

Ezra

1

Summary: *In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, God stirs the king to issue a decree permitting the Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. The surrounding population contributes silver, gold, goods, and livestock. Cyrus himself restores the sacred vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had plundered from Solomon's Temple. Sheshbazzar, prince of Judah, receives the inventory and leads the first wave of returnees back to Jerusalem.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *The book of Ezra opens by repeating the final two verses of 2 Chronicles almost word for word — a literary stitch connecting the two works. The phrase 'the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus' (he'ir YHWH et ruach Koresh) uses the same verb (he'ir, 'to awaken, arouse') that Isaiah uses when describing God raising up a conqueror from the east (Isaiah 41:2, 25; 45:13). The narrator sees no tension between Cyrus acting as a pagan emperor and God using him as an instrument. Isaiah 45:1 calls Cyrus God's 'anointed' (mashiach) — the only non-Israelite to receive that title. The decree itself is remarkable for its theology: Cyrus attributes his success to 'the LORD, God of heaven' (YHWH Elohei ha-shamayim), a title that appears repeatedly in the Persian-period books. Whether Cyrus actually used YHWH's name or the author shaped the decree in Israelite theological language remains debated, but the Cyrus Cylinder confirms that the historical Cyrus did allow displaced peoples to return and rebuild their temples.*

Translation Friction: *The relationship between Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel is one of the book's enduring puzzles. Sheshbazzar is called 'the prince of Judah' (ha-nasi li-Yehudah) here and is credited with laying the Temple foundation in 5:16, yet Zerubbabel appears as the primary leader in chapters 3-5 and is credited with the same foundation-laying in 3:8-10. Some scholars identify them as the same person; others see Sheshbazzar as an older figure (perhaps Shenazzar of 1 Chronicles 3:18) who led the initial return but was soon succeeded by Zerubbabel. We render both figures as presented without harmonizing. The vessel inventory in verses 9-11 does not add up — the individual items total 2,499 but verse 11 gives the sum as 5,400. This discrepancy exists in the Hebrew text itself and likely reflects either a damaged source list or additional uncategorized items.*

Connections: *The return from Babylon fulfills Jeremiah's prophecy of seventy years of exile (Jeremiah 25:11-12; 29:10), which is explicitly cited in verse 1. The stirring of Cyrus echoes Isaiah's designation of him as God's shepherd and anointed (Isaiah 44:28-45:1). The restoration of Temple vessels reverses the desecration described in 2 Kings 25:13-17 and Daniel 5:2-3, where Belshazzar drinks from them at his final feast. The pattern of a foreign king sponsoring Israelite worship will recur with Darius (chapter 6) and Artaxerxes (chapter 7), establishing that*

God works through imperial power to restore his people.

¹In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia — so that the word of the LORD spoken through Jeremiah would be fulfilled — the LORD stirred the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia. He sent a proclamation throughout his entire kingdom, and also put it in writing: ²This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has appointed me to build a house for him in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. ³Whoever among you belongs to his people — may his God be with him — let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the house of the LORD, the God of Israel. He is the God who is in Jerusalem. ⁴And everyone who remains in any place where he is living — let the people of that place support him with silver, gold, goods, and livestock, along with a freewill offering for the house of God in Jerusalem. ⁵Then the heads of the ancestral houses of Judah and Benjamin rose up, along with the priests and the Levites — everyone whose spirit God had stirred — to go up and build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem. ⁶All their neighbors strengthened their hands with articles of silver, gold, goods, livestock, and valuables — in addition to everything given as a freewill offering. ⁷King Cyrus also brought out the vessels of the house of the LORD that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the temple of his gods. ⁸Cyrus king of Persia had them brought out through Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. ⁹This is their inventory: thirty gold basins, one thousand silver basins, ¹⁰thirty gold bowls, four hundred and ten silver bowls of a second kind, and one thousand other vessels. ¹¹The total of the gold and silver vessels was five thousand four hundred. Sheshbazzar brought all of these up when the exiles went up from Babylon to Jerusalem.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The verb *he'ir* ('stirred, awakened') is theologically loaded — it credits God as the unseen agent behind the most powerful ruler on earth. The same verb describes God rousing warriors (Joel 4:7) and raising up deliverers. Cyrus acts freely, yet the narrator insists God is the prime mover.
1. The phrase *li-khelot devar YHWH* ('to complete/fulfill the word of the LORD') refers to Jeremiah's prophecy of a seventy-year exile (Jeremiah 25:11-12; 29:10). The verb *kalah* means 'to finish, bring to completion' — the exile is not merely ending but being brought to its appointed conclusion.
2. Cyrus uses the divine title *YHWH Elohei ha-shamayim* ('the LORD, God of heaven'), which became the standard designation for Israel's God in Persian-period documents. The verb *paqad* ('appointed, charged') carries the weight of a divine commission — the same verb used when God 'visits' his people for judgment or deliverance.
2. The phrase 'which is in Judah' may seem redundant, but it reflects the administrative language of the Persian Empire, specifying the province. Judah (Yehud) was a sub-province of the satrapy Beyond the River.
3. The parenthetical 'he is the God who is in Jerusalem' (*hu ha-Elohim asher bi-Yerushalaim*) could be read two ways: as Cyrus identifying Israel's God with a specific locale (a Persian understanding of territorial deities), or as an Israelite theological assertion that the true God dwells in Jerusalem. The ambiguity may be deliberate — the decree works for both audiences.
4. The verb *nasa* ('lift up, support') means the surrounding population should actively assist the returning exiles — not merely allow them to leave but fund their journey. The word *nedavah* ('freewill offering') is distinct from obligatory offerings; it denotes voluntary generosity. This pattern echoes the Exodus: just as the Egyptians gave silver and gold to the departing Israelites (Exodus 12:35-36), the peoples of Babylon now provision the returning exiles.
5. The verb *he'ir* ('stirred') reappears — the same word used of God stirring Cyrus in verse 1 now describes God stirring the people. The parallel is deliberate: emperor and exiles respond to the same divine impulse. The phrase *rashei ha-avot* ('heads of the fathers/ancestral houses') designates the patriarchal clan leaders who organized the return.
5. Only Judah and Benjamin are named among the returnees, reflecting the composition of the southern kingdom after the northern tribes were deported by Assyria in 722 BCE. Priests and Levites are listed separately, indicating their distinct role in the restoration.
6. The phrase *chizzqu vi-deihem* ('strengthened their hands') is an idiom for material and moral support. The word *migdanot* ('valuables, precious things') appears only here and in Genesis 24:53 and 2 Chronicles 21:3, referring to costly gifts. The Exodus parallel continues: as Egypt's wealth equipped Israel's departure, Babylon's wealth now equips the return.
7. The verb *hotsi* ('brought out') is used twice — once for Cyrus releasing the vessels and once for Nebuchadnezzar taking them. The reversal is precise: what was carried out in plunder is now carried out in restoration. The phrase *beit elohav* ('the house/temple of his gods') likely refers to the temple of Marduk in Babylon. These vessels had been desecrated by Belshazzar at his feast (Daniel 5:2-4); now they return to their proper place.
8. Mithredath (Mitredat) is a Persian name meaning 'gift of Mithra,' reflecting the Zoroastrian deity. The title *gizbar* ('treasurer') is a Persian loanword that entered Hebrew during the exile. Sheshbazzar is called *ha-nasi li-Yehudah* ('the prince/leader of Judah') — *nasi* is a title with deep Israelite

resonance, used of tribal chiefs and later of the Davidic heir in Ezekiel's vision (Ezekiel 44-48).

8. Sheshbazzar's identity remains debated. He may be the Shenazzar of 1 Chronicles 3:18, a son of Jehoiachin and therefore of Davidic lineage. His Babylonian name (possibly Shamash-ab-usur, 'Shamash protect the father') reflects the naming practices of exilic Jews.
9. The word *agartelei* (singular *agartal*) is a rare term for large basins or bowls used in Temple service. The KJV 'chargers' is archaic English for large flat dishes. Note that the KJV includes 'nine and twenty knives' in this verse, but the Hebrew text places the knives (*machalafim*) in verse 9 as well. We follow the verse division of the WLC.
10. The word *keforei* ('bowls') differs from the *agartelei* of verse 9, suggesting a different type or size of vessel. The term *mishniyim* ('of a second sort/secondary') likely indicates a lesser quality or grade of silver. The category *kelim acherim* ('other vessels') is a catch-all for items not individually categorized in the inventory.
11. The itemized count in verses 9-10 totals 2,499, but the stated sum here is 5,400. This numerical discrepancy exists in the Masoretic Text itself and likely reflects either a damaged source document, additional categories not individually listed, or a scribal transmission issue. We render the text as it stands without emendation.
11. The verb *he'elah* ('brought up') uses the same root as *aliyah* — going up to Jerusalem. This 'going up' from Babylon deliberately echoes the original 'going up' from Egypt. The exiles are cast as participants in a second exodus.

2

Summary: *A detailed census of the exiles who returned from Babylon to Jerusalem and Judah under Zerubbabel's leadership. The list organizes returnees by family clans, towns of origin, priestly and Levitical divisions, Temple servants, descendants of Solomon's servants, and those who could not prove their Israelite ancestry. The total count is 42,360 free persons plus 7,337 male and female servants, 200 singers, and extensive livestock. The chapter closes with the leaders contributing gold, silver, and priestly garments toward the rebuilding.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *This chapter is essentially an ancient census document embedded in narrative — a roster that functioned as legal proof of identity for a displaced people. Every name in this list represents a family that survived seventy years of exile and chose to leave Babylon for an uncertain future in a ruined homeland. The list has a near-parallel in Nehemiah 7:6-73, with numerous small variations in names and numbers that reflect independent transmission of the same source document. The chapter's most theologically charged moment comes in verses 61-63, where families who cannot produce genealogical records are excluded from the priesthood until a priest arises 'with Urim and Thummim' — an acknowledgment that the post-exilic community lacked the full means of divine consultation that the pre-exilic Temple had possessed. The itemized totals of individual groups (29,818) do not match the stated grand total of 42,360, suggesting either that women and children are included in the grand total but not the sub-counts, or that some groups were omitted from the detailed list.*

Translation Friction: *The returnee list poses persistent translation challenges. Many of the place names and personal names have uncertain vowel pointings, and the numbers frequently differ between the Masoretic Text, the Septuagint, and the parallel list in Nehemiah 7. We follow the WLC consistently. The term *Nethinim* (*netinim*, 'those who are given') in verses 43-54 refers to Temple servants of possibly non-Israelite origin — the name suggests they were 'given' or 'dedicated' to Temple service, perhaps descended from the Gibeonites (Joshua 9:27) or other groups assigned menial sanctuary tasks. We render *netinim* as 'Temple servants' to convey function rather than transliterate an opaque term.*

Connections: *The list structure echoes the tribal censuses of Numbers 1-2 and 26, establishing continuity between the wilderness generation and the returning exiles. The mention of Urim and Thummim (verse 63) reaches back to the priestly oracle described in Exodus 28:30 and Numbers 27:21. The parallel list in Nehemiah 7:6-73 serves a different narrative purpose — there it validates the population for Nehemiah's wall-building project. The gifts for the Temple treasury (verses 68-69) echo the freewill offerings for the Tabernacle in Exodus 35:20-29.*

‡These are the people of the province who came up from the captivity of the exile — those whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had deported to Babylon — and returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town. ¶They came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, and Baanah. The count of the

men of the people of Israel: ³The descendants of Parosh: 2,172. ⁴The descendants of Shephatiah: 372. ⁵The descendants of Arah: 775. ⁶The descendants of Pahath-moab (through the line of Jeshua and Joab): 2,812. ⁷The descendants of Elam: 1,254. ⁸The descendants of Zattu: 945. ⁹The descendants of Zaccai: 760. ¹⁰The descendants of Bani: 642. ¹¹The descendants of Bebai: 623. ¹²The descendants of Azgad: 1,222. ¹³The descendants of Adonikam: 666. ¹⁴The descendants of Bigvai: 2,056. ¹⁵The descendants of Adin: 454. ¹⁶The descendants of Ater, through Hezekiah: 98. ¹⁷The descendants of Bezai: 323. ¹⁸The descendants of Jorah: 112. ¹⁹The descendants of Hashum: 223. ²⁰The descendants of Gibbar: 95. ²¹The people of Bethlehem: 123. ²²The people of Netophah: 56. ²³The people of Anathoth: 128. ²⁴The people of Azmaveth: 42. ²⁵The people of Kiriath-arim, Chephirah, and Beeroth: 743. ²⁶The people of Ramah and Geba: 621. ²⁷The people of Michmash: 122. ²⁸The people of Bethel and Ai: 223. ²⁹The people of Nebo: 52. ³⁰The people of Magbish: 156. ³¹The descendants of the other Elam: 1,254. ³²The descendants of Harim: 320. ³³The people of Lod, Hadid, and Ono: 725. ³⁴The people of Jericho: 345. ³⁵The people of Senaah: 3,630. ³⁶The priests: the descendants of Jedaiah, of the house of Jeshua: 973. ³⁷The descendants of Immer: 1,052. ³⁸The descendants of Pashhur: 1,247. ³⁹The descendants of Harim: 1,017. ⁴⁰The Levites: the descendants of Jeshua and Kadmiel, of the line of Hodaviah: 74. ⁴¹The singers: the descendants of Asaph: 128. ⁴²The gatekeepers: the descendants of Shallum, Ater, Talmon, Akkub, Hatita, and Shobai — 139 in all. ⁴³The Temple servants: the descendants of Ziha, Hasupha, Tabbaoth, ⁴⁴Keros, Siaha, Padon, ⁴⁵Lebanah, Hagabah, Akkub, ⁴⁶Hagab, Shalmai, Hanan, ⁴⁷Giddel, Gahar, Reaiah, ⁴⁸Rezin, Nekoda, Gazzam, ⁴⁹Uzza, Paseah, Besai, ⁵⁰Asnah, Meunim, Nephusim, ⁵¹Bakbuk, Hakupha, Harhur, ⁵²Bazluth, Mehida, Harsha, ⁵³Barkos, Sisera, Temah, ⁵⁴Neziah, and Hatipha. ⁵⁵The descendants of Solomon's servants: Sotai, Sophereth, Peruda, ⁵⁶Jaalah, Darkon, Giddel, ⁵⁷Shephatiah, Hattil, Pokereth-hazzebaim, and Ami. ⁵⁸All the Temple servants and descendants of Solomon's servants: 392. ⁵⁹These came up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addan, and Immer, but they could not prove their ancestral house or their lineage — whether they belonged to Israel: ⁶⁰The descendants of Delaiah, Tobiah, and Nekoda: 652. ⁶¹And from among the priests: the descendants of Hobaiah, Hakkoz, and Barzillai — who had married a daughter of Barzillai the Gileadite and was called by their name. ⁶²These searched for their genealogical records but could not find them, so they were excluded from the priesthood as unclean. ⁶³The governor told them they must not eat of the most holy food until a priest should arise with the Urim and Thummim. ⁶⁴The entire assembly together numbered 42,360, ⁶⁵not counting their male and female servants, who numbered 7,337. They also had 200 male and female singers. ⁶⁶Their horses: 736. Their mules: 245. ⁶⁷Their camels: 435. Their donkeys: 6,720. ⁶⁸When they arrived at the house of the LORD in Jerusalem, some of the heads of the ancestral houses gave freewill offerings for the house of God, to restore it on its site. ⁶⁹According to their ability they gave to the treasury for the work: 61,000 gold darics, 5,000 silver minas, and 100 priestly garments. ⁷⁰The priests, the Levites, some of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the Temple servants settled in their towns — and all Israel in their towns.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The term ha-medinah ('the province') refers to the Persian administrative district of Yehud (Judah), not to a vague 'region.' The returnees are identified by their provincial status under Persian governance. The phrase shevi ha-golah ('the captivity of the exile') is a double expression emphasizing both the act of deportation and the ongoing condition of displacement.
1. The phrase ish le-iro ('each to his town') implies that the returnees reclaimed ancestral lands and towns — a restoration of the tribal inheritance system disrupted by the exile.
2. Eleven leaders are named, heading the return. Zerubbabel (Babylonian: Zer-Babili, 'seed of Babylon') is of Davidic lineage (1 Chronicles 3:19). Jeshua (Yeshua) is the high priest who will partner with Zerubbabel in rebuilding. The Nehemiah here is not the later cupbearer-governor; the Mordecai is not the hero of Esther. These are common names in the post-exilic community.
2. The parallel list in Nehemiah 7:7 has twelve leaders with slightly different names (Nahamani appears, Reelaiah becomes Raamiah), possibly reflecting the ideal of twelve leaders for twelve tribes.
3. The name Par'osh means 'flea' — a humble name that was nonetheless borne by a large and prominent clan. The census begins with family-based groupings (benei, 'descendants of'), the primary organizational unit for post-exilic Jewish identity.
4. Shephatiah means 'the LORD has judged' — a theophoric name affirming divine justice even in exile.

