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Rebuilding of the Temple and Renewal of Hope: *Leadership Lessons from Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah*

Abstract

The past three decades have been witness to a nascent but compelling body of literature on lessons in leadership for business derived from biblical narratives. The aim of this paper is to advance that effort. Specifically, this study considers the leadership of Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah who built the Second Temple on the ruins of the First, and that of Ezra and Nehemiah, who instituted reforms -- religious, financial, and agrarian. When Zerubbabel arrived in Judah from Babylon, the walls of Jerusalem were breached and the land was filled with people hostile to the construction of the Temple. This paper discusses mistakes made by Zerubbabel as a leader, how Ezra and Nehemiah rectified these errors, and demonstrates what leaders of today can learn from the issues pertaining to the Second Temple period.

Introduction

The past three decades have been witness to a nascent but compelling body of literature on lessons in leadership for business derived from biblical narratives. The aim of this paper is to advance that effort. The concepts of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1991), covenantal leadership (Pava, 2003), and spiritual leadership (Fry, 2003) all have their roots in the biblical tradition. Robert K. Greenleaf (1991) first introduced the concept of servant leadership in 1970. Lynch and Friedman (2013) use the Bible to demonstrate that adding a spiritual component –encouraging personal growth and incorporating social justice themes into the work environment– to the concept of servant leadership makes it more complete as a leadership theory. Scholars have examined the lives of biblical figures such as Abraham, Joseph, and Moses in order to extract important leadership lessons (e.g., Baron & Padwa, 1999; Birnbaum & Herskovitz, 2009; Feiler, 2004; Feiler, 2010; Fischer & Friedman, 2017; Friedman & Hertz, 2016; Friedman & Langbert, 2000; Herskovitz & Klein, 1999, 2000; Laufer, 2006; Maxwell, 2002; Morris, 2006; Wildavsky, 1984; Woolfe, 2002).

The United States and many other nations are facing a serious crisis of leadership (Annan, 2016; Pearse, 2018; Shahid, 2014; Veldsman, 2016; World Economic Forum, 2014). The

public distrusts leaders of all kinds of institutions including business, education, religion, government, and health care. One CEO posits that “capitalism has been slowly committing suicide” by moving away from stakeholder capitalism and becoming the kind of selfish, predatory capitalism that only cares about top executives and investors (Leonhardt, 2019). Many CEOs have been more concerned about current profits than manufacturing safe, quality products which, in effect, means the long-term strength of an organization is being sacrificed for short-term goals (Friedman & Kass, 2018).

George (2011) highlights the fact that “[w]hen leaders focus on external gratification instead of inner satisfaction, they lose their grounding.” He notes that leaders must “reframe their leadership from being heroes to being servants of the people they lead.” Leaders who believe that the purpose of leadership is to achieve “power, prestige, and money” are at risk of losing their way and even end up “violating the law or putting their organization’s existence at risk” (George, 2011). Leadership at its core must be about ethics (De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2008; Kouzes & Posner, 2010, pp. 15-20; Northouse, 2018, p. 342).

Larry Fink, an investment manager at Blackrock responsible for \$six trillion in investor funds, has been urging CEOs to ensure that their companies did more than earn profits (Sorkin, 2019). It was crucial for the corporate world to also make a “positive contribution to society.” Fink writes that “profits are in no way inconsistent with purpose. Purpose is not the sole pursuit of profits but the animating force for achieving them.” He further stated that “[w]ith unemployment improving across the globe, workers, not just shareholders, can and will have a greater say in defining a company’s purpose, priorities and even the specifics of its business.”

Businesses have increasingly adopted a “doing-well-by-doing-good philosophy” (Kolhatkar, 2017). Blackrock has been introducing socially responsible funds that exclude industries such as coal, firearms, and tobacco (Sorkin, 2019). There is now a website that ranks America’s most “just” companies, defined as organizations that are “ethical, honest, and fair, and [behave] this way when it comes to its employees, customers, shareholders, and the environment, as well as the communities it impacts locally and around the world” (JUST Capital, 2019). It behooves firms to especially concentrate on “mission and purpose” because a recent Gallup poll indicates that is what millennials are motivated by, rather than by remuneration alone (Robison, 2019).