5. The name Arach may mean 'wanderer' or 'wild ox.' Nehemiah 7:10 gives 652 for this clan — one of many numerical variations between the two lists.
6. Pahath-moab literally means 'governor of Moab,' suggesting an ancestor held authority over the Moabite region during the monarchy. This large clan is further divided by sub-lineages — Jeshua and Joab — indicating its size required subdivision for administrative purposes.
7. This Elam is a clan name, not a reference to the region of Elam east of Babylon. The identical number appears in Nehemiah 7:12, showing consistent transmission for this particular entry.
8. Nehemiah 7:13 records 845 for this clan. Such variations — typically within a range of 100 — are characteristic of independently transmitted census copies.
9. The name Zakkai means 'pure' or 'innocent.' The number matches Nehemiah 7:14 exactly.
10. The parallel in Nehemiah 7:15 reads 'Binnui' with 648 — a textual variant in both name and number.
11. Nehemiah 7:16 gives 628 for this clan.
12. Azgad means 'Gad is strong' — a theophoric name invoking the deity or the tribe of Gad. Nehemiah 7:17 gives 2,322, a difference of 1,100 — one of the largest discrepancies between the two lists.
13. Adonikam means 'my lord has risen.' Nehemiah 7:18 records 667. The number 666 carries no symbolic weight in the Hebrew Bible; the association with the 'number of the beast' is a much later Christian reading from Revelation 13:18.
14. Bigvai is a Persian name (possibly Bagavahya, 'gift of God' in Old Persian), reflecting the cultural influence of the exile. Nehemiah 7:19 gives 2,067.
15. Adin means 'luxurious' or 'delicate.' Nehemiah 7:20 gives 655.
16. The qualifying phrase 'through Hezekiah' (li-Chizkiyyah) distinguishes this Ater clan from others of the same name. Whether this Hezekiah is the famous king or a later figure is uncertain.
17. Nehemiah 7:23 gives 324 — a difference of one.
18. In Nehemiah 7:24 this name appears as Hariph. The variation likely reflects alternate clan designations or a scribal difference in the source lists.
19. Nehemiah 7:22 gives 328 for this clan.
20. In Nehemiah 7:25 this appears as 'Gibeon' — suggesting the name refers to the town of Gibeon and Gibbar is a personal name derived from it. This marks a transitional point in the list between family-based and location-based groupings.
21. The list shifts here from family names to town names, indicating returnees grouped by ancestral place of residence. Bethlehem ('house of bread'), the town of David, contributed a modest contingent. In Nehemiah 7:26 Bethlehem is combined with Netophah for a total of 188.
22. Netophah was a village near Bethlehem. Some of David's warriors came from Netophah (2 Samuel 23:28-29). The term shifts from benei ('descendants of') to anshei ('men of'), marking the geographic section of the list.
23. Anathoth was Jeremiah's hometown (Jeremiah 1:1) — a priestly city in Benjamin about three miles north of Jerusalem. The prophet who foretold the return came from a town now sending its descendants back.
24. Azmaveth (also called Beth-azmaveth in Nehemiah 7:28) means 'death is strong' — a name reflecting the harsh realities of ancient life.
25. Three Gibeonite cities are grouped together. These were the towns that deceived Joshua into making a treaty (Joshua 9). Their inclusion in the returnee list shows they had been absorbed into Judah's population. Kiriath-arim is a shortened form of Kiriath-jearim, where the ark rested for twenty years (1 Samuel 7:1-2).
26. Ramah ('height') and Geba ('hill') were Benjaminite towns north of Jerusalem. Ramah was where the exiles were gathered before deportation (Jeremiah 40:1), making the return of its inhabitants a pointed reversal.
27. Michmash was the site of Jonathan's daring raid against the Philistines (1 Samuel 13-14). It sat on the strategic pass north of Jerusalem.
28. Bethel ('house of God') and Ai were paired since the conquest narrative (Joshua 7-8). Bethel was where Jacob saw the heavenly stairway (Genesis 28:10-19) and later became a site of unauthorized worship under Jeroboam (1 Kings 12:29). Its returnees now reintegrate into the Judahite community.
29. This Nebo is a Judahite town, not Mount Nebo in Moab. The name coincidentally matches the Babylonian deity Nabu.
30. Magbish does not appear in the parallel list in Nehemiah 7. Its location is uncertain — possibly a small settlement that was later absorbed into another district.
31. This is a different Elam clan from verse 7, distinguished by the qualifier acher ('other'). Remarkably, both Elam groups have exactly the same count: 1,254. Whether this reflects coincidence or a scribal duplication remains uncertain.
32. Harim means 'consecrated' or 'flat-nosed.' A priestly family of the same name appears in verse 39, but this entry is in the lay section of the list.
33. These three towns lay in the coastal plain west of Jerusalem, in traditional Benjaminite territory. Lod (later Lydda, modern Lod/Lydda) would become the site where Peter healed Aeneas (Acts 9:32-35).

34. Jericho, the first city conquered under Joshua (Joshua 6), was resettled despite the curse pronounced on its rebuilders (Joshua 6:26; fulfilled in 1 Kings 16:34). By the post-exilic period the curse had apparently spent its force.
35. Senaah is the largest single contingent in the list. Nehemiah 7:38 gives 3,930. The town's location is uncertain; some identify it with Magdal-senna near Jericho. Its size may indicate it served as a regional center.
36. The priestly section begins here. Jedaiah ('the LORD has known') heads the first priestly course. The phrase 'of the house of Jeshua' links this priestly family to the high-priestly line — Jeshua ben Jozadak was the first post-exilic high priest.
37. Immer was the sixteenth priestly course according to 1 Chronicles 24:14. Jeremiah's antagonist Pashhur was 'son of Immer' (Jeremiah 20:1).
38. Pashhur is a priestly clan name. The Pashhur who persecuted Jeremiah (Jeremiah 20:1-6) bore this same name. The large number shows that the priestly families remained intact through the exile.
39. This is the priestly clan of Harim, distinct from the lay clan in verse 32. The total of four priestly families is 4,289 — a substantial proportion of the 42,360 total returnees, underscoring the priestly character of the restoration.
40. The strikingly small number of Levites (74) compared to priests (4,289) is one of the chapter's most notable features. It will become a recurring problem — Ezra himself will struggle to recruit Levites for the second return (8:15-20). The Levites' reluctance to return may reflect their diminished status in the post-exilic period, where priestly families held greater power.
41. Asaph was one of the chief musicians appointed by David (1 Chronicles 16:5). The singers (*meshorerim*) are listed separately from the Levites, though Chronicles classifies them as a Levitical subdivision. Several psalms bear Asaph's name (Psalms 50, 73-83).
42. The gatekeepers (*sho'arim*) controlled access to the Temple precincts, a role requiring both physical presence and ritual purity. Six families are named. Like the singers, gatekeepers are categorized separately from the general Levites, though their function was Levitical.
43. The *Nethinim* (*netinim*, literally 'given ones') were non-priestly Temple workers assigned to support the Levites. The term suggests they were originally 'given' to the sanctuary — perhaps descended from war captives or foreign groups dedicated to menial Temple service, as the Gibeonites were in Joshua 9:27. Their names often have non-Israelite etymologies.
44. The list continues with Temple servant families. These names lack clear Hebrew etymologies, supporting the theory of non-Israelite ancestry for many of these families.
45. *Lebanah* means 'white/moon'; *Hagabah* means 'locust' — common Semitic naming patterns drawn from nature.
46. *Hagab* also means 'locust,' closely related to *Hagabah* in the previous verse. *Hanan* means 'gracious.'
47. *Giddel* means 'God has made great'; *Reaiah* means 'the LORD has seen.'
48. *Rezin* is also the name of the last Aramean king of Damascus (2 Kings 16:5-9), though this is a different person entirely.
49. *Paseah* means 'limping' — the same root as *Pesach* ('Passover'), related to the idea of passing/limping over.
50. *Meunim* may connect this family to the *Meunites*, a people from the region of Ma'on in Edom (2 Chronicles 26:7). If so, this Temple servant family descends from foreign captives dedicated to sanctuary service.
51. *Bakbuk* is onomatopoeic — it imitates the gurgling sound of a bottle being emptied.
52. *Harsha* means 'craftsman' or 'mute' — the same root as the word for skilled artisan work.
53. The name *Sisera* is the same as the Canaanite general defeated by Deborah and Barak (Judges 4-5). A Temple servant family bearing this name may descend from captives taken after that battle, though the connection is speculative.
54. This concludes the Temple servant list — 35 families in all (verses 43-54). No total count is given for the Temple servants, unlike the priests, Levites, singers, and gatekeepers.
55. A new category appears: *avdei Shelomoh* ('servants of Solomon'). These were likely descendants of the forced laborers Solomon conscripted from the remaining Canaanite populations (1 Kings 9:20-21). By the post-exilic period they functioned alongside the Temple servants as a recognized class within the Temple workforce.
56. *Darkon* may be a Persian-influenced name. *Giddel* appears also among the Temple servants (verse 47) — the name was shared across different service categories.
57. *Pokereth-hazzebaim* means 'binder of gazelles' — possibly a hereditary occupational name for a family that trapped or raised gazelles, perhaps for royal kitchens or sacrificial purposes.
58. The two categories — Temple servants and Solomon's servants — are combined for a single total. These 392 individuals represent the entire non-Levitical support staff of the Temple returning from exile.
59. The list now turns to those whose genealogical records were lost or incomplete during the exile. The place names (*Tel-melah*, 'mound of salt'; *Tel-harsha*, 'mound of the craftsman') are Babylonian settlement sites where exiles had lived. The inability to prove *beit avotam* ('their father's house') was a serious legal disability — identity in post-exilic Judah required documented ancestry.

59. This section reveals the anxiety of a community reconstituting itself after catastrophic displacement. Who counts as Israel? The question will intensify in chapters 9-10.
60. These 652 people claimed Israelite identity but lacked documentation. Their theophoric names (Delaiah, 'the LORD has drawn up'; Tobiah, 'the LORD is good') suggest genuine Israelite heritage, yet administrative proof was required.
61. The case of the priestly Barzillai clan is particularly telling. The ancestor had married into the prominent Gileadite family of Barzillai (the same Barzillai who aided David, 2 Samuel 17:27-29; 19:31-40) and adopted his wife's family name — an unusual move that suggests the Barzillai name carried greater prestige. But by taking a non-priestly name, the family lost its documented connection to the priestly lineage.
62. The verb *go'alu* ('were excluded as polluted/defiled') is harsh — it comes from the root *ga'al* meaning 'to defile, pollute.' Without documented priestly lineage, these families were treated as ritually disqualified. The priesthood required verifiable descent from Aaron; undocumented claims were not accepted, regardless of how genuine they might have been.
63. The *tirshata* is a Persian title for the governor (possibly from a root meaning 'revered one'). The ruling is both merciful and sobering: the disputed priests are not permanently expelled but suspended until a priest arises who can consult the Urim and Thummim — the oracular device stored in the high priest's breastpiece (Exodus 28:30). Since no post-exilic text records the Urim and Thummim being used again, the suspension was effectively permanent. The community acknowledged a gap in its access to divine revelation.
64. The grand total of 42,360 does not match the sum of the individual entries, which totals approximately 29,818. The discrepancy is likely because the sub-totals count only adult males of specific categories, while the grand total may include women, children, or unlisted groups. Both Ezra and Nehemiah give the same grand total (42,360), confirming it comes from the source document.
65. The 7,337 servants (*avadim va-amahot*) are listed separately from the 42,360 free Israelites, reflecting the social stratification of the community. The 200 singers (*meshorerim u-meshorerot*) are secular musicians, distinct from the Levitical singers of verse 41 — these performed at celebrations, funerals, and other social occasions.
66. The livestock inventory indicates substantial wealth among the returnees. Horses and mules were expensive animals — their presence shows this was not a destitute population but one with considerable resources.
67. The high number of donkeys (6,720) compared to camels (435) reflects practical transportation needs — donkeys were the primary pack animal for the journey across the Fertile Crescent. The camel count suggests long-distance trade connections.
68. The verb *hitnadvu* ('gave freely, offered voluntarily') from the root *nadav* indicates spontaneous, uncoerced generosity. The phrase *le-ha'amido al mekhono* ('to establish it on its foundation/site') shows that the goal was to rebuild the Temple on its exact original location — continuity with Solomon's Temple mattered.
69. The *darkemonim* are gold darics — Persian coins bearing the image of the king, among the first standardized gold coins in history. The use of Persian currency reflects the economic integration of the exilic community. A *mina* (*maneh*) was a unit of weight equal to approximately 50 shekels (about 571 grams). The 100 priestly garments (*kotnot kohanim*) were essential for resuming Temple worship — priests could not serve without proper vestments.
70. The chapter closes with a sweeping summary: every group — priestly, Levitical, lay, and service — found its place. The final phrase *ve-khol Yisrael be-areihem* ('and all Israel in their towns') carries enormous weight. After seventy years of exile, the community has reconstituted itself on its ancestral land. The word *yashvu* ('they settled, dwelt') implies permanence — not a temporary camp but a restored habitation.

3

Summary: *In the seventh month, the returned exiles gather in Jerusalem. Jeshua the priest and Zerubbabel rebuild the altar on its original foundation and resume the daily burnt offerings, the Festival of Booths, and the regular sacrificial calendar — all before the Temple itself is rebuilt. In the second year, they lay the foundation of the new Temple with Levitical musicians leading worship. The people erupt in praise, but the older generation who remember Solomon's Temple weep loudly at the sight. The sound of weeping and the sound of joy are indistinguishable from a distance.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *The theological center of this chapter is verse 12: the old men who had seen the first Temple weep when the foundation of the second is laid. This is not nostalgia — it is grief born of comparison. Haggai 2:3 confirms that the second Temple appeared as 'nothing' compared to Solomon's. The weeping acknowledges genuine loss: the glory of the first Temple, the ark of the covenant (now gone), and the unbroken continuity of Davidic worship. Yet the narrator refuses to separate the weeping from the joy — verse 13 says 'the people could not distinguish the sound of the shout of joy from the sound of the weeping.' The two responses are not competing but coexisting, and the text honors both without declaring either inappropriate. This is one of the most emotionally*

complex moments in the Hebrew Bible.

Translation Friction: *The chronology between Ezra 3 and the parallel accounts in Haggai and Zechariah creates tension. Ezra 3 places the foundation-laying in the second year of the return (approximately 536 BCE), but Haggai 1:1-2 (dated to 520 BCE) describes the Temple as not yet rebuilt and implies the foundation work had stalled. Either the initial foundation was laid and then abandoned for sixteen years, or the accounts describe different stages of the same process. We render Ezra 3 as it stands, trusting the narrator's chronological framework. The phrase 'according to the prescription of David king of Israel' in verse 10 raises the question of how much of the pre-exilic liturgical tradition survived the exile — enough, apparently, for the returnees to reconstruct Davidic worship patterns.*

Connections: *The rebuilding of the altar before the Temple mirrors the patriarchal pattern: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob built altars before any permanent sanctuary existed (Genesis 12:7; 26:25; 33:20). The seventh-month gathering echoes the dedication of Solomon's Temple during the Festival of Booths (1 Kings 8:2). The Levitical praise with cymbals and trumpets follows the pattern David established (1 Chronicles 16:4-6; 25:1-7). The antiphonal chant 'For he is good, for his faithful love endures forever toward Israel' (verse 11) is the signature refrain of Israelite worship, appearing in Psalms 106:1; 107:1; 118:1; 136:1 and at the dedication of Solomon's Temple (2 Chronicles 5:13).*

¹When the seventh month arrived and the Israelites were settled in their towns, the people assembled as one in Jerusalem. ²Then Jeshua son of Jozadak and his fellow priests, along with Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and his kinsmen, rose up and built the altar of the God of Israel to offer burnt offerings on it, as prescribed in the Law of Moses the man of God. ³They set the altar on its foundation, for dread of the surrounding peoples was upon them, and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD — burnt offerings morning and evening. ⁴They observed the Festival of Booths as prescribed, offering the daily burnt offerings in their proper number according to the requirement for each day. ⁵And after that, the regular burnt offering, the new moon offerings, all the appointed festivals of the LORD that are holy, and every freewill offering to the LORD. ⁶From the first day of the seventh month they began offering burnt offerings to the LORD, though the foundation of the LORD's Temple had not yet been laid. ⁷They gave silver to the stonecutters and craftsmen, and food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and Tyrians to bring cedar logs from Lebanon by sea to Joppa, as authorized by Cyrus king of Persia. ⁸In the second year after their arrival at the house of God in Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Jeshua son of Jozadak, and the rest of their kinsmen — the priests, the Levites, and all who had come from the exile to Jerusalem — began the work. They appointed Levites twenty years old and older to supervise the construction of the house of the LORD. ⁹Jeshua with his sons and kinsmen, Kadmiel with his sons — the descendants of Hodaviah — stood together to supervise the workers in the house of God, along with the sons of Henadad and their sons and kinsmen, the Levites. ¹⁰When the builders laid the foundation of the LORD's Temple, the priests stood in their vestments with trumpets, and the Levites — the sons of Asaph — with cymbals, to praise the LORD according to the directions of David king of Israel. ¹¹They sang responsively in praise and thanksgiving to the LORD: 'For he is good, for his faithful love toward Israel endures forever.' And all the people raised a great shout of praise to the LORD because the foundation of the house of the LORD had been laid. ¹²But many of the priests, Levites, and heads of ancestral houses — the old men who had seen the first house — wept loudly when they saw the foundation of this house being laid before their eyes. And many others raised their voices in shouts of joy. ¹³No one could distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the weeping, because the people were shouting so loudly that the sound carried far away.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The seventh month (Tishrei) was the most sacred month in the Israelite calendar, containing the Feast of Trumpets (1st), the Day of Atonement (10th), and the Festival of Booths (15th-21st). The phrase *ke-ish echad* ('as one man') emphasizes complete unity — the same expression used of Israel's assembly at Mizpah (Judges 20:1) and at Sinai in rabbinic tradition.
2. Jeshua (Yeshua, a shortened form of Yehoshua/Joshua) son of Jozadak was the first post-exilic high priest, descended from the last pre-exilic high priest Seraiah, who was executed by Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 25:18-21). Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel was of Davidic lineage. Together, the priestly and royal lines cooperate in the restoration.

2. The phrase *be-torat Mosheh ish ha-Elohim* ('in the Law of Moses the man of God') establishes Torah as the constitutional document of the restored community. The altar is built according to written instruction, not oral tradition or innovation.
3. The phrase *ki be-eimah aleihem* ('for dread was upon them') reveals the precarious situation: the returnees rebuilt the altar not despite their fear but perhaps because of it — worship was their response to threat. The morning and evening burnt offerings (*olot la-boqer ve-la-arev*) resumed the *tamid*, the perpetual offering commanded in Exodus 29:38-42, which had ceased when the Temple was destroyed.
4. The Festival of Booths (Sukkot) required a complex sacrificial schedule: Numbers 29:12-38 prescribes a decreasing sequence from thirteen bulls on the first day down to seven on the seventh, plus rams, lambs, and grain offerings. The phrase *devar yom be-yomo* ('the matter of each day in its day') indicates meticulous observance of this detailed calendar.
5. The *tamid* ('perpetual/regular offering') resumed daily — morning and evening — as the backbone of Temple worship. The new moon offerings (Numbers 28:11-15) and festival calendar were layered on top. The freewill offerings (*nedavah*) allowed individual Israelites to express personal devotion beyond the required schedule. The entire sacrificial system was being reconstituted from the ground up.
6. The first day of the seventh month is the Feast of Trumpets (later Rosh Hashanah). The narrator emphasizes a striking fact: sacrificial worship resumed on an open-air altar before the Temple existed. The altar was sufficient for worship; the building was secondary to the act of offering. This theological priority — sacrifice before structure — echoes the patriarchal period.
7. The arrangement mirrors Solomon's Temple construction: Solomon also imported Lebanese cedar through Phoenician contractors via the port of Joppa (2 Chronicles 2:15-16). The returnees are deliberately replicating the pattern of the first Temple. The term *rishyon* ('authorization, permit') is a Persian loanword reflecting the bureaucratic apparatus of the empire — Cyrus's decree provided the legal framework for these expenditures.
8. The second month (Iyyar, roughly April-May) was also when Solomon began building the first Temple (1 Kings 6:1) — another deliberate parallel. The age threshold of twenty for Levitical supervisors is lower than the thirty specified in Numbers 4:3 but matches the age David set in 1 Chronicles 23:24-27. The post-exilic community adapted the threshold to meet the reality of limited Levitical manpower.
9. The 'sons of Judah' (*benei Yehudah*) here is likely a variant spelling of 'Hodaviah' (see 2:40), not the tribe of Judah — these are Levitical supervisors, not lay tribal members. *Henadad* means 'favor of Hadad,' with Hadad being a storm deity — another example of a name reflecting the cultural environment of the exile.
10. The phrase *al yedei David melekh Yisrael* ('by the hands/direction of David king of Israel') credits David with establishing the liturgical patterns now being revived. The *chatsotsrot* (silver trumpets) were priestly instruments (Numbers 10:1-10); the *metsiltayim* (cymbals) were Levitical. The distinction between priestly and Levitical instruments was carefully maintained.
11. The antiphonal refrain *ki tov ki le-olam chasdo al Yisrael* ('for he is good, for his faithful love toward Israel is forever') is Israel's signature doxology. It appears at the dedication of Solomon's Temple (2 Chronicles 5:13), in multiple psalms (106:1; 107:1; 118:1-4; 136 *passim*), and at Jehoshaphat's battle (2 Chronicles 20:21). By singing this ancient refrain, the returnees stitch themselves into the continuum of Israelite worship.
11. The verb *he'iru teru'ah gedolah* ('raised a great shout') uses *teru'ah*, the term for the war cry, the trumpet blast, and the acclamation of a king. This is not polite applause — it is the full-throated roar of a people witnessing their God's faithfulness.
12. This is the emotional climax of the chapter. The old men (*ha-zeqenim*) who had seen Solomon's Temple as children — they would have been at least seventy years old by this point — look at the new foundation and weep. The weeping is not criticized; neither is the joy. The text presents both responses as legitimate. Haggai 2:3 confirms the disparity: 'Who among you saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes?'
12. The Hebrew places the weeping and the joy in the same sentence, grammatically intertwined — *bokhim be-qol gadol* ('weeping with a loud voice') and *bi-teru'ah be-simchah le-harim qol* ('in joyful shouting lifting the voice'). The sounds are simultaneous and inseparable.
13. The narrator's observation is devastating in its simplicity: *ein ha-am makkirim* ('the people could not distinguish'). Joy and grief produced the same volume, the same intensity, the same overwhelming sound. From a distance, restoration and loss were acoustically identical. This is not a failure of perception but a statement about the nature of return — it is never pure joy, and the grief is never despair. The verb *nishma* ('was heard') in its passive form means the sound reached far without the hearers being able to parse it. The ambiguity is the point.

4

Summary: *The adversaries of Judah and Benjamin approach Zerubbabel offering to help rebuild the Temple, claiming they have worshipped the same God since the Assyrian resettlement. Zerubbabel refuses. The opponents then hire counselors to frustrate the building throughout the reigns of Cyrus and Darius. The narrative jumps forward to the reign of Artaxerxes, where Rehum and Shimshai write an Aramaic letter warning the king that Jerusalem has a history of rebellion. Artaxerxes orders the work stopped, and the rebuilding ceases until the second year of Darius.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *This chapter contains one of the most significant linguistic transitions in the Hebrew Bible. At verse 8 the text shifts from Hebrew to Aramaic — the diplomatic language of the Persian Empire — and remains in Aramaic through 6:18. The shift is not accidental: the narrator switches to Aramaic precisely when quoting official Persian correspondence, as if presenting the documents in their original administrative language. The chapter also performs a complex chronological compression, jumping from the early opposition under Cyrus (verses 1-5) forward to the reigns of Xerxes and Artaxerxes (verses 6-23) before returning to the Cyrus-Darius period in verse 24. The opponents' letter to Artaxerxes is a masterpiece of political manipulation — they frame the rebuilding as sedition, invoke Jerusalem's rebellious history, and threaten the king's tax revenue, knowing exactly which arguments will move a Persian bureaucrat.*

Translation Friction: *The chronological structure of this chapter is the most debated issue in Ezra scholarship. Verses 6-23 describe opposition during the reigns of Ahasuerus (Xerxes I, 486-465 BCE) and Artaxerxes I (465-424 BCE), but the Temple was completed in 515 BCE under Darius I. The opposition in verses 6-23 therefore concerns the city walls, not the Temple — the narrator has grouped all opposition episodes thematically rather than chronologically. We render the text sequentially as the narrator presents it, noting the chronological shift. The identity of the 'adversaries' in verse 1 is also contested: the narrator calls them people resettled by Esarhaddon of Assyria, linking them to the mixed-religion population of 2 Kings 17:24-41. Their offer to help may have been genuine, but Zerubbabel's refusal reflects the returnees' determination to maintain ethnic and religious boundaries.*

Connections: *The Assyrian resettlement background (verse 2) reaches back to 2 Kings 17:24-33, where foreign peoples brought to Samaria by the Assyrians adopted a syncretistic form of YHWH worship. Zerubbabel's refusal anticipates the stricter boundary-maintenance of chapters 9-10. The appeal to Jerusalem's rebellious history (verse 15) references the revolts of Hezekiah against Assyria (2 Kings 18:7), Jehoiakim against Babylon (2 Kings 24:1), and Zedekiah against Babylon (2 Kings 24:20). The Aramaic correspondence genre will recur in chapters 5-6 and 7, establishing a pattern of imperial letters that shape the community's fate.*

¹When the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a Temple to the LORD, the God of Israel, ²they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of the ancestral houses and said to them, 'Let us build with you, for we seek your God just as you do. We have been sacrificing to him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here.' ³But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of the ancestral houses of Israel said to them, 'You have no part with us in building a house to our God. We alone will build for the LORD, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus king of Persia commanded us.' ⁴Then the people of the land set about weakening the hands of the people of Judah and intimidating them from building. ⁵They hired advisors against them to frustrate their plans throughout the reign of Cyrus king of Persia and into the reign of Darius king of Persia. ⁶In the reign of Ahasuerus, at the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. ⁷In the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, and the rest of their associates wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia. The letter was written in Aramaic script and composed in the Aramaic language. ⁸Rehum the royal deputy and Shimshai the secretary wrote a letter against Jerusalem to King Artaxerxes as follows: ⁹Then Rehum the royal deputy, Shimshai the secretary, and the rest of their associates — the judges, the envoys, the officials, the Persians, the people of Erech, the Babylonians, the people of Susa (that is, the Elamites), ¹⁰and the rest of the peoples whom the great and noble Osnappar deported and settled in the city of Samaria and the rest of the province Beyond the River — and so forth. ¹¹This is a copy of the letter they sent to him: 'To King Artaxerxes: Your servants, the men of the

province Beyond the River — greetings. ¹²Let the king be informed that the Jews who came up from you to us have gone to Jerusalem. They are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city; they are completing the walls and repairing the foundations. ¹³Let the king know that if this city is rebuilt and its walls completed, they will not pay tribute, tax, or toll, and the royal revenue will suffer loss. ¹⁴Now since we eat the salt of the palace and it is not fitting for us to witness the king's dishonor, we have sent to inform the king, ¹⁵so that a search may be made in the book of records of your predecessors. You will find in the book of records and learn that this city is a rebellious city, harmful to kings and provinces, and that sedition has been stirred within it from ancient times. That is why this city was destroyed. ¹⁶We inform the king that if this city is rebuilt and its walls completed, you will have no portion left in the province Beyond the River. ¹⁷The king sent this reply: 'To Rehum the royal deputy, Shimshai the secretary, and the rest of their associates who live in Samaria and the rest of the province Beyond the River — greetings, and furthermore: ¹⁸The letter you sent to us has been read and translated in my presence. ¹⁹I issued an order and a search was made. It was found that this city has from ancient times risen up against kings, and that rebellion and sedition have been carried out within it. ²⁰Mighty kings have ruled over Jerusalem with authority over the entire province Beyond the River, and tribute, tax, and toll were paid to them. ²¹Now issue an order to make these men stop. This city is not to be rebuilt until I issue a further decree. ²²Be careful not to be negligent in this matter. Why should damage increase to the detriment of the king?' ²³As soon as the copy of King Artaxerxes' letter was read before Rehum, Shimshai the secretary, and their associates, they went in haste to Jerusalem and forced the Jews to stop by armed power. ²⁴At that time the work on the house of God in Jerusalem stopped. It remained halted until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The narrator immediately labels these people tsarei Yehudah u-Vinyamin ('adversaries of Judah and Benjamin') — the reader is told their character before hearing their words. This editorial framing shapes how we read their offer in verse 2. The term tsarim (from tsarar, 'to bind, press, be hostile') leaves no ambiguity about the narrator's assessment.
2. Esarhaddon (681-669 BCE) continued the Assyrian policy of population transfer begun by Sargon II after the fall of Samaria in 722 BCE (2 Kings 17:24). These settlers had adopted YHWH worship — but according to 2 Kings 17:33, they 'feared the LORD and also served their own gods.' Their claim 'we seek your God as you do' may have been sincere from their perspective, but the returnees understood it as syncretism, not genuine covenant commitment.
2. The verb nidrosh ('we seek/inquire of') is significant — darash implies deliberate, sustained seeking of God, the same verb used in 2 Chronicles 15:2 ('if you seek him, he will be found by you'). The opponents use theologically correct vocabulary.
3. The refusal is absolute: lo lakhem valanu ('not for you and for us'). The justification is Cyrus's decree, which authorized specifically the returned exiles to build. Zerubbabel reframes the question politically — this is not merely a religious disagreement but a matter of imperial authorization. The phrase anachnu yachad ('we ourselves together') emphasizes the exclusivity of the building community.
4. The phrase am ha-arets ('people of the land') here refers to the non-exilic population — those who had remained in the land during the exile or been resettled there. The idiom merappin yedei ('weakening the hands of') describes systematic demoralization, the same expression used of those who undermined Jerusalem's defense before the Babylonian siege (Jeremiah 38:4). The verb mevahalim ('terrifying, alarming') adds a note of active intimidation beyond mere discouragement.
5. The word sokherim ('hiring') indicates a sustained, funded campaign — these were paid political operatives working within the Persian bureaucratic system to block the Jews' building permit. The phrase kol yemei Koresh ('all the days of Cyrus') means the opposition persisted from the initial return (538 BCE) through the early reign of Darius I (522 BCE), roughly sixteen years of bureaucratic warfare.
6. Ahasuerus is the Hebrew form of Xerxes (Xerxes I, 486-465 BCE). The word sitnah ('accusation, hostility') shares the same root as satan ('adversary, accuser'). This verse and the next jump forward chronologically to show that opposition continued across multiple reigns. The content of this specific accusation is not preserved — only the fact of its filing.
7. This verse is the hinge point: it announces that the following letter is in Aramaic, and from verse 8 onward the biblical text itself shifts to Aramaic. The phrase katurv Aramit u-meturgam Aramit ('written in Aramaic and translated/composed in Aramaic') may mean 'written in Aramaic script and in the Aramaic language' — distinguishing script from language, since Aramaic script was used for multiple languages in the Persian period.
7. Bishlam may be a name or the Aramaic phrase be-shelam ('in peace, with greetings') — a salutation mistaken for a personal name. Tabeel means 'God is good' in Aramaic.
8. The text switches to Aramaic here and will remain in Aramaic through 6:18. Rehum's title be'el te'em ('lord of decree/command') designates a high-ranking provincial official — a royal commissioner or deputy governor. Shimshai the safra ('scribe, secretary') was the professional letter-writer.

The Aramaic *iggera chada* ('one letter') is the standard term for an official dispatch.

9. The list of co-signers represents a coalition of peoples resettled in Samaria from across the Assyrian and Persian empires. Many of these terms are titles rather than ethnic names: *dinaye* ('judges'), *afarsat-khaye* ('envoys' or 'investigators'). The Babylonians, Susanians (from Susa, the Persian capital), and Elamites represent the diverse population that the Assyrians had transplanted into the former northern kingdom.
10. Osnappar (Asnappar) is almost certainly Ashurbanipal (669-631 BCE), the last great Assyrian king. The Aramaic form is a corruption of the Akkadian Ashur-bani-apli. The phrase *Avar Naharah* ('Beyond the River') is the official Persian name for the satrapy west of the Euphrates, encompassing Syria, Phoenicia, and Palestine. The closing phrase *ukhe'enet* ('and so forth' or 'at this time') is a formulaic letter ending.
11. The word *parshegen* ('copy') is a Persian loanword (from Old Persian **patigarana*) that entered Aramaic and appears also in Esther 3:14; 4:8. The self-designation 'your servants' (*avdakh*) is standard courtly address to the king. The letter format follows Persian epistolary conventions.
12. The accusation is carefully crafted: *qiryeta maradeta u-vi'shta* ('the rebellious and wicked city') is designed to trigger Persian suspicion. The words are Aramaic but the political calculation is universal — label the enemy as disloyal, and the empire will respond. The claim that they are completing walls (*shuraya shakhlelilu*) specifically alleges military fortification, not mere urban construction.
13. Three types of taxation are named: *mindah* (land/property tax), *belo* (commodity/excise tax), and *halakh* (road/transit toll). The letter writers know their audience — the threat to revenue is more persuasive to a Persian king than religious arguments. The phrase *appetom malkin tehanziq* ('the treasury of kings you will damage') makes the financial stakes personal.
14. The idiom *melach heikhala melachna* ('we eat the salt of the palace') is a covenant expression — sharing salt signified loyalty and obligation (compare Numbers 18:19, 'a covenant of salt'). The letter writers present themselves as loyal subjects motivated by duty, not malice. The phrase *ervat malka* ('the king's dishonor/nakedness') uses *ervah*, a word that in Hebrew means 'nakedness, shame, vulnerability' — they frame Jerusalem's rebuilding as an exposure of royal weakness.
15. The appeal to *sefer dakhranaya* ('the book of records/memorials') invokes the Persian archive system — royal chronicles were meticulously maintained and could be consulted to verify claims (see also Esther 2:23; 6:1). The letter writers weaponize Jerusalem's own history: the revolts of Hezekiah, Jehoiakim, and Zedekiah are all on record. The phrase *min yomat alma* ('from days of eternity, from ancient times') is a sweeping generalization designed to make rebellion seem like Jerusalem's permanent character.
16. This is the letter's most dramatic claim — that a rebuilt Jerusalem would cost the king the entire province of Beyond the River (*Avar Naharah*), encompassing all of Syria-Palestine. The claim is wildly exaggerated, but it plays on Persian anxieties about western revolts. The province Beyond the River was strategically vital as the approach route to Egypt.
17. The Aramaic *pitgama* ('edict, official reply') is a Persian loanword (Old Persian **patigama*). The formulaic *shlam ukhe'et* ('peace and now') is standard Persian-Aramaic epistolary greeting. Artaxerxes responds directly to the named officials, confirming the bureaucratic chain of command.
18. The word *meforash* ('plainly, clearly, translated') indicates that the letter was both read and interpreted — possibly translated from Aramaic into Old Persian for the king, or simply read with explanation. The verb *qeri* ('read') is passive, indicating a court reader performed the reading.
19. Artaxerxes confirms the accusation through archival research — the Persian bureaucratic system worked exactly as the letter writers intended. The phrase *min yomat alma* ('from days of eternity') echoes the accusers' language in verse 15; the king has adopted their framing.
20. Artaxerxes acknowledges what the accusers implied — Jerusalem once hosted an independent monarchy (David, Solomon) that controlled the very territory now under Persian rule. The irony is that the king recites Israelite royal glory as evidence of danger. The three-tax formula (*mindah*, *belo*, *halakh*) reappears, reinforcing the fiscal anxiety.
21. The phrase *ad minni ta'ama yittsam* ('until a decree is issued by me') leaves a legal opening — the stop-work order is not permanent but suspended pending royal review. This nuance matters: it allows for the possibility of reversal, which will come under Darius in chapter 6.
22. The word *chavala* ('damage, harm') carries the sense of financial loss and political injury. Artaxerxes frames the urgency in terms of escalating risk — delay means compounding damage to royal interests.
23. The phrase *be-edra ve-chayil* ('by arm and force') indicates military enforcement — this was not a polite request but an armed shutdown. The adverb *bi-vehilu* ('in haste, urgently') shows the eagerness of the opponents to execute the order. They had the legal backing they needed and acted immediately.
24. The narrative returns to the main chronological thread after the Artaxerxes digression (verses 6-23). The second year of Darius I is 520 BCE — the year when Haggai and Zechariah prophesied and the rebuilding resumed (chapter 5). The work had been stalled for approximately sixteen years. This verse is still in Aramaic, bridging into the Aramaic section that continues through chapter 6.