This paper studies the leadership of Zerubbabel (a contraction of two Hebrew words, *zarua b’Bavel* which means “conceived in Babylon”) who initiated the building of the Second Temple on the ruins of the First and then mysteriously disappears from the biblical record. Despite his considerable role in establishing the Second Commonwealth, Zerubbabel has been condemned to posthumous oblivion: “Zerubbabel is well known to biblical scholars specializing in the Persian period yet of minor notice to today’s average worshipper, be he Jewish or Christian” (Lewis, 2005, p. 301).¹ In addition, this paper also examines the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah who completed Zerubbabel’s task and ensured the survival of the nascent polity with circumscribed political powers. We argue that the work of Zerubbabel was a necessary but insufficient condition for the revival of Judaism; the reforms

¹ One reason he has not been totally forgotten by lay people is that his name appears in the *Ma’oz Tzur* (O Mighty Rock), a song/liturgical poem recited after lighting the Hanukkah candles. The relevant phrase in the song is “When at Babylon’s demise Zerubbabel came – at the end of seventy years I was saved.”

— such as the remission of debts — of Ezra and Nehemiah were vital in establishing the Second Commonwealth on a base of social justice. Recent work in economics have recognized the need for a state to be tethered to a moral foundation and have called for the crafting of an ethical society (Collier, 2018; Stiglitz, 2019).

This paper calls attention to critical weaknesses of Zerubbabel as a leader and how his defects were corrected by Ezra and Nehemiah. Zerubbabel focused on the construction of the Second Temple without providing the security of a city wall. More serious still, was his failure to foster ethical values and principles of social justice in his flock. After all, a Temple is meaningless if there is no social justice. The problem of pointless sacrifices to God was emphasized by prophets such as Isaiah (1: 1, 17): “Why do I need your many sacrifices? Says the Lord... Learn to do good, seek justice, strengthen the oppressed, render justice for the orphan, plead for the widow.”

Without the ethical teachings and reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah, Zerubbabel would have been responsible for building a useless structure that did little to strengthen the values of the Jewish people. Leaving Judah before the task was complete for a better position as exilarch in Babylon is not what one expects from a great leader.

The Discrepancy of Approximately 166 Years Between the Two Calendars

There is a discrepancy of about 165 years between the chronology in the Seder Olam Rabbah, a second-century rabbinic chronological text, and that of the secular historians. According to the rabbinic chronology, the Second Temple stood for 420 years (from 348 or 350 BCE to 68 or 70 CE). There were four Persian kings — Darius the Mede, Cyrus, Ahashverosh (variant spelling, Ahasuerus), and Darius the Persian — and the Persian Empire spanned only 52 years (369 BCE to 317 BCE). Modern historians believe that the Persian Empire lasted for approximately 206 years and there were 10 Persian kings: Cyrus, Cambyses II, Darius I, Xerxes I (likely the Ahashverosh of the *Book of Esther*), Artaxerxes I, Xerxes II, Darius II, Artaxerxes II, Artaxerxes III, and Darius III. Thus, the Second Temple stood from *circa* 516 BCE to 68 or 70 CE, a total of 585 years. A key problem with Seder Olam Rabbah is that “[l]ike other rabbinic scholars, he believed that Zerubbabel (sixth century BCE), Malachi, Ezra, Nehemiah (all fifth century BCE), and Simon the Just (third century) were all contemporaries” (Rosenthal, 2007; for dating issues regarding the rebuilding of Jerusalem, see Edelman, 2005, pp. 80 -150).

Sinensky (2019) discusses five major approaches that have been used to explain the discrepancy between the two chronologies. He notes:

The rabbinic view raised a number of acute difficulties, including the biblical references to a variety of Jewish leaders and Persian monarchs who seemed to live in periods spanning more than 52 years. To resolve these dilemmas, in numerous instances the Talmud conflates seemingly distinct personalities. Malakhi was Ezra or Mordekhai (Babylonian Talmud, Megilla 15b). Zerubavel, a leader of the first wave of aliya, was Nechemia (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 38a). Cyrus, Artaxerxes and Darius were one and the same (Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashana 3b). While this pattern follows the larger midrashic tendency to conflate various biblical personalities, in regard to Shivat Tzion the trend is especially pronounced (Sinensky, 2019, para. 7).

The two chronologies — rabbinic and secular/academic — are from Steinsaltz (2018, p. 3) and are below (*Tables 1 and 2*).