5

Summary: *The prophets Haggai and Zechariah stir Zerubbabel and Jeshua to resume building the Temple. Tattenai, the governor of the province Beyond the River, and his associates arrive and question who authorized the construction. God's protective eye is on the Jewish elders, and Tattenai does not force them to stop while he sends a letter to King Darius requesting a search of the royal archives for Cyrus's original decree. The letter reports the Jews' claim that Cyrus authorized the rebuilding and returned the Temple vessels to Sheshbazzar.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *This chapter presents a strikingly different kind of opposition compared to chapter 4. Tattenai is not hostile — he is a competent administrator doing his job, asking legitimate questions about building permits. His letter to Darius is factual and even-handed, a marked contrast to Rehum's inflammatory accusations. The narrator credits the prophets Haggai and Zechariah with restarting the project, and their prophetic books confirm this: Haggai 1:1 is dated to the second year of Darius (520 BCE), and he explicitly rebukes the people for living in paneled houses while the Temple lies in ruins. The chapter's theological claim is encapsulated in the phrase 'the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews' (verse 5) — divine protection manifests not as miraculous intervention but as bureaucratic patience. God works through the empire's own procedural safeguards.*

Translation Friction: *The entire chapter is in Aramaic, continuing the Aramaic section that began at 4:8. Tattenai (Aramaic: Tattenai; possibly the 'Tattannu' mentioned in a Babylonian text as governor of Beyond the River) asks the Jews for their authorization. The Jews' response (verses 11-16) provides a theological history lesson — they explain the exile as divine judgment, Cyrus's decree as divine reversal, and Sheshbazzar as the authorized builder. The reference to Sheshbazzar laying the foundation (verse 16) creates tension with 3:8-10, which credits Zerubbabel. We render both accounts as given, without harmonizing.*

Connections: *The prophetic impetus for rebuilding connects directly to the books of Haggai and Zechariah, both datable to 520-518 BCE. Haggai 1:2-4 provides the prophetic rebuke that motivates the resumed construction. Zechariah's night visions (Zechariah 1-6) provide the theological framework — especially Zechariah 4:6-10, which promises that Zerubbabel's hands will complete the Temple. The appeal to Cyrus's decree (verse 13) reaches back to chapter 1 and forward to chapter 6, where Darius will locate and confirm the original document.*

¹Then the prophets — Haggai the prophet and Zechariah son of Iddo — prophesied to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them. ²Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua son of Jozadak rose up and began rebuilding the house of God in Jerusalem, with the prophets of God supporting them. ³At that time Tattenai, governor of the province Beyond the River, along with Shethar-bozenai and their associates, came to them and said, 'Who gave you authorization to build this house and complete this structure?' ⁴They also asked them, 'What are the names of the men who are doing this construction?' ⁵But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they were not stopped while the report traveled to Darius and a written reply was returned concerning the matter. ⁶This is a copy of the letter that Tattenai, governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and his associates — the officials in the province Beyond the River — sent to King Darius. ⁷They sent him a report, and this was written in it: 'To King Darius — complete peace. ⁸Let the king be informed that we went to the province of Judah, to the house of the great God. It is being built with large cut stones, and timber is being set into the walls. This work is being carried out with diligence and is progressing well under their hands. ⁹Then we questioned those elders and said to them, 'Who gave you authorization to build this house and complete this structure?' ¹⁰We also asked their names, so that we could inform you and write down the names of the men who lead them. ¹¹They answered us as follows: 'We are servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the house that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel constructed and completed. ¹²But because our ancestors provoked the God of heaven, he handed them over to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house and deported the people to Babylon. ¹³However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, King Cyrus issued a decree to rebuild this house of God. ¹⁴Also, the gold and silver vessels of the house of God that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the Temple in Jerusalem

and brought to the temple in Babylon — King Cyrus removed them from the temple in Babylon and gave them to one named Sheshbazzar, whom he had appointed as governor. ¹⁵He said to him, 'Take these vessels, go, and deposit them in the Temple in Jerusalem. Let the house of God be rebuilt on its original site.' ¹⁶Then Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem. From that time until now it has been under construction, and it is not yet finished.' ¹⁷Now, if it pleases the king, let a search be made in the royal archives there in Babylon to determine whether King Cyrus indeed issued a decree to rebuild this house of God in Jerusalem. And let the king send us his decision on this matter.'

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The text is in Aramaic. Zechariah is identified as bar Iddo ('son of Iddo'), though Zechariah 1:1 calls him 'son of Berechiah son of Iddo' — bar may mean 'grandson' or the genealogy may be compressed. The phrase be-shum Elah Yisrael alehon ('in the name of the God of Israel, upon them') can mean either that they prophesied in God's name over the Jews, or that the God of Israel was present over/with them. The ambiguity is productive — the prophets spoke God's word and God's presence accompanied the speaking.
2. The Aramaic mesa'adin lehon ('supporting/sustaining them') uses a word meaning 'to uphold, prop up, assist.' The prophets did not merely inspire the work with words — they remained present as ongoing supporters. Haggai's prophecies are dated to specific days in the second year of Darius, showing sustained engagement over months (Haggai 1:1; 2:1; 2:10; 2:20).
3. Tattenai (Tattenay) holds the title pechat Avar Naharah ('governor of Beyond the River') — the highest Persian authority in the region west of the Euphrates. His question is procedural, not hostile: man sam lekhem te'em ('who placed for you a decree?'). He wants to see paperwork. Shethar-bozenai may be a title rather than a name, possibly meaning 'star of splendor' in Persian. The word usharna ('structure, wall, timber-frame') refers to the building's structural framework.
4. The demand for names was standard imperial procedure — the administration needed to identify who was responsible. Some manuscripts and versions read 'they said to them' rather than 'we said to them,' which would mean the narrator is quoting from the perspective of Tattenai's letter (verse 7 onward). The WLC reads amarna ('we said'), which places this in the voice of the letter writers.
5. The phrase ein Elahahom havat al savei Yehudaye ('the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews') is the chapter's theological key. God's 'eye' is a metaphor for watchful protection (compare Psalm 33:18; Deuteronomy 11:12). The protection operates through bureaucratic channels — Tattenai defers rather than enforces, filing a report rather than issuing a shutdown. Divine providence works within, not against, the imperial system.
6. The Aramaic Afarsakhaye ('officials, inspectors') likely designates Persian administrative personnel stationed in the provinces — possibly related to the Old Persian *frasakara ('investigator'). The letter is addressed directly to Darius the king, bypassing the regional chain of command, indicating the matter's seriousness.
7. The greeting shlama kholla ('complete peace, total well-being') is the standard Aramaic diplomatic salutation. Unlike Rehum's hostile letter in chapter 4, Tattenai's letter opens with a neutral, respectful greeting and will proceed to present the facts without editorial hostility.
8. Tattenai calls the Temple beit Elaha rabba ('the house of the great God') — a respectful acknowledgment from a Persian official. The construction method described — even gelal ('large rolling/hewn stones') with wood set in the walls — matches the technique of Solomon's Temple (1 Kings 6:36) and the specification in Cyrus's decree (6:4). The word osparna ('diligently, with urgency') is a Persian loanword suggesting energetic progress.
9. Tattenai repeats his original question (from verse 3) verbatim in his report to the king, showing that his letter is a factual transcript of the exchange. The term savaya ('elders') indicates he addressed the leadership rather than the general workforce.
10. The purpose of gathering names is explicitly stated: le-hoda'utkakh ('to inform you') — Tattenai is creating a proper administrative record. The names of the leaders would allow Darius to verify their claims and hold specific individuals accountable.
11. The elders' self-identification as avdohi di Elah shemaya ve-ar'a ('servants of the God of heaven and earth') expands the standard Persian-period title to include 'earth' — a more universal claim than merely 'God of heaven.' The 'great king of Israel' is Solomon, though he is not named. The phrase min qadmat denah ('from before this, long ago') indicates the ancient pedigree of the Temple.
12. The elders provide a remarkable theological confession to a Persian official: they attribute their own exile to divine judgment, not merely to Babylonian military superiority. The verb hargizu ('provoked, angered') is an honest admission of ancestral guilt. They present the exile as God's act (yehav himmo be-yad, 'he gave them into the hand of'), with Nebuchadnezzar as the instrument. This theological interpretation of history is the same framework used by the prophets (Jeremiah 25:8-11; 2 Kings 21:10-15).
13. Cyrus is called 'king of Babylon' (malka di Bavel) because after conquering Babylon in 539 BCE, he adopted the title as part of his royal titulary. The elders cite the specific year and the specific authority — they are making a legal argument, not merely a historical one. The emphasis on Cyrus is strategic: they invoke a prior king's decree, which under Persian law carried binding authority on subsequent rulers.
14. Sheshbazzar is here called pechah ('governor'), a title different from the nasi ('prince') of 1:8. The Persian title pechah designates a provincial administrator — Cyrus apparently gave Sheshbazzar formal governmental authority over the returnee community. The chain of custody for the Temple vessels is carefully documented: Nebuchadnezzar took them from Jerusalem to Babylon; Cyrus took them from Babylon and gave them to Sheshbazzar.

15. Cyrus's command as reported by the elders is direct and personal: sa ('take'), ezel ('go'), achet ('place'). The phrase al atreh ('on its site/place') insists on geographic continuity — the new Temple must stand where the old one stood. The elders present this as eyewitness tradition, transmitted through their community.
16. The elders credit Sheshbazzar with laying the foundation, while 3:8-10 credits Zerubbabel. Several explanations exist: Sheshbazzar may have begun the work ceremonially before Zerubbabel continued it, they may be the same person, or the elders may be citing Sheshbazzar because he was the officially recognized governor who received Cyrus's authorization. The phrase min edayin ve-ad ke'an ('from that time until now') glosses over the sixteen-year gap during which construction was halted.
17. Tattenai's letter concludes not with a recommendation but with a request for verification — he asks the king to check the archives. The phrase beit ginzaya ('treasury/archive house') refers to the royal archives where official decrees were stored. This procedural approach reflects the Persian Empire's reliance on written records and precedent. The phrase re'ut malka ('the will/pleasure of the king') defers to royal authority without prejudging the outcome. Tattenai's neutrality will be rewarded: Darius will find the decree and not only confirm it but expand it (6:1-12).

6

Summary: *Darius orders a search of the archives and the original decree of Cyrus is found at Ecbatana. The decree specifies Temple dimensions and materials, funded by the royal treasury. Darius not only confirms the decree but expands it: Tattenai is ordered to stay away, provide funds from tax revenue, and supply animals for sacrifice. Anyone who interferes will have a beam pulled from his house and be impaled on it. The Temple is completed in the sixth year of Darius and dedicated with joy. The returned exiles celebrate Passover, having purified themselves, and the chapter closes with the joyful observation that God had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *The chapter completes the first major arc of Ezra: the Temple is rebuilt, dedicated, and the Passover celebrated. Darius does not merely permit the building — he funds it from imperial taxes and threatens death to anyone who obstructs it. The empire that destroyed the Temple now pays to rebuild it. The dedication is deliberately understated compared to Solomon's (no fire from heaven, no glory cloud filling the house), yet the narrator insists on the community's joy. The final verse is theologically startling: it calls Darius 'the king of Assyria' (melekh Ashur), even though he was king of Persia. This is not an error — it is a theological identification. The narrator sees Persia as the successor to the Assyrian-Babylonian imperial tradition, and God's turning of 'the heart of the king of Assyria' means that the entire oppressive imperial trajectory has been reversed.*

Translation Friction: *The Aramaic section ends at verse 18, and the text returns to Hebrew at verse 19. The transition is unmarked — the reader simply shifts languages between verses. The decree found at Ecbatana (Aramaic: Achmetha), the Median capital, differs in detail from the decree in chapter 1. Chapter 1 presents a public proclamation in Hebrew; chapter 6 presents an Aramaic memorandum (dikhrona) with architectural specifications. These likely represent two different versions of the same authorization — a public edict and an administrative record. The sacrifice numbers at the dedication (100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, 12 goats) are modest compared to Solomon's dedication (22,000 cattle and 120,000 sheep in 1 Kings 8:63). The 12 goats as a sin offering 'for all Israel' insist that the restoration represents all twelve tribes, even though only Judah and Benjamin actually returned.*

Connections: *The discovery of Cyrus's decree in the archives fulfills the promise implicit in 5:17 — the Persian system works as designed. The Temple dedication echoes Solomon's in 1 Kings 8/2 Chronicles 5-7 but in diminished scale. The Passover celebration (verses 19-22) connects the return from Babylon to the Exodus from Egypt, the foundational redemption narrative. The phrase 'turned the heart of the king' (hesiv lev melekh) uses the same theological language as Proverbs 21:1 ('The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases').*

¹Then King Darius issued an order, and a search was made in the archives where the records were stored in Babylon. ²A scroll was found in the citadel at Ecbatana, in the province of Media, and this was the memorandum written in it: ³In the first year of King Cyrus, King Cyrus issued a decree concerning the house of God in Jerusalem: 'Let the house be rebuilt as a place where sacrifices are offered, and let its foundations be retained. Its height shall be sixty cubits and its width sixty cubits, ⁴with three courses of large cut stones and one course of new timber. The cost is to be paid from the royal treasury. ⁵A

iso, the gold and silver vessels of the house of God that Nebuchadnezzar took from the Temple in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon are to be returned and brought back to the Temple in Jerusalem, each to its proper place. They are to be deposited in the house of God.' ⁶Now then, Tattenai governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and your associates — the officials in the province Beyond the River — keep away from there. ⁷Allow the work on this house of God to proceed. Let the governor of the Jews and the Jewish elders rebuild this house of God on its original site. ⁸I also issue this decree regarding what you are to do for the elders of the Jews for the rebuilding of this house of God: the full cost is to be paid to these men promptly from royal funds — from the tax revenue of the province Beyond the River — so that the work is not interrupted. ⁹Whatever is needed — young bulls, rams, and lambs for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, and wheat, salt, wine, and oil, as the priests in Jerusalem require — let it be given to them day by day without fail, ¹⁰so that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the life of the king and his sons. ¹¹I further decree that if anyone alters this edict, a beam shall be pulled from his house and he shall be impaled on it, and his house shall be made a refuse heap for this offense. ¹²May the God who has caused his name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who lifts a hand to alter this decree or to destroy this house of God in Jerusalem. I, Darius, have issued this decree. Let it be carried out with all diligence. ¹³Then Tattenai the governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their associates carried out the order diligently, exactly as King Darius had directed. ¹⁴The Jewish elders built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah son of Iddo. They completed the building by the decree of the God of Israel and the decrees of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia. ¹⁵This house was completed on the third day of the month Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius. ¹⁶The people of Israel — the priests, the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles — celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy. ¹⁷They offered for the dedication of this house of God: one hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel, twelve male goats — one for each of the tribes of Israel. ¹⁸They installed the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their sections for the service of God in Jerusalem, as prescribed in the book of Moses. ¹⁹The returned exiles observed the Passover on the fourteenth day of the first month. ²⁰The priests and the Levites had purified themselves together — all of them were ritually clean — and they slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the returned exiles, for their fellow priests, and for themselves. ²¹The Israelites who had returned from exile ate the Passover, along with everyone who had separated themselves from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to join them in seeking the LORD, the God of Israel. ²²They celebrated the Festival of Unleavened Bread for seven days with joy, for the LORD had filled them with joy and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The Aramaic *beit sifrayya* ('house of books/scrolls') is the Persian imperial archive. The word *ginzayya* ('treasures, deposits') indicates that official decrees were stored alongside valuables. The search begins in Babylon, the primary administrative center, but the document will be found elsewhere.
2. Ecbatana (Aramaic: *Achmetha*; modern Hamadan, Iran) was the Median capital and served as the Persian kings' summer residence. Cyrus may have issued the decree there, or the document may have been transferred from Babylon for archival purposes. The word *dikhrona* ('memorandum, record') indicates an internal administrative document, distinct from a public proclamation. This explains why it differs from the edict in chapter 1.
3. The dimensions specified — 60 cubits (about 90 feet) high and 60 cubits wide — differ from Solomon's Temple, which was 30 cubits high, 20 cubits wide, and 60 cubits long (1 Kings 6:2). The discrepancy may indicate that Cyrus authorized a larger structure, that the numbers are rounded, or that the length was inadvertently omitted from this copy. A cubit is approximately 18 inches (45 cm).
4. The construction specification — three stone courses topped by one timber course — matches the technique described for Solomon's inner court (1 Kings 6:36, 'three courses of cut stone and one course of cedar beams'). The funding provision (*nifqeta min beit malka*, 'expenditure from the king's house') means the Persian treasury bore the cost. Imperial sponsorship of local temple rebuilding was standard Persian policy, confirmed by the Cyrus Cylinder and other documents.
5. The decree specifies *le-atreh* ('to its place') — each vessel must return to its original liturgical position within the Temple. This insistence on exact restoration reflects the Persian respect for cultic continuity. The phrase *tachet be-beit Elaha* ('deposit in the house of God') uses *tachet* in the sense of 'place down, deposit,' indicating formal installation.
6. The phrase *rachiqin havu min tammah* ('be far from there') is a blunt directive — stay out of the way. Darius not only confirms the building permit but orders the very officials who questioned it to stand down. Tattenai's neutral inquiry has resulted in an outcome far more favorable to the Jews than the status quo.