Important Dates²

Table 1: Chronology of Events According to the Sages (Seder Olam)

Source: Steinsaltz (2018, p. 3)

King	Year BCE	Main Events	Prophets of the Era
Nebuchadnezzar	422	Destruction of the First Temple	Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel
Cyrus the Great (3 years)	370	Conquest of Babylon by Cyrus the Persian and Darius the Mede Founding of the Persian Empire Edict of Cyrus Return of Zerubavel (Sheshbatar) and Yehoshua the High Priest to the Land of Israel Rebuilding of the altar and laying of the foundations of the Second Temple (Ezra 3:10)	
Ahashverosh son of Darius the Mede (14 years)	367	Death of Cyrus Temporary cessation of work on the Second Temple due to political interference by Israel's enemies (Ezra 4)	
	363	Crowning of Esther as queen of Ahashverosh, in the third year of his reign	
	354	Haman's plot and downfall	
Darius (Artahshasta, 36 years)	353	Suppression of a revolt in the city of Babylon	Haggai, Zechariah
	348	Completion of work on the Second Temple (Ezra 6:15)	
	347	Return of Ezra to the Land of Israel (Ezra 7)	Malachi
	334	Appointment of Nehemiah as governor Rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and renewal of the Covenant (Nehemiah 10:1)	
	318	Conquests of Alexander the Great	

Table 2: Chronology of Events According to Most Historians

Source: Steinsaltz (2018, p. 3)

King	Year BC	Main Events	Prophets of the Era
Nebuchadnezzar	586	Destruction of the First Temple	Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel

² This paper uses the dates of academic historians.

Cyrus the Great	550	Founding of the Persian Empire	
	539	Conquest of Babylon by Cyrus	
	538	Edict of Cyrus Return of Zerubavel (Sheshbazzar) and Yehoshua the High Priest to the Land of Israel	
	537	Rebuilding of the altar and laying of the foundations of the Second Temple (Ezra 3:10) Temporary cessation of work on the Second Temple due to interference by Israel's enemies (Ezra 4)	
Cambyses	530	Succeeded Cyrus as Emperor	
	525	Conquest of Egypt	
Darius the Great	522	Beginning of reign with the suppression of a revolt in the city of Babylon and in Persia	
	520	Resumption of work on the Second Temple (Ezra 4:24–6:14)	Haggai, Zechariah
	516	Completion of work on the Second Temple (Ezra 6:15)	
Xerxes (Ahashverosh)	486	Accusations against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem (Ezra 4:6)	Malachi
	483	Crowning of Esther as queen of Ahashverosh, in the third year of his reign	
	474	Haman's plot and downfall	
Artaxerxes (Artahshasta)	458	Arrival of Ezra in the Land of Israel (Ezra 7)	
	445	Appointment of Nehemiah as governor Rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and renewal of the Covenant (Nehemiah 10:1)	
Alexander the Great	331	Conquest of the Persian Empire by Alexander	

Cyrus Encourages the Rebuilding of the Temple

This First Temple, built by Solomon, was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon in the year 586 BCE. Jeremiah (29:10) prophesied that the exile would last 70 years: "For thus said God: After 70 years for Babylon have been completed, I will attend to you and I will fulfill for you My favorable promise, to return you to this place."

In 539 BCE, Cyrus invaded and conquered the Babylonian Empire. He defeated the Babylonians in battle and became the king of the Achaemenid Persian Empire. Cyrus encouraged the rebuilding of the Temple (see Ezra 1: 1-4). Planning for the building of the Second Temple began with Sheshbazzar who was the governor after 538 BCE.

King Cyrus removed the vessels of the Temple of God, which Nebuchadnezzar had removed from Jerusalem and placed in the temple of his gods. Cyrus, king of Persia, had them removed by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, who then counted them over to Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah (Ezra 1: 7-8).

Several commentators (e.g., Ibn Ezra, Ralbag, and Metzudos) assert that Sheshbazzar was the Persian or Chaldean name for Zerubbabel. Others, such as Rashi claim that Sheshbazzar is Daniel. Schiffman (1991, p. 36) believes that Sheshbazzar was Zerubbabel's uncle and succeeded him as governor in 522 BCE. In any case, there was too much turmoil in Jerusalem and Sheshbazzar was not successful.

According to Schiffman (1991, p. 36), between 538 and 522 BCE, Zerubbabel left Babylon with a group of exiles numbering 42,360 (Ezra 2:64). This is a small number, indicating that the majority of the Jews living in the Persian Empire preferred to stay in the diaspora rather than go on a dangerous journey to rebuild a distant homeland in economic distress and surrounded by hostile peoples.

Among the dignitaries who came to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel were Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordechai, Bilshan (Talmudic scholars say that Bilshan is another name for Mordechai), Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, and Baanah (Ezra 2:2). Many commentators state that Mordechai is the same person who appears in the *Book of Esther*. If so, he must have left Jerusalem to return to the diaspora, probably when construction of the Temple was halted. If Nehemiah is the same Nehemiah who authored the Book of Nehemiah, then he also left Jerusalem. Jeshua, son of Jozadak, the High Priest is also referred to as Joshua (e.g., see Haggai 1:1, 1:12; Zechariah 3:1, 3:3, 3:6, 3:8).

Disruption of the Rebuilding of the Temple

The city of Jerusalem lay in ruins and had few inhabitants. Israel had been split into two kingdoms in the time of Rehoboam, son of Solomon. The Southern Kingdom of Judah consisted of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, and the Northern Kingdom of Israel consisted of the other Ten Tribes. The Ten Tribes were exiled first. The Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom in 722 BCE, dispersed the Ten Tribes, and brought in various foreign groups. The Ten Tribes disappeared, and the scholarly consensus was they assimilated.

Before the Temple was built, Jeshua the High Priest, Zerubbabel, and their brethren erected an altar so that they could immediately offer burnt offerings upon it. Commentators suggest that the purpose of the sacrifices was either to request God for protecting them from the surrounding hostile people (see commentary of Ibn Ezra) or to thank God for watching over them on the long, arduous journey from Babylon to Judah. They then observed the festival of Tabernacles (Ezra 3:3-4).³

The Samaritans, who believed in pagan deities along with the God of the Jews, wanted to help with the construction of the Temple. The Jews rebuffed their offer of assistance, and consequently the Samaritans vigorously opposed the building of the Second Temple, going so far as writing libelous letters to the Persian authorities (see Ezra 4).

³ There is a discussion in the Talmud to explain how sacrifices were allowed to be brought before the Temple was actually constructed.

Rabba bar bar Hana says that Rabbi Yochanan says: Three prophets ascended with them from the exile: One who testified to them about the size and shape of the altar, and one who testified to them about the proper location of the altar, and one who testified to them that one sacrifices offerings even if there is no Temple, provided that there is a proper altar (Babylonian Talmud, Zevachim 62a; translation by Sefaria.org).

The construction of the Temple was halted for about 18 years, and it was not until the ascension of Darius I to the Persian throne that the rebuilding was resumed. In the second year of King Darius, the prophet Haggai urged the Jews to erect the Second Temple (Haggai 1:1). The Temple was completed about 515 BCE. Scripture states (Ezra 6:15): “This Temple was completed on the third day of the month of Adar during the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.”

The Second Temple was modest and unassuming compared to the First Temple. The older people who remembered what the First Temple looked like were crying; the younger people were joyous and sang:

With praise and thanksgiving they sang responsively to the Lord: He is good; his benevolence towards Israel endures forever. And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid (Ezra 3:11).

It is surprising that the names of Zerubbabel and Joshua the High Priest are not mentioned at the inauguration of the Temple: “Then the children of Israel, the priests, the Levites and the rest of the exiles celebrated the dedication of the Temple of God with joy” (Ezra 6:16). One possible explanation is that this is because Zerubbabel was planning on leaving for Babylon right after the dedication ceremonies.

Question about the Need for Fasting

Chapter 7 of the Book of Zechariah sheds light on the reason for the destruction of the First Temple. During the fourth year of King Darius’s reign, corresponding to 518 BCE, Zechariah was asked the following question by the leaders of Judah who remained behind in Babylon. They made an inquiry concerning the observance of fast days that were instituted to commemorate the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. The most important fast day was Tisha B’Av (literally, the 9th day of the month of Av) in remembrance of the destruction of the Temple. The people living in the diaspora questioned the wisdom of fasting given that the Second Temple was being rebuilt.

God’s answer was that He does not seek the people’s fasting and mourning. Fasting is not imitating the way of God since He does not eat or drink. The people made a “precious land a desolation” by persisting in their evil ways:

This is what the Lord of Hosts says: Administer true justice, perform deeds of loving-kindness, and show compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the stranger, or the poor person. Neither shall any of you think in your hearts of wronging one another. But they refused to listen and they turned a rebellious shoulder and they made their ears hard of hearing (Zechariah 7: 9-12).

Zechariah declared that God’s message was that the Jews caused the fast and the mourning through their iniquity; what God desires is not fasting but transforming Jerusalem into a “city of truth” through justice and righteousness so that He could return to it (Zechariah 8: 3). God assured the people that the day would come when all four fast days would become days of joy.

Completion of Temple

As noted above, the Temple was finished around 515 BCE (Ezra 6:15). The prophets Haggai and Zechariah prophesied to the Jews that they would be successful in building the Temple

and that it would not be disrupted again (Ezra 5:1). Hearing this, Zerubbabel and Jeshua “arose and commenced to build the Temple of God in Jerusalem. And the prophets of God were with them and assisted them” (Ezra 5:2). The prophecy that “Zerubbabel’s hands laid the foundations of this Temple and his hands shall complete it” (Zechariah 4:9) was fulfilled.