7. The imperative shevuqu ('leave alone, let be') orders non-interference. The phrase pechat Yehudaye ('governor of the Jews') recognizes the Jewish leadership as a legitimate provincial authority. Darius addresses the Jewish governor and elders as competent administrators of their own religious project.
8. Darius goes beyond confirming Cyrus's decree — he orders Tattenai's own provincial taxes to fund the Temple construction. The phrase osparna nifqeta teheve mityahava ('promptly/diligently let expenses be given') uses osparna (the Persian loanword for 'diligently') to demand urgency. The irony is complete: the officials who questioned the project must now finance it.
9. Darius provides not just building funds but ongoing sacrificial supplies. The list — bulls, rams, lambs, wheat, salt, wine, oil — covers the full range of Temple offerings as prescribed in the Torah (Numbers 28-29). The phrase yom be-yom di la shalu ('day by day without ceasing') mandates continuous supply. A Persian king is now underwriting Israel's daily worship.
10. The phrase nichohin ('pleasing aroma') is the Aramaic equivalent of the Hebrew nicho'ach — the 'soothing aroma' of sacrifice that ascends to God (Genesis 8:21; Leviticus 1:9). Darius's motive is partly political: the Jews are to pray for the king's life and dynasty. Imperial sponsorship of subject peoples' temples was a standard Persian strategy for securing loyalty. Yet the narrator presents this arrangement without cynicism — God works through political self-interest.
11. The punishment is characteristically Persian in its brutal creativity: the criminal's own house provides the instrument of his execution. The verb yitmache ('be struck/impaled') likely refers to impalement, a standard Persian form of execution attested in Herodotus and Persian inscriptions. The final indignity — converting the house to a nevalu ('refuse heap, latrine') — ensures that the offender's legacy is erased along with his life.
12. Darius invokes the God of the Temple as enforcer of his own decree — a Persian king calling on Israel's God to punish future violators. The phrase di shakken shemeh tammah ('who has caused his name to dwell there') uses Deuteronomic theology (Deuteronomy 12:5, 11) from a pagan king's mouth. Whether Darius understood the theology or his Jewish scribes drafted this language, the effect is the same: imperial power and divine authority converge. The first-person declaration ana Daryavesh sameth te'em ('I Darius have issued the decree') places the king's personal authority behind the order.
13. The word osparna ('diligently') reappears — the same urgency demanded by the king is now exhibited by his officials. Tattenai's compliance is immediate and thorough. The narrative turns on a bureaucratic irony: the investigation meant to challenge the Jews became the mechanism for expanding their support.
14. The narrator places God's decree (ta'am Elah Yisrael) alongside the decrees of three Persian kings — divine will and imperial authorization operate as a single cause. The mention of Artaxerxes alongside Cyrus and Darius is unexpected, since Artaxerxes comes later (chapter 7) and is associated with Ezra's mission rather than the Temple construction. The narrator may be telescoping the entire restoration project — Temple, walls, and community reform — into a single summary.
15. The date — 3 Adar in the sixth year of Darius I — corresponds to approximately March 12, 515 BCE. The Temple construction thus took about four and a half years from the resumption in 520 BCE, or about twenty-three years from Cyrus's original decree in 538 BCE. Adar is the twelfth and final month of the Jewish calendar, making the completion a fitting conclusion to the year.
16. The word chanukkat ('dedication') is the same root that later names the Hanukkah festival commemorating the rededication of the Temple under the Maccabees in 164 BCE. The term carries the sense of inaugural consecration — setting apart for sacred use. The phrase be-chedvah ('with joy') is Aramaic, reflecting the continued Aramaic section. The community categories — priests, Levites, and benei galuta ('children of exile') — encompass the entire restored community.
17. The twelve goats for the sin offering are the most theologically significant detail. By offering twelve — le-minyan shivtei Yisrael ('according to the number of the tribes of Israel') — the community claims to represent all twelve tribes, not just Judah and Benjamin. The ten northern tribes deported by Assyria are not forgotten; the restored community acts on their behalf. The total sacrifices (100 + 200 + 400 = 700, plus 12) are modest compared to Solomon's dedication (22,000 cattle and 120,000 sheep), but the twelve-goat gesture carries disproportionate theological weight.
18. This is the last verse in Aramaic; the text returns to Hebrew at verse 19. The organizational structure — priestly and Levitical divisions (peluggatehon, machleqatehon) — follows the Mosaic prescription (Numbers 3-4) as elaborated by David (1 Chronicles 24-26). The phrase ki-khetav sefer Mosheh ('as written in the book of Moses') grounds the new Temple's operations in Torah authority, the same basis invoked at the altar's construction (3:2).
19. The text returns to Hebrew. The date — 14 Nisan — is exactly one month after the Temple's completion on 3 Adar. The Passover on 14 Nisan follows the Mosaic prescription exactly (Exodus 12:6; Leviticus 23:5). This is the first Passover celebrated at the rebuilt Temple, connecting the new community to the Exodus event. The term benei ha-golah ('children of the exile') emphasizes their identity as the returned diaspora.
20. The note that 'all of them were clean' (kullam tehorim) emphasizes the contrast with the pre-exilic failures. In Hezekiah's Passover (2 Chronicles 30:17-20), many participants were ritually unclean and required special dispensation. Here the entire community — priests and Levites alike — achieved full ritual purity. The Levites slaughter the lamb for everyone, including the priests, indicating their role as liturgical assistants.
21. This verse is remarkable for its inclusiveness: alongside the returned exiles, others who had 'separated from the uncleanness of the nations' (nivdal mi-tum'at goyei ha-arets) were welcome at the Passover. These may have been Jews who remained in the land during the exile, or even non-Israelites who converted. The criterion is not genealogy but commitment — separation from impurity and seeking the LORD. This openness stands in tension with the stricter genealogical boundaries of chapters 2, 9, and 10.

22. The chapter's final verse delivers a theological shock: Darius is called *melekh Ashur* ('king of Assyria'). Persia was not Assyria, but the narrator sees the imperial succession — Assyria to Babylon to Persia — as a single trajectory now reversed by God. The empire that first destroyed the northern kingdom now, through its Persian successor, funds the rebuilding of the Temple. The verb *hesev* ('turned') presents God as sovereign over imperial hearts, and the phrase *le-chazzeq yedeihem* ('to strengthen their hands') closes the arc that began with the enemies 'weakening the hands' of Judah in 4:4.

7

Summary: *The narrative jumps forward approximately sixty years to introduce Ezra himself. His priestly genealogy is traced back to Aaron through the high-priestly line. Ezra is described as a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses, and the king grants him everything he asks because 'the hand of the LORD his God was upon him.' Artaxerxes issues an Aramaic letter authorizing Ezra's mission: to investigate conditions in Judah according to the Law, transport silver and gold, appoint judges, and enforce Torah compliance throughout the province. Anyone who does not obey the Law of God and the law of the king faces severe punishment. Ezra blesses the LORD for putting such a purpose in the king's heart.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *This chapter introduces the figure who gives the book its name — a priest who is also a scribe, a combination that will define post-exilic Judaism. The phrase *sofer mahir be-torat Mosheh* ('a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses') marks a historical shift: authority now resides not only in the priesthood but in expertise with the written text. Ezra is the prototype of the rabbi, the teacher whose power comes from knowledge of Torah rather than sacrificial function. Artaxerxes' letter (verses 12-26, in Aramaic) is the most extensive imperial document in Ezra, and it effectively makes Torah the law of the land for the Jewish community. The letter creates a dual legal system: the 'law of your God' and the 'law of the king' operate in parallel, with Persian enforcement backing Jewish religious law. This fusion of religious and imperial authority shaped Jewish self-governance for centuries.*

Translation Friction: *The sixty-year gap between chapters 6 and 7 (515 to approximately 458 BCE) is unexplained. The entire reign of Xerxes (486-465) passes in silence. The Artaxerxes of this chapter is generally identified as Artaxerxes I Longimanus (465-424 BCE), though some scholars argue for Artaxerxes II (404-358), which would place Ezra after Nehemiah. The identification affects the chronological relationship between Ezra and Nehemiah — a problem that remains unresolved. The Aramaic section (verses 12-26) returns to Aramaic for the royal letter, creating the second language-shift zone in the book. Ezra's genealogy in verses 1-5 is compressed — comparing it with 1 Chronicles 6:3-14 reveals that six generations are omitted, likely to create a literary structure rather than a complete genealogical record.*

Connections: *Ezra's genealogy connects him to Aaron (Exodus 6:16-25), Phinehas (Numbers 25:10-13), and the high-priestly line through Zadok (2 Samuel 8:17; 1 Kings 2:35). The phrase 'the hand of the LORD his God was upon him' (verse 6) echoes the same phrase applied to Elijah (1 Kings 18:46) and will recur as a refrain in Ezra (7:9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31). Artaxerxes' letter authorizing Torah enforcement anticipates the public Torah reading in Nehemiah 8, where Ezra will stand on a wooden platform and read the Law to the assembled community. The authority to 'appoint magistrates and judges' (verse 25) echoes Moses' appointment of judges in Deuteronomy 16:18.*

¹After these events, during the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra son of Seraiah, son of Azariah, son of Hilkiah, ²son of Shallum, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub, ³son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Meraioth, ⁴son of Zeremiah, son of Uzzi, son of Bukki, ⁵son of Abishua, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the chief priest. ⁶This Ezra came up from Babylon. He was a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses that the LORD, the God of Israel, had given. The king granted him everything he requested, because the hand of the LORD his God was upon him. ⁷Some of the Israelites and some of the priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and Temple servants went up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes. ⁸He arrived in Jerusalem in the fifth month of the seventh year of the king. ⁹On the first day of the first month he set out from Babylon, and on the first day of the fifth month he arrived in Jerusalem, for the good hand of his God was upon him. ¹⁰For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, to practice it, and to teach statute and ordinance in Israel. ¹¹This is a copy of the letter

that King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe — a scribe learned in the words of the commandments of the LORD and his statutes for Israel: ¹²Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, scribe of the Law of the God of heaven — greetings. ¹³I hereby decree that any of the people of Israel and their priests and Levites in my kingdom who freely volunteer to go to Jerusalem may go with you. ¹⁴You are being sent by the king and his seven counselors to investigate conditions in Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God, which is in your hand, ¹⁵and to bring the silver and gold that the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, ¹⁶together with all the silver and gold you can collect throughout the province of Babylon, along with the freewill offerings that the people and the priests contribute for the house of their God in Jerusalem. ¹⁷With this money, then, you are to buy diligently: bulls, rams, lambs, and their grain offerings and drink offerings, and offer them on the altar of the house of your God in Jerusalem. ¹⁸Whatever seems best to you and your kinsmen to do with the remaining silver and gold, do it according to the will of your God. ¹⁹The vessels given to you for the service of the house of your God — deliver them all before the God of Jerusalem. ²⁰And whatever else is needed for the house of your God that falls to you to provide, you may draw from the royal treasury. ²¹I, King Artaxerxes, hereby decree to all the treasurers in the province Beyond the River: whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the Law of the God of heaven, requests of you, it is to be done promptly — ²²up to one hundred talents of silver, one hundred cors of wheat, one hundred baths of wine, one hundred baths of oil, and salt without limit. ²³Whatever the God of heaven commands, let it be done precisely for the house of the God of heaven. For why should wrath fall on the realm of the king and his sons? ²⁴And we inform you that it is not permitted to impose tribute, tax, or toll on any of the priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, Temple servants, or any other workers in this house of God. ²⁵And you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God that is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province Beyond the River — all who know the laws of your God. And those who do not know them, you shall teach. ²⁶Anyone who does not obey the law of your God and the law of the king — let judgment be executed against him promptly, whether death, banishment, confiscation of property, or imprisonment.' ²⁷Blessed be the LORD, the God of our ancestors, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king — to glorify the house of the LORD in Jerusalem. ²⁸He has extended faithful love toward me before the king, his counselors, and all the king's powerful officials. I took courage because the hand of the LORD my God was upon me, and I gathered leaders from Israel to go up with me.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The phrase *achar ha-devarim ha-elleh* ('after these things') bridges a gap of roughly sixty years without explanation. Seraiah at the head of Ezra's genealogy is likely the same Seraiah who was the last high priest before the exile, executed by Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah (2 Kings 25:18-21). If so, Ezra is 'son of Seraiah' in the sense of descendant, not immediate child. Hilkiyah is the high priest who discovered the book of the Law in Josiah's reign (2 Kings 22:8).
2. Zadok is the priest who supported David and Solomon (2 Samuel 8:17; 1 Kings 2:35), from whom the legitimate high-priestly line descended. The 'sons of Zadok' become the priestly ideal in Ezekiel's vision (Ezekiel 44:15). Ezra's Zadokite lineage establishes his priestly credentials.
3. The genealogy compresses several generations. Comparing with 1 Chronicles 6:3-14, at least six names between Meraioth and Azariah are omitted. This selective genealogy serves a literary rather than archival purpose — it connects Ezra to the key figures in the priestly line without listing every generation.
4. These names trace the high-priestly line through the period of the Judges, connecting the pre-monarchic priesthood to Ezra's post-exilic generation.
5. The genealogy terminates at Aaron ha-kohen ha-rosh ('Aaron the chief/head priest'). The sixteen generations from Aaron to Ezra span roughly a thousand years. Phinehas is the zealous grandson of Aaron who received God's 'covenant of peace' and perpetual priesthood (Numbers 25:10-13). Eleazar succeeded Aaron on Mount Hor (Numbers 20:25-28). Every link in this chain carries priestly authority.
6. The title *sofer mahir* ('skilled scribe, rapid scribe') defines Ezra's identity. The word *mahir* means 'swift, skilled, expert' — this is not merely a copyist but a master interpreter of Torah. The phrase *yad YHWH Elohav alav* ('the hand of the LORD his God upon him') is the theological explanation for Ezra's success with the king. It becomes the book's signature refrain, appearing six times (7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31). Divine favor operates through human expertise and royal generosity.
7. The seventh year of Artaxerxes I is 458 BCE — approximately fifty-seven years after the Temple's completion. The same categories of returnees from chapter 2 appear again: priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and Temple servants (*netinim*). This is a second wave of return, led by Ezra, focused not on building but on Torah reform.

8. The fifth month (Av, approximately July-August) — the same month in which the first Temple had been destroyed (2 Kings 25:8-9). Arriving in this month of mourning to begin restoration work carries symbolic weight, though the text does not comment on it directly.
9. The journey took exactly four months — from 1 Nisan to 1 Av. The distance from Babylon to Jerusalem via the caravan routes was approximately 900 miles. The phrase *ke-yad Elohav ha-tovah alav* ('according to the good hand of his God upon him') attributes the safe and timely arrival to divine providence. The refrain now adds the qualifier 'good' (*tovah*), emphasizing that God's hand brings benefit.
10. This verse is Ezra's mission statement, structured as a three-step sequence: *lidrosh* (to study/seek), *la'asot* (to practice/do), *u-le-lammed* (to teach). The order is deliberate and irreversible — one cannot teach what one has not practiced, and one cannot practice what one has not studied. The verb *hekhin* ('prepared, established, set firm') indicates a settled, unshakeable resolution. The phrase *choq u-mishpat* ('statute and ordinance') covers the full range of Torah law — *choq* for the prescribed duties and *mishpat* for the judicial decisions.
11. Ezra's title is doubled: *ha-kohen ha-sofer* ('the priest, the scribe'). He is then further qualified as *sofer divrei mitsvot YHWH ve-chuqqav al Yisrael* ('scribe of the words of the LORD's commandments and his statutes concerning Israel'). This extended title reflects the intersection of priestly and scribal authority — Ezra is not merely a copyist but an authoritative interpreter of divine law.
12. The text shifts to Aramaic and remains so through verse 26. Artaxerxes uses the title *melekh malkaya* ('king of kings'), the standard Persian royal epithet reflecting universal sovereignty. Ezra's Aramaic title is *kahana safar data di Elah shemaya* ('priest-scribe of the law of the God of heaven') — the Persian court recognizes him as an expert in Jewish religious law. The word *gemir* ('complete, perfect') may modify 'greetings' or Ezra's expertise.
13. The decree makes participation voluntary (*mitnaddav*, 'volunteers freely') — Artaxerxes does not compel Jewish return but authorizes it. This matches Cyrus's approach in chapter 1. The inclusion of priests and Levites as a distinct category shows that the Persian administration understood the internal structure of Jewish society.
14. The 'seven counselors' (*shiv'at ya'atsohi*) are the seven noble Persian families who had special access to the king (see Esther 1:14). Their involvement elevates Ezra's mission to the highest level of imperial authority. The phrase *dat Elahakh di vi-dakh* ('the law of your God which is in your hand') means Ezra carried a physical copy of the Torah. The law is simultaneously divine ('your God') and portable ('in your hand') — a text Ezra personally controls and can consult.
15. The phrase *di bi-Yerushalem mishkheneh* ('whose dwelling is in Jerusalem') uses *mishkan* — the same word for the Tabernacle. The king acknowledges that Israel's God has a permanent address in Jerusalem. The royal contribution is described as a freewill offering (*hitnadavu*), using the same vocabulary applied to Israelite voluntary donations.
16. Ezra is authorized to collect donations from the Jewish diaspora throughout Babylon — a fundraising mandate backed by imperial authority. The phrase *di tehaskkach* ('that you can find/obtain') gives Ezra broad latitude in gathering resources.
17. The king specifies that the primary use of funds is sacrificial worship — bulls, rams, lambs, grain offerings (*minchatehon*), and drink offerings (*niskkehon*). The Persian king is ordering Jewish sacrificial worship to continue, funded by imperial and diaspora donations.
18. Artaxerxes grants Ezra discretionary authority over surplus funds: *ki-re'ut Elahakhem ta'avdun* ('according to the will of your God you shall do'). The king defers to Jewish religious judgment on the use of the money — a remarkable grant of autonomy within the imperial system.
19. Additional Temple vessels (presumably replacements or supplements for those returned under Cyrus) are entrusted to Ezra. The phrase *hashlem qodam Elah Yerushalem* ('deliver complete before the God of Jerusalem') requires a full accounting — every vessel must arrive intact.
20. An open-ended funding authorization: any additional needs (*she'ar chashchut*, 'the rest of what is needed') may be covered by the royal treasury (*beit ginzei malka*). This is a blank check from the Persian king for Temple expenses.
21. Artaxerxes speaks in the first person (*ana*, 'I') with emphatic self-identification, lending maximum royal weight to the order. Every treasury official in the entire satrapy of Beyond the River is commanded to comply with Ezra's requests. This effectively makes Ezra the king's authorized representative with financial drawing rights across the province.
22. The amounts are generous but capped (except for salt). A talent (*kikkar*) of silver was approximately 75 pounds (34 kg), so 100 talents equals about 7,500 pounds of silver. A cor was approximately 220 liters (about 6 bushels); a bath was approximately 22 liters (about 6 gallons). The exemption of salt from any limit reflects its importance in Temple sacrifices (Leviticus 2:13, 'the salt of the covenant') and its relatively low cost.
23. The word *adrazda* ('precisely, with care, diligently') is a Persian loanword indicating meticulous execution. Artaxerxes' motivation is partly self-protective: *di lemah leheve qetsaf* ('for why should there be wrath') reveals a pagan king's fear of offending a god whose power he respects. Persian imperial theology recognized the reality of local deities and their capacity for retribution. The concern for 'the king and his sons' (*malka u-venohi*) echoes the same dynastic prayer request as 6:10.
24. Complete tax exemption for all Temple personnel — the same three taxes named in 4:13 and 4:20 (*mindah*, *belo*, *halakh*). This exemption gives the Temple staff economic independence from the provincial tax system, effectively creating a religious enclave within the empire. The six categories of exempt personnel match the census categories of chapter 2.
25. Artaxerxes grants Ezra judicial authority throughout the entire province Beyond the River — not just Judah but the whole satrapy. He is authorized to appoint *shaftin ve-dayyanin* ('magistrates and judges') — two categories of judicial officials — and to teach Torah to those who do not know it. This is a Persian-backed mandate for Torah education and enforcement, the most extensive grant of religious authority to any individual in the post-exilic period.

26. This is the last verse in Aramaic; the text returns to Hebrew at verse 27. The dual legal authority is explicit: *data di Elahakh ve-data di malka* ('the law of your God and the law of the king'). Torah and Persian imperial law operate as parallel systems with mutual enforcement. Four penalties are listed in descending severity: death (*mot*), banishment (*lishroshi*, 'uprooting'), confiscation (*anash nikhsin*, 'fining of property'), and imprisonment (*essurin*). The word *osparna* ('promptly, diligently') means no delays in enforcement — violators face swift consequences.
27. The text returns to Hebrew, and Ezra speaks in the first person for the first time. The blessing *barukh YHWH Elohei avoteinu* ('blessed be the LORD, God of our fathers') is classic Israelite praise language. Ezra attributes the king's generosity to God's initiative — *natan kazot be-lev ha-melekh* ('put such a thing in the heart of the king') — the same theology of divine stirring that opened the book in 1:1. The verb *le-fa'er* ('to glorify, beautify') suggests both physical adornment and spiritual honor.
28. The phrase *hittah chesed* ('extended faithful love') uses the key covenant term — God's *chesed* operates through imperial politics. Ezra experiences divine faithfulness not in a vision or miracle but in royal favor. The phrase *va-ani hitchazzaqti* ('and I took courage/strengthened myself') shows Ezra's personal response to divine enablement — he is empowered but not passive. The refrain *ke-yad YHWH Elohai alai* ('as the hand of the LORD my God was upon me') appears for the third time, establishing it as the interpretive key to Ezra's entire mission.

8

Summary: *Ezra lists the heads of the ancestral houses who returned with him from Babylon. He discovers that no Levites have volunteered, so he sends a delegation to Iddo at Casiphia to recruit Levites and Temple servants. Thirty-eight Levites and 220 Temple servants join the caravan. At the Ahava canal, Ezra proclaims a fast to seek God's protection for the journey, having been ashamed to ask the king for a military escort after telling him that God protects those who seek him. He distributes the silver, gold, and sacred vessels among twelve priests and twelve Levites for safekeeping. After a three-day rest in Jerusalem, the treasure is weighed and recorded. The returnees offer sacrifices and deliver the king's commissions to the provincial officials.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *The chapter's most revealing moment is Ezra's confession in verse 22: he was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers because he had already testified that God protects his servants. This is not naive piety — it is a man trapped by his own theology, forced to trust the God he proclaimed. The faith is genuine but costly, and Ezra's honesty about feeling ashamed rather than confident makes it real. The Levite shortage (verse 15) reveals an ongoing crisis: the Levitical families were reluctant to return, perhaps because their economic prospects in Babylon were better than menial Temple service in a small provincial town. Ezra's solution — sending a recruitment delegation to Casiphia — suggests an organized Jewish community in the diaspora with its own leadership structures. The meticulous weighing of treasure in verses 24-34, with every mina and talent documented, shows a community that understood accountability and transparency in handling donated resources.*

Translation Friction: *The location of Casiphia (verse 17) is unknown — the name may relate to *keseph* ('silver'), suggesting a silver-working district, or it may be a proper name. The phrase *ha-maqom Kasifya* ('the place Casiphia') is enigmatic; some scholars read *maqom* as a euphemism for a sanctuary or house of study, suggesting a proto-synagogue in the diaspora. The number of Temple servants (220, verse 20) marked as *netinim* 'whom David and the officials had set apart' provides a rare historical note about their origin. The total silver in verse 26 (650 talents, approximately 48,750 pounds) and gold (100 talents, approximately 7,500 pounds) represent enormous wealth for a caravan traveling without military escort — underscoring the faith risk Ezra assumed.*

Connections: *The ancestor list format parallels chapter 2, maintaining the pattern of documented identity. Ezra's fast at the Ahava canal echoes the fasts proclaimed by Jehoshaphat before battle (2 Chronicles 20:3) and by Esther before approaching the king (Esther 4:16). The refusal of military escort contrasts with Nehemiah, who will accept a royal military escort (Nehemiah 2:9). The safe arrival attributed to 'the hand of our God' (verse 31) continues the refrain from chapter 7. The sacrificial offerings on arrival (verse 35) — including twelve bulls, twelve male goats — maintain the twelve-tribe symbolism from 6:17.*

‡These are the heads of the ancestral houses, with their genealogical registration, who went up with me from Babylon during the reign of King Artaxerxes: †Of the descendants of Phinehas: Gershom. Of the descendants of Ithamar: Daniel. Of the descendants of David: Hattush. ‡Of the descendants of Shecaniah, from the line of Parosh: Zechariah, and with him 150

registered males. ⁴Of the descendants of Pahath-moab: Eliehoenai son of Zerahiah, with 200 males. ⁵Of the descendants of Shecaniah: the son of Jahaziel, with 300 males. ⁶Of the descendants of Adin: Ebed son of Jonathan, with 50 males. ⁷Of the descendants of Elam: Jeshaiiah son of Athaliah, with 70 males. ⁸Of the descendants of Shephatiah: Zebadiah son of Michael, with 80 males. ⁹Of the descendants of Joab: Obadiah son of Jehiel, with 218 males. ¹⁰Of the descendants of Shelomith: the son of Josiphiah, with 160 males. ¹¹Of the descendants of Bebai: Zechariah son of Bebai, with 28 males. ¹²Of the descendants of Azgad: Johanan son of Hakkatan, with 110 males. ¹³Of the descendants of Adonikam — the last to come — these are their names: Eliphelet, Jeuel, and Shemaiah, with 60 males. ¹⁴Of the descendants of Bigvai: Uthai and Zabbud, with 70 males. ¹⁵I assembled them at the canal that flows toward Ahava, and we camped there three days. When I reviewed the people and the priests, I found no Levites among them. ¹⁶So I sent for Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarib, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah, and Meshullam — leading men — and for Joiarib and Elnathan — men of insight. ¹⁷I directed them to Iddo, the leader at the place called Casiphia, and I put words in their mouths to speak to Iddo and his kinsmen, the Temple servants at the place Casiphia, asking them to send us ministers for the house of our God. ¹⁸By the good hand of our God upon us, they brought us a man of insight from the descendants of Mahli son of Levi son of Israel — namely Sherebiah — with his sons and kinsmen, eighteen in all; ¹⁹also Hashabiah and with him Jeshaiiah of the descendants of Merari, with their kinsmen and sons, twenty; ²⁰and of the Temple servants whom David and the officials had designated for the service of the Levites: ²¹20 Temple servants — all of them listed by name. ²²I proclaimed a fast there at the Ahava canal, so that we could humble ourselves before our God and seek from him a safe route for us, our children, and all our possessions. ²³For I was ashamed to ask the king for infantry and cavalry to protect us from enemies on the road, since we had told the king, 'The hand of our God is upon all who seek him, for their good, but his power and wrath are against all who forsake him.' ²⁴So we fasted and sought our God concerning this, and he answered our prayer. ²⁵Then I set apart twelve of the leading priests, along with Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and ten of their kinsmen. ²⁶I weighed out to them the silver, the gold, and the vessels — the offering for the house of our God that the king, his counselors, his officials, and all the Israelites present had contributed. ²⁷I weighed into their care: silver — 650 talents; silver vessels — 100 talents' worth; gold — 100 talents; ²⁸twenty gold bowls worth 1,000 darics; and two vessels of polished bronze, as precious as gold. ²⁹I said to them, 'You are holy to the LORD, and these vessels are holy. The silver and gold are a freewill offering to the LORD, the God of your ancestors. ³⁰Guard them carefully until you weigh them out before the leading priests, the Levites, and the heads of the ancestral houses of Israel in Jerusalem, in the chambers of the house of the LORD.' ³¹So the priests and the Levites accepted the weighed silver, gold, and vessels to bring them to Jerusalem, to the house of our God. ³²We set out from the Ahava canal on the twelfth of the first month to travel to Jerusalem. The hand of our God was upon us, and he delivered us from the enemy and from ambush along the road. ³³We arrived in Jerusalem and rested there for three days. ³⁴On the fourth day the silver, gold, and vessels were weighed in the house of our God under the supervision of Meremoth son of Uriah the priest, with Eleazar son of Phinehas assisting him, along with the Levites Jozabad son of Jeshua and Noadiah son of Binnui. ³⁵Everything was counted and weighed, and the entire weight was recorded at that time. ³⁶The returned exiles who had come from captivity offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel: twelve bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven lambs, and twelve male goats as a sin offering — all as a burnt offering to the LORD. ³⁷They delivered the king's commissions to the royal satraps and the governors of the province Beyond the River, and these officials supported the people and the house of God.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. Ezra now speaks in the first person (immi, 'with me'), continuing the autobiographical section that began at 7:27. The phrase ve-hityachsam ('and their genealogical registration') indicates formal documentation of lineage — every returnee was enrolled by ancestral house.
2. The three leading families represent the priestly line of Phinehas, the priestly line of Ithamar (Aaron's two surviving sons' lines), and the royal house of David. The presence of a Davidic descendant (Hattush; see 1 Chronicles 3:22) shows that the Davidic line continued to be recognized and honored even without a throne.
3. The count specifies lizekharim ('males') — adult men enrolled by genealogy. The total caravan would have been larger when women, children, and servants are included.

4. Eliehoenai means 'my eyes are toward the LORD' — a fitting name for someone joining a faith-driven journey.
5. The clan leader's personal name appears to be missing — the text reads 'the son of Jahaziel' without a given name. This may reflect a textual lacuna or the practice of identifying a leader solely by patronym.
6. Ebed means 'servant' — a name expressing devotion to God.
7. Jeshaiiah means 'the LORD saves' — a shortened form of Isaiah.
8. Zebadiah means 'the LORD has bestowed'; Michael means 'who is like God?'
9. Obadiah means 'servant of the LORD' — the same name as the prophet.
10. Again the personal name of the clan leader is absent — only the patronym 'son of Josiphiah' is given. Shelomith derives from shalom ('peace').
11. The clan leader shares his ancestor's name — a common practice reflecting reverence for founding figures.
12. Hakkatan means 'the small/young one' — possibly a birth-order designation that became a family name. Johanan (Yochanan) means 'the LORD is gracious.'
13. The qualifier acharonim ('last, final') may mean this was the last remaining group of the Adonikam clan still in Babylon — after this return, the entire family had relocated to Judah.
14. The total registered males from all the listed clans is approximately 1,496. Including women, children, and servants, the full caravan may have been several thousand people.
15. The Ahava canal (or river) was likely one of the many irrigation channels in the Babylonian canal system — a staging area for the caravan. The discovery that no Levites had volunteered (mi-benei Levi lo matsati sham, 'from the sons of Levi I did not find there') confirms the ongoing Levitical recruitment crisis noted in 2:40, where only 74 Levites returned in the first wave. The Levites' reluctance to return is a persistent problem in the restoration narrative.
16. Ezra assembles a delegation of eleven men — nine designated rashim ('leaders') and two designated mevinim ('men of understanding, discerning ones'). The distinction between leadership and insight suggests different roles in the recruitment mission: some were to negotiate, others to discern the quality and suitability of volunteers. Three men named Elnathan appears — a common name meaning 'God has given.'
17. Casiphia (Kasifya) may derive from keseph ('silver'), suggesting a silver-working district in Babylon. The phrase ha-maqom ('the place') may euphemistically refer to a place of worship or study — a proto-synagogue where Levites and Temple servants had gathered. Iddo appears to be the recognized leader of this diaspora community. Ezra's scripted message (va-asimah be-fihem devarim, 'I placed words in their mouths') shows careful diplomatic preparation — he wanted the request made with exactly the right persuasive language.
18. The refrain ke-yad Eloheinu ha-tovah aleinu ('by the good hand of our God upon us') attributes the successful recruitment to divine providence. Sherebiah is singled out as ish sekhel ('a man of insight/intelligence') — high praise from a scribe who valued learning. His Levitical pedigree is traced back through Mahli to Levi to Israel (Jacob), establishing full legitimacy.
19. Merari was the third son of Levi (Genesis 46:11), and his descendants served in the most physically demanding Temple tasks (Numbers 4:29-33). The total of 38 Levites (18 + 20) is still small but sufficient for the caravan's needs.
20. This verse provides a historical note about the origin of the Temple servants: David and the officials (ha-sarim) established this institution. The phrase kullam niqgevu ve-shemot ('all of them designated by names') means every individual was formally registered — no anonymous participants. The 220 Temple servants outnumber the 38 Levites by nearly 6 to 1, reflecting the Temple servants' greater willingness to return.
21. The fast is an act of self-humbling (le-hit'annot, 'to afflict oneself') before God — the same vocabulary used for the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29-31). Ezra seeks derekh yesharah ('a straight/right way') — both physically safe passage and divine guidance. The mention of tappenu ('our little ones, our children') makes the risk visceral — this is not abstract theology but a father's prayer for his children's safety on a dangerous road.
22. This is the chapter's most human moment. The word boshti ('I was ashamed') is unflinching self-disclosure. Ezra had made a theological claim to Artaxerxes — that God protects his people — and now he must live by it. He cannot request soldiers without contradicting his own testimony. The shame is not weakness but integrity: Ezra would rather face danger than undermine his witness. The theology is precise: yad Eloheinu al kol mevaqshav le-tovah ('the hand of our God upon all who seek him, for good') and uzzo ve-appe al kol ozevav ('his power and anger upon all who forsake him').
23. The verb vayyei'ater ('he was entreated, he answered') comes from the root atar, which carries the sense of God allowing himself to be moved by prayer. The same verb describes God responding to Isaac's prayer for Rebekah (Genesis 25:21) and David's prayer during plague (2 Samuel 24:25). The brevity of the verse — one sentence — contrasts with the intensity of the preceding confession, suggesting that God's response was immediate and complete.
24. Ezra creates a formal chain of custody for the treasure: twelve priestly leaders plus twelve Levites (Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and ten others). The number twelve continues the twelve-tribe symbolism that permeates the restoration narrative.
25. Every item is weighed (va-eshqelah, from shaqal, 'to weigh') and formally transferred. The contributors are listed: the king, his counselors, his officials, and all Israel present — a combination of imperial and Jewish donors. The verb heerimu ('contributed, lifted up') is the standard term for a dedicated offering separated from common use.

26. The treasure is staggering: 650 talents of silver (approximately 48,750 pounds/22,100 kg), plus silver vessels weighing 100 talents, plus 100 talents of gold (approximately 7,500 pounds/3,400 kg). This vast fortune is traveling without military escort — the concrete reality of Ezra's faith in verse 22.
27. The adarkhonim ('darics') are Persian gold coins. Twenty gold bowls valued at 1,000 darics represents enormous worth. The 'polished bronze' (nechoset mutsahav tovah) refers to a high-quality bronze alloy so bright it resembled gold — chamudot ka-zahav ('desirable as gold'). These vessels may have been made of orichalcum or a similar copper-gold alloy prized in antiquity.
28. Ezra declares the custodians themselves holy (attem qodesh la-YHWH) alongside the vessels — the bearers are as consecrated as the objects they carry. The word qodesh ('holy, set apart') extends the Temple's sacred space to the road itself. The entire journey becomes a liturgical act.
29. The chain of custody requires a second formal weighing at the destination — what was weighed out in Babylon must be weighed again in Jerusalem in the Temple chambers. The accountability system is rigorous: departure weight must match arrival weight. The lishkhot ('chambers, storerooms') of the Temple were the secure rooms where valuables were stored (see Nehemiah 13:4-9).
30. The verb qibbelu ('accepted, received') marks the formal transfer of responsibility. From this moment, the designated priests and Levites are accountable for every ounce of treasure.
31. The departure date — 12 Nisan — places them on the road just before Passover (14 Nisan), echoing the original Exodus journey. The refrain yad Eloheinu haytah aleinu ('the hand of our God was upon us') answers the faith crisis of verse 22: God did protect them. The mention of orev al ha-derekh ('ambush on the road') confirms that the danger was real — bandits and hostile groups preyed on wealthy caravans. The deliverance validates both the fast and the refusal of military escort.
32. The three-day rest upon arrival echoes the three-day camp at Ahava (verse 15). The pattern — gather, fast, journey, rest — structures the entire trip as a liturgical procession. The three days also allowed the caravan to recover from the four-month journey and prepare for the formal accounting.
33. Four named officials — two priests and two Levites — conduct the formal receiving audit. Meremoth son of Uriah will appear again in Nehemiah 3:4, 21 as a wall-builder. The parallel between the departure weighing (verse 25) and the arrival weighing ensures complete accountability: no discrepancy, no suspicion, no accusation of mishandling sacred funds.
34. The phrase be-mispar be-mishqal la-kol ('by number and by weight — everything') indicates a complete inventory. The written record (vayyikkhatev kol ha-mishqal, 'the entire weight was written') creates a permanent document verifying that the full treasure arrived intact. This meticulous accounting reflects both practical wisdom and theological integrity — the holy offerings must be handled with transparent precision.
35. The twelve bulls and twelve goats continue the twelve-tribe theology — the second wave of returnees, like the first (6:17), insists on representing all Israel. The ninety-six rams (8 x 12) and seventy-seven lambs may also carry symbolic numerical significance. The phrase ha-kol olah la-YHWH ('all of it a burnt offering to the LORD') means every animal was entirely consumed on the altar — nothing reserved for the worshippers to eat. The complete consumption expressed total dedication.
36. The achashdarpnei ha-melekh ('the king's satraps') are the highest-ranking Persian provincial governors — the term is a Hebrew adaptation of the Old Persian khshathrapavan ('protector of the realm'). The pachavot ('governors') are the lower-ranking provincial administrators. The verb niss'u ('they supported, lifted up') means the officials actively assisted the Jewish community, as the king had commanded. Artaxerxes' letter (7:21-24) is now being enforced by the provincial bureaucracy.

9

Summary: *Officials inform Ezra that the people of Israel — including priests and Levites — have intermarried with the surrounding peoples. Ezra is devastated. He tears his garment and robe, pulls hair from his head and beard, and sits in stunned silence until the evening offering. Then he falls on his knees and pours out a prayer of confession, acknowledging Israel's guilt and God's grace. He confesses that the remnant has violated God's commands even after the mercy of restoration, and he dares not even lift his face to God.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *Ezra's prayer in this chapter is one of the most theologically dense passages in the Hebrew Bible. It is not a prayer for himself — Ezra has done nothing wrong — but a corporate confession in which he identifies completely with the community's sin. The repeated pronoun 'we' (anachnu) and 'our' (avonoteinu) shows a leader who will not stand apart from the guilt of his people. The prayer is structured as a movement from acknowledgment of past judgment (verses 6-7), through recognition of present mercy (verses 8-9), to confession of present failure (verses 10-14), ending in a raw admission of guilt with no request attached (verse 15). Ezra does not ask God to forgive — he simply confesses and stops. The silence at the end of the prayer is more powerful than any petition could be. The physical gestures of mourning — tearing garments, pulling out hair, sitting in desolation — are not performance but the body expressing what words cannot contain.*

Translation Friction: The intermarriage crisis is the most theologically and ethically challenging section of Ezra. The prohibition against intermarriage draws on Deuteronomy 7:1-4, which forbids marriage with specific Canaanite nations to prevent religious syncretism. Ezra extends this prohibition to peoples not named in Deuteronomy (Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians), using the phrase ke-to'avot ha-goyim ('like the abominations of the nations') rather than a strict legal citation. The concern is religious identity, not ethnicity per se — intermarriage threatens covenant faithfulness because foreign spouses bring foreign gods. Ruth the Moabitess, an ancestor of David, stands as a counter-example: a foreign woman who joined Israel's God and people. We render the text faithfully without sanitizing its severity or importing modern categories that the text does not use.

Connections: Ezra's posture of mourning echoes Job (Job 1:20), the mourning for Josiah (2 Chronicles 35:24-25), and Daniel's self-humbling before God (Daniel 9:3-19). The list of nations in verse 1 draws from the Deuteronomic list of prohibited peoples (Deuteronomy 7:1) but expands it. The theological vocabulary — avon ('guilt'), ashmah ('culpability'), peshah ('transgression') — links to the Day of Atonement liturgy (Leviticus 16). The phrase zera ha-qodesh ('the holy seed') in verse 2 echoes Isaiah 6:13 ('the holy seed is its stump') and establishes a connection between the remnant theology of the prophets and the community boundaries Ezra seeks to enforce.

¹When these things had been completed, the officials approached me and said, 'The people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands. They are following the detestable practices of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians, and Amorites. ²They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy seed has become mixed with the peoples of the lands. And the hand of the officials and leaders has been foremost in this unfaithfulness.' ³When I heard this, I tore my garment and my robe, pulled out hair from my head and beard, and sat down in desolation. ⁴Everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel gathered around me because of the unfaithfulness of the returned exiles. I sat in desolation until the evening offering. ⁵At the evening offering I rose from my humiliation, with my garment and robe torn, and fell on my knees and spread out my hands to the LORD my God. ⁶I said: 'My God, I am ashamed and humiliated to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen over our heads and our guilt has grown up to the heavens. ⁷From the days of our ancestors until this very day we have been deep in guilt. Because of our iniquities, we — our kings and our priests — have been handed over to the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plunder, and to open shame, as it is today. ⁸Now, for a brief moment, grace has come from the LORD our God — to leave us a remnant and to give us a secure hold in his holy place, so that our God might give light to our eyes and grant us a little relief in our servitude. ⁹For we are slaves, yet our God has not abandoned us in our slavery. He has extended faithful love to us before the kings of Persia, granting us revival — to raise up the house of our God and restore its ruins, and to give us a wall of protection in Judah and Jerusalem. ¹⁰Now, our God — what can we possibly say after all this? For we have abandoned your commandments, ¹¹which you commanded through your servants the prophets, saying: 'The land you are entering to possess is a land polluted by the impurity of the peoples of the lands, by their detestable practices. They have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness. ¹²So now: do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. Do not seek their peace or prosperity — ever — so that you may be strong, eat the good of the land, and leave it as an inheritance to your children forever.' ¹³After everything that has come upon us because of our evil deeds and our enormous guilt — for you, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved and have given us a remnant such as this — ¹⁴shall we again break your commandments and intermarry with the peoples who practice these detestable things? Would you not be angry with us until you had consumed us, leaving no remnant or survivor? ¹⁵LORD, God of Israel, you are righteous — for we survive as a remnant this very day. Here we are before you in our guilt, for no one can stand before you because of this.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The list of eight nations blends the traditional Deuteronomic list (Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Amorites — from Deuteronomy 7:1) with additional peoples (Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians). Many of these ancient nations no longer existed as distinct entities in the post-exilic period; the names function as theological categories for the kinds of peoples whose practices threaten covenant faithfulness. The phrase ke-to'avoteihem ('according to their abominations') is the interpretive key: the issue is religious contamination, not racial purity.

1. The inclusion of priests and Levites in the accusation is devastating — the very guardians of holiness have violated the boundary they were supposed to maintain.
2. The phrase *zera ha-qodesh* ('the holy seed') is theologically loaded. It does not appear in the Torah as a designation for Israel; its closest antecedent is Isaiah 6:13. The term frames Israel's identity in terms of consecrated distinctiveness — a people set apart for God whose mixing with other peoples constitutes a violation of their holy status. The word *ma'al* ('unfaithfulness, treachery') is a technical term for sacrilege — misuse of what belongs to God (Leviticus 5:15). Intermarriage is framed not merely as a social offense but as desecration of the holy.
2. That the officials and leaders (*ha-sarim ve-ha-seganim*) were 'foremost' (*rishonah*) in the violation means this is a leadership crisis, not merely a populace problem.
3. Four physical actions express Ezra's anguish: tearing the inner garment (*begeg*), tearing the outer robe (*me'il*), pulling hair from the head, and pulling hair from the beard. Hair-pulling goes beyond normal mourning rites (which involve tearing clothes) into the territory of extreme grief and self-affliction. The word *meshomem* ('desolated, stunned, appalled') describes someone struck dumb by catastrophe — the same word used for desolate ruins. Ezra becomes a living embodiment of the destruction he fears.
4. The phrase *kol chared be-divrei Elohei Yisrael* ('everyone trembling at the words of the God of Israel') describes those who take God's word with absolute seriousness — the *charedim*, a term that later designated the most devout observant community. These people gather around Ezra not for comfort but in solidarity of grief. Ezra remains silent from morning until the *minchat ha-arev* ('evening offering'), approximately 3 PM — hours of wordless anguish before he speaks.
5. Ezra's prayer posture is deliberate: kneeling (*ekhre'ah al birkai*) with hands spread open (*efresah kappai*). The open hands signify both supplication and emptiness — he approaches God with nothing to offer but confession. The timing at the evening offering connects his personal anguish to the Temple's liturgical rhythm — the daily sacrifice provides the framework for his prayer. The word *ta'aniti* ('my humiliation/affliction') comes from the same root as the Yom Kippur fasting (Leviticus 16:29).
6. The prayer opens not with praise or petition but with shame: *boshti ve-nikhlampti* ('I am ashamed and humiliated'). Two synonyms for shame express a single overwhelming emotion. Ezra cannot lift his face — the physical posture matches the spiritual condition. The imagery is of guilt as a rising flood (*rabu le-ma'lah rosh*, 'multiplied above the head') and a tower reaching heaven (*gadlah ad la-shamayim*), echoing the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:4). The pronouns are corporate: *avonoteinu* ('our iniquities'), *ashmatenu* ('our guilt').
7. Ezra sweeps the entire history of Israel — *mi-yemei avoteinu* ('from the days of our ancestors') — under the verdict of guilt. The fourfold punishment (sword, captivity, plunder, shame) summarizes the covenant curses of Deuteronomy 28. The phrase *boshet panim* ('shame of face') is the opposite of God's shining face (Numbers 6:25) — a community whose face is exposed in humiliation rather than illuminated by divine favor. The refrain *ke-ha-yom ha-zeh* ('as it is this day') insists that the guilt is not historical but present.
8. The prayer pivots from guilt to grace: *techinnah* ('favor, grace') from God has provided three gifts. First, *peleithah* ('a remnant, an escape') — the community itself is the gift. Second, *yated bi-meqom qodsho* ('a peg/stake in his holy place') — the word *yated* means a tent peg or nail, an image of precarious but real security. The returned community is a tent peg driven into sacred ground. Third, *le-ha'ir eineinu* ('to give light to our eyes') — a metaphor for restored vitality after near-death (see 1 Samuel 14:27-29). The word *mychyah* ('revival, sustenance') carries the sense of being brought back from the edge of death.
8. The phrase *be-avdutenu* ('in our servitude') is startling — even after the return, Ezra considers the community to be in bondage. They live on their own land but under Persian authority. The restoration is real but incomplete.
9. Ezra repeats: *avadim anachnu* ('we are slaves'). The community lives under Persian sovereignty — the restoration is genuine but the freedom is limited. Yet *lo azavanu Eloheinu* ('our God has not abandoned us') is the theological heart of the prayer. God's faithfulness persists despite the community's unfaithfulness. The word *gader* ('wall, fence') may refer literally to the city walls (under construction or planned) or metaphorically to God's protection. The phrase *vayyat aleinu chesed* ('he extended faithful love toward us') uses the key covenant term — God's *chesed* operates even in servitude.
10. The pivot *mah nomar* ('what can we say?') is a confession of speechlessness — after receiving grace, the community has sinned again, and no words can justify it. The verb *azavnu* ('we have forsaken') is the same word Ezra just used of God not forsaking them (verse 9, *lo azavanu*). The parallel is devastating: God did not abandon his people, but his people abandoned his commands.
11. Ezra attributes this command to the prophets collectively rather than citing a specific text. The words echo Deuteronomy 7:1-4 and Leviticus 18:24-30 but are not a verbatim quotation — Ezra synthesizes the prophetic tradition into a composite statement. The word *niddah* ('impurity, menstrual uncleanness') is a powerful metaphor drawn from the purity laws — the land itself is ritually contaminated by the practices of its inhabitants. The phrase *mi-peh el peh* ('from mouth to mouth,' i.e., from one end to the other) describes total contamination.
12. The prohibition against seeking 'their peace or prosperity' (*shelomam ve-tovatum*) echoes the command regarding Ammon and Moab in Deuteronomy 23:6. The promise attached — 'that you may be strong and eat the good of the land' — echoes the land promises throughout Deuteronomy. The inheritance language (*ve-horashstem li-vneikhem ad olam*, 'leave as an inheritance to your children forever') stakes the future on present obedience.
13. The phrase *chasakta le-mattah me-avonenu* ('you held back below our iniquity,' i.e., punished less than deserved) is a remarkable theological admission: the exile was not the full measure of what Israel's sin warranted. God restrained his justice. The word *peleithah* ('remnant, deliverance')

echoes verse 8 — the surviving community is itself evidence of divine restraint.

14. The question is rhetorical and devastating: *ha-nashuv le-hafer mitsvotekha* ('shall we return to breaking your commandments?'). The expected answer is no — yet the community has done exactly this. The consequence Ezra envisions is total destruction: *ad kalleh le-ein she'erit u-feleitah* ('until consumption, with no remnant or escape'). This is the prayer's deepest fear: that the remnant given by grace could be annihilated by repeated unfaithfulness.
15. The prayer ends without a request. There is no 'forgive us' or 'have mercy.' Ezra simply declares God's righteousness (*tsaddiq attah*) and the community's guilt (*be-ashmatenu*) and stops. The phrase *ki ein la'amod lefanekha al zot* ('for no one can stand before you because of this') is the final word — absolute inability to stand before a righteous God. The silence after this verse is the prayer's most powerful statement. Ezra places the community entirely at God's disposal, making no claim on mercy, offering no defense, requesting no pardon. The response will come from the community itself in chapter 10.

10

Summary: *While Ezra prays and weeps before the Temple, a large crowd gathers and weeps with him. Shecaniah son of Jehiel proposes a covenant to send away the foreign wives and their children. Ezra makes the priests, Levites, and all Israel swear an oath to do this. He then withdraws to fast. A proclamation orders all returnees to assemble in Jerusalem within three days or forfeit their property and be expelled from the community. The assembly meets in the rain and agrees to the mass divorce. A commission is appointed to investigate case by case. The chapter ends with a detailed list of those found guilty — priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and laypeople — and notes that some of these wives had borne children.*

What Makes This Remarkable: *This chapter describes one of the most wrenching events in biblical history — the systematic dissolution of marriages between Israelite men and foreign women. The text does not celebrate this action; it narrates it with a kind of grim determination. The weeping of the assembly (verse 1) is not merely penitential — it reflects the human cost of what is being demanded. The rain pouring on the open-air assembly (verse 9) mirrors the tears. Shecaniah's proposal uses the language of hope ('there is still hope for Israel,' verse 2), but the hope requires devastating personal sacrifice. The chapter ends abruptly with the list of offenders and the note about children — *ve-yesh mehem nashim va-yasimu banim* ('and some of them had wives by whom they had children,' verse 44). That single sentence is the book's most haunting line. The text acknowledges the human wreckage without comment, leaving the reader to reckon with the cost of covenant purity.*

Translation Friction: *This chapter raises the sharpest ethical questions in the book. The modern reader recoils at the forced dissolution of families, and the text itself does not fully resolve the tension. The justification is theological: intermarriage threatens the covenant community's faithfulness to God, and the exile itself was caused by such unfaithfulness. Deuteronomy 7:1-4 provides the legal basis. Yet Ruth the Moabitess was welcomed into Israel and became David's ancestor, and Deuteronomy 21:10-14 provides for marriage with captured foreign women. The difference, as the text presents it, is assimilation versus conversion: Ruth joined Israel's God; these marriages apparently did not involve the wives' conversion. We render the text without softening or condemning — the narrative speaks for itself, including its disturbing final verse.*

Connections: *Shecaniah's proposal echoes the covenant renewal patterns of Joshua 24, 2 Kings 23, and Nehemiah 10. The three-day deadline (verse 8) parallels Joshua's three-day preparation for entering the land (Joshua 1:11). The property forfeiture and community expulsion (*cherem*, verse 8) echo the holy war language of Joshua 6-7. Nehemiah will face the same intermarriage problem (Nehemiah 13:23-27) and respond with physical violence rather than legal process, making Ezra's committee approach appear restrained by comparison. The final list of offenders parallels the returnee lists of chapters 2 and 8, but this time the names carry shame rather than honor.*

¹While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a very large assembly of Israelites gathered around him — men, women, and children — for the people were weeping bitterly. ²Shecaniah son of Jehiel, one of the descendants of Elam, spoke up and said to Ezra, 'We have been unfaithful to our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land. But even now, there is hope for Israel in this matter. ³Now let us make a

covenant with our God to send away all these wives and the children born to them, following the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the command of our God. Let it be done according to the Law. ⁴Rise up, for this matter falls to you, and we are with you. Be strong, and act.' ⁵Then Ezra stood up and made the leading priests, the Levites, and all Israel swear to do as had been proposed. And they swore. ⁶Then Ezra withdrew from the front of the house of God and went to the chamber of Jehohanan son of Eliashib. He went there and neither ate food nor drank water, for he was mourning over the unfaithfulness of the exiles. ⁷A proclamation was issued throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the returned exiles, ordering them to assemble in Jerusalem. ⁸Anyone who did not appear within three days, as the officials and elders directed, would have all his property confiscated and would himself be expelled from the assembly of the exiles. ⁹All the men of Judah and Benjamin assembled in Jerusalem within the three days. It was the ninth month, on the twentieth of the month. All the people sat in the open square of the house of God, trembling because of the matter and because of the heavy rain. ¹⁰Ezra the priest stood and said to them, 'You have been unfaithful. You have married foreign women, adding to the guilt of Israel. ¹¹Now make confession to the LORD, the God of your ancestors, and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives.' ¹²The whole assembly responded in a loud voice: 'Yes! As you have said, so we must do. ¹³But the people are many, and it is the rainy season, and we cannot stand outside. Besides, this is not the work of one or two days, for we have sinned greatly in this matter. ¹⁴Let our officials represent the whole assembly. Let everyone in our towns who has married a foreign woman come at designated times, accompanied by the elders and judges of each town, until the burning anger of our God over this matter has turned away from us.' ¹⁵Only Jonathan son of Asahel and Jahzeiah son of Tikvah opposed this, with Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite supporting them. ¹⁶The returned exiles did as proposed. Ezra the priest selected men who were heads of ancestral houses, all designated by name. They convened on the first day of the tenth month to investigate the matter. ¹⁷They finished investigating all the men who had married foreign women by the first day of the first month. ¹⁸Among the priests who had married foreign women were found: from the descendants of Jeshua son of Jozadak and his brothers — Maaseiah, Eliezer, Jarib, and Gedaliah. ¹⁹They pledged to send away their wives, and since they were guilty, they offered a ram from the flock for their guilt. ²⁰From the descendants of Immer: Hanani and Zebadiah. ²¹From the descendants of Harim: Maaseiah, Elijah, Shemaiah, Jehiel, and Uziah. ²²From the descendants of Pashhur: Elioenai, Maaseiah, Ishmael, Nethanel, Jozabad, and Elasa. ²³Among the Levites: Jozabad, Shimei, Kelaiah (also known as Kelita), Pethahiah, Judah, and Eliezer. ²⁴From the singers: Eliashib. From the gatekeepers: Shallum, Telem, and Uri. ²⁵From the rest of Israel — from the descendants of Parosh: Ramiah, Izziah, Malchijah, Mijamin, Eleazar, Malchijah, and Benaiah. ²⁶From the descendants of Elam: Mattaniah, Zechariah, Jehiel, Abdi, Jeremoth, and Elijah. ²⁷From the descendants of Zattu: Elioenai, Eliashib, Mattaniah, Jeremoth, Zabad, and Aziza. ²⁸From the descendants of Bebai: Jehohanan, Hananiah, Zabbai, and Athlai. ²⁹From the descendants of Bani: Meshullam, Malluch, Adaiah, Jashub, Sheal, and Jeremoth. ³⁰From the descendants of Pahath-moab: Adna, Chelal, Benaiah, Maaseiah, Mattaniah, Bezalel, Binnui, and Manasseh. ³¹From the descendants of Harim: Eliezer, Ishijah, Malchijah, Shemaiah, Shimeon, ³²Benjamin, Malluch, and Shemariah. ³³From the descendants of Hashum: Mattenai, Mattattah, Zabad, Eliphelet, Jeremai, Manasseh, and Shimei. ³⁴From the descendants of Bani: Maadai, Amram, and Uel, ³⁵Benaiah, Bedeiah, Cheluhu, ³⁶Vaniah, Meremoth, Eliashib, ³⁷Mattaniah, Mattenai, and Jaasu, ³⁸and Bani, Binnui, Shimei, ³⁹Shelemiah, Nathan, and Adaiah, ⁴⁰Machnadebai, Shashai, Sharai, ⁴¹Azarel, Shelemiah, Shemariah, ⁴²Shallum, Amariah, and Joseph. ⁴³From the descendants of Nebo: Jeiel, Mattithiah, Zabad, Zebina, Jaddai, Joel, and Benaiah. ⁴⁴All of these had married foreign women. And some of them had wives by whom they had children.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The scene is public and communal: Ezra's private grief has become a corporate event. The inclusion of men, women, and children (anashim ve-nashim vi-ladim) means entire families participated in the mourning — including, presumably, some of the very women and children who would be affected by the coming action. The phrase bakhu ha-am harbeh vekheh ('the people wept much weeping') uses the cognate accusative for emphasis: they wept with weeping.
2. Shecaniah's opening is simultaneously an admission of guilt and an assertion of hope: anachnu ma'alnu be-Eloheinu ('we have been unfaithful to our God') followed by yesh miqveh le-Yisrael ('there is hope for Israel'). The word miqveh ('hope, expectation') is the same word used in Jeremiah 17:13 ('the LORD, the hope of Israel'). Remarkably, Shecaniah's own father Jehiel appears in the list of offenders (verse 26), meaning Shecaniah is

proposing action that implicates his own family.

3. Shecaniah proposes a formal berit ('covenant') — a binding agreement before God. The scope is total: kol nashim ve-ha-nolad mehem ('all the wives and those born from them'). The children are included because they represent the mixed lineage that threatens covenant identity. The phrase ba-atsat Adonai ('by the counsel of my lord') defers to Ezra's authority. The phrase ve-kha-Torah ye'aseh ('and according to the Torah let it be done') grounds the action in legal authority, though the specific Torah text authorizing mass divorce is debated — Deuteronomy 24:1-4 permits divorce but does not command it.
4. Shecaniah's exhortation echoes the charge given to Joshua: chazaq va-aseh ('be strong and act,' 1 Chronicles 28:10, 20). The words are encouraging but they also place the full weight of responsibility on Ezra: alekha ha-davar ('the matter is upon you'). The community pledges support (anachnu immakh, 'we are with you') but the decision and its consequences rest on Ezra's shoulders.
5. Ezra moves from prayer to action. He extracts an oath (vayyashba, 'he caused to swear') from the entire leadership structure — priests, Levites, and the whole assembly. The oath binds them before God. The final word vayyishave'u ('and they swore') is terse and absolute — there is no recorded dissent.
6. Ezra's fast is total — no food, no water. The chamber of Jehohanan son of Eliashib was likely a Temple storeroom used by the priestly administration. If this Eliashib is the high priest of Nehemiah's time (Nehemiah 3:1), the chronological relationship between Ezra and Nehemiah becomes complex. The mourning (mit'abel, 'grieving, lamenting') continues even after the oath, showing that the resolution brings no joy to Ezra.
7. The verb vayyya'aviru qol ('they caused a voice to pass') describes a herald going through the territory with an official announcement. The summons covers all of Judah and Jerusalem — every member of the exilic community is called.
8. The penalty for non-compliance is severe: yocharam kol rekhusho ('all his property will be devoted to destruction'). The word cherem is the same term used for the total destruction of Jericho (Joshua 6:17-18) — property placed under the ban belongs to God and is removed from human use. Expulsion from the community (yibadel mi-qahal ha-golah) means loss of identity as an Israelite. The three-day deadline (given the distances involved in Judah) shows urgency.
9. The ninth month (Kislev, November-December) is the beginning of the rainy season in Judah. The people sit in the open square (rechov beit ha-Elohim) with no shelter, drenched by rain. The word mar'idim ('trembling') describes physical shaking caused by both fear and cold. The double cause — al ha-davar u-me-ha-geshamim ('because of the matter and because of the rains') — is grimly observed by the narrator. The weather mirrors the emotional desolation.
10. Ezra's charge is direct: attem me'altem ('you have been unfaithful'). The verb ma'al is the same sacrilege term from 9:2. The phrase le-hosif al ashmat Yisrael ('to add to the guilt of Israel') means this intermarriage compounds the nation's already-existing burden of guilt — the guilt that caused the exile in the first place.
11. The command tenu todah ('give confession/thanks') is ambiguous — todah can mean either 'thanksgiving' or 'confession.' In context, it means both: confess the sin and acknowledge God's right to demand obedience. The phrase va-asu retsono ('do his will/pleasure') uses ratson, which implies willing, delighted obedience. The command ve-hibbadelu ('separate yourselves') uses the same root (badal) that describes God's creative separating in Genesis 1 — a re-creation of holy boundaries.
12. The assembly's response is unanimous and emphatic: ken ki-devarekha aleinu la'asot ('yes, according to your word — it is upon us to do'). The word aleinu ('upon us') accepts responsibility — this is not imposed from outside but owned by the community.
13. Practical reality intervenes: the crowd is too large, the rain too heavy, and the cases too numerous for an outdoor mass proceeding. The admission ki hirbinu lifshoa ('for we have greatly transgressed') acknowledges the scale of the problem — this is not a few isolated cases but a widespread failure.
14. The proposal creates a judicial process rather than a mob action: designated officials, scheduled hearings, local elders and judges as witnesses. Each case will be examined individually (le-ittim mezummanim, 'at appointed/designated times'). The goal is explicitly theological: le-hashiv charon af Eloheinu ('to turn back the burning anger of our God'). The community fears that God's wrath will destroy the remnant if the problem is not resolved.
15. The phrase amdu al zot ('stood against this') is ambiguous — it could mean they 'were appointed over this matter' (supervised the process) or 'stood in opposition to this' (dissented). Most interpreters read it as opposition, since the Hebrew al in this construction typically means 'against' rather than 'over.' If this is dissent, the text records it without comment — four men opposed the mass divorce, and the narrative simply notes their names and moves on. This is the only recorded opposition.
16. The commission began its work on 1 Tevet (approximately December-January) — ten days after the assembly. Ezra chose the investigators from the ancestral house leaders, each named and accountable. The verb lidrosh ha-davar ('to investigate the matter') uses the same root darash ('to seek, inquire') that defines Ezra's own vocation (7:10). The investigation is conducted with the same scholarly rigor Ezra applies to Torah.
17. The investigation took three months (from 1 Tevet to 1 Nisan). The thoroughness is deliberate — every case was examined individually, with local elders and judges participating (verse 14). The completion date — 1 Nisan, the first day of the first month — coincides with the new year. The purification is complete as a new year begins.
18. The list of offenders begins with the most devastating category: the descendants of Jeshua the high priest himself. The high-priestly family — the very line that led the restoration — is implicated. This explains the depth of Ezra's grief: the corruption reaches the highest level of religious leadership.

19. The phrase vayyittenu yadam ('they gave their hands') means they made a solemn handshake — a physical gesture of binding commitment. The guilt offering (eil tson, 'a ram of the flock') follows the asham regulation of Leviticus 5:14-19 — a ram offered for sacrilege against holy things. The intermarriage is treated as a trespass against the holy, requiring both repentance and ritual sacrifice.
20. The Immer priestly division (see 2:37) has two offenders listed.
21. Five offenders from the Harim priestly family — the largest priestly contingent on the list.
22. Six offenders from the Pashhur priestly family.
23. Six Levites are named. Given that only 74 Levites returned in the first wave and perhaps 38 more with Ezra, six offenders represents a significant proportion of the Levitical community.
24. One singer and three gatekeepers are named. The list moves systematically through every category of Temple personnel before turning to the laity — no class is exempt from scrutiny.
25. The lay list begins with the Parosh clan — the same family that headed the returnee list in 2:3. Seven names are listed. Malchijah appears twice, indicating either two people with the same name or a textual issue.
26. Jehiel — the father of Shecaniah who proposed the covenant (verse 2) — appears here. Shecaniah proposed the dissolution of marriages knowing his own father was an offender. The personal cost of his proposal becomes visible.
27. Six offenders from the Zattu clan.
28. Four offenders from the Bebai clan.
29. Six offenders from the Bani clan.
30. Eight offenders from the large Pahath-moab clan — the most of any single lay family.
31. The Harim clan's lay members now appear (distinct from the priestly Harim in verse 21).
32. Three more from the Harim clan, completing eight names total for this family.
33. Seven offenders from the Hashum clan.
34. The Bani clan appears again (compare verse 29), perhaps representing a different branch of the same family.
35. Three more from the Bani clan.
36. Three more names continue the Bani clan list.
37. Three more from Bani, bringing the total to approximately twelve — the largest single family grouping on the offenders list.
38. The list continues with names that may be additional Bani clan members or a new sub-group.
39. Three more names in the continuing sequence.
40. Machnadebai is an unusual name — possibly Persian in origin or a corrupted Hebrew form.
41. Three more names. Shemariah ('the LORD has guarded') appears also in verse 32 — different individuals from different clans.
42. The name Joseph (Yosef) is rare in the post-exilic lists, connecting this individual to the patriarchal tradition.
43. Seven offenders from the Nebo clan conclude the geographic/clan section of the list. The total number of named offenders is approximately 111 — a significant number from a community of 42,360.
44. The book of Ezra ends with this devastating understatement. The phrase ve-yesh mehem nashim vayyasimu banim ('and some of them were women, and they had produced children') acknowledges the human reality behind the legal process: these were not abstract cases but families with children. The children are mentioned last, as if the narrator cannot bring himself to say more. The sentence names no names, assigns no blame to the women, and offers no resolution. The book simply stops. There is no triumphant conclusion, no word of divine approval, no prayer of thanksgiving. The silence after this final verse forces the reader to sit with the cost of what has been done — a cost the narrator will not pretend to resolve.