At the dedication of the First Temple built by Solomon, the *Shekhina* (Divine Presence) manifested itself. There was fire that came down from heaven to consume the burnt offering and the “glory of the Lord filled the Temple” (II Chronicles 7:1-2). At this inaugural ceremony of the Second Temple built by Zerubbabel, Scripture makes no mention of fire coming down from heaven and the glory of the Lord filling the Temple. The Talmud makes the point that the *Shekhina* did not rest in the Second Temple (Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 21b). Levy (n.d.) provides various reasons as to why the *Shekhina* did not rest on the Second Temple. Levy (n.d.) also points out that the dedication of the Second Temple is discussed in a “mere four verses” (Ezra 6:15-18). Compare that to the length of the description of the consecration of the Tabernacle, the portable Temple used when the Israelites left Egypt, in Leviticus 9 and Numbers 7 and the sanctification of Solomon’s Temple (66 verses – I Kings 8 and II Chronicles 5:2 – 7:1).

The Talmud suggests a reason that God did not manifest Himself at the dedication of the Second Temple: He was upset that only a small fraction of the Jews ascended to the Holy Land. Most remained behind in the diaspora.

Reish Lakish, who lived in Israel, was swimming in the Jordan River when Rabba bar bar Hana, who was a Babylonian, came and gave him a hand to help him out. Reish Lakish said to him: God hates you Babylonians, as it is written (Song of Songs 8:9): “If she be a wall we will build a silver turret upon her; and if she be a door we will cover her with cedar panels.” This is the meaning of the verse as it applies to the Jewish people: Had you rendered yourselves a solid bloc like a wall and all ascended to Israel in the days of Ezra, you would have been likened to silver, which is not subject to decay, in the sense that you would have merited experiencing the Divine Presence in all its glory. But now that you ascended like doors, and only some of you came to Israel, you are likened to cedar, which is subject to decay, and you merit experiencing only partial revelation of the Divine Presence (Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 9b; translation based on Sefaria.org and ArtScroll translations).

Disappearance of Zerubbabel

Scripture states that following the construction of the Second Temple, Ezra emigrated from Babylon to Judah in 458 BCE. He brought a letter from King Artaxerxes authorizing him and the Israelite exiles residing in the Babylonian kingdom, to travel to Jerusalem. Ezra was described as a “priest who has mastered the Book of the Law of the God of Heaven [i.e., the Torah]” (Ezra 7: 12). Ezra was given authority by the king to punish anyone who does not fulfill the law of God (Ezra 7:26). Ezra appointed 12 other priests to take care of the Temple’s treasures (Ezra 8: 24-30), even though he was a priest himself. There is a gap from the period when the Temple was completed until the arrival of Ezra (from approximately 515 BCE to 458 BCE). Little is known about what happened in that time period. Ezra found that the problem of intermarriage between the returned exiles and the Samaritans had become widespread and recognized that his task was to revive the spiritual and moral lives of the people. The question is what happened to Zerubbabel.

The Malbim, a 19th century biblical exegete, expounding on Haggai 1:1, citing the commentary of Don Isaac Abarbanel (1437-1508) explains that Zerubbabel would have been the Messiah had the Jews merited it (see Abarbanel on Haggai 2). Many of the prophecies actually hinted that he was a potential Messiah who would bring all the Jews back to Israel. Indeed, during the second year of King Darius's reign, the prophet Haggai exhorted the Jews that the time had come to rebuild the Second Temple. However, only a small number of Jews left Babylon for Judah so they were not worthy of complete redemption. This is why the prophet Zechariah affirmed (Zechariah 4:6): "This is the word of God to Zerubbabel saying: 'Not through military force nor through strength, but only by My spirit.'" Zerubbabel was not supposed to wage war against the Persians and have himself crowned king since the time was not right for the Messiah. God would use His spirit to convince Darius to allow the Temple to be rebuilt.

Walzer (2012, p. 65) points out that Zerubbabel "harbored hopes for a restoration [of the Davidic dynasty] after the return from Babylonia." But this did not happen. Zerubbabel was not crowned as king; his position was only that of governor working for the Persians, and he returned to Babylon after completing the Second Temple. This explains his abrupt "disappear[ance] from the historical record." The shortcomings of the Jews that made them unworthy of redemption included intermarriage with foreign, idol-worshipping inhabitants of the land, desecration of the Sabbath, and the unwillingness of the majority to leave Babylon for Judah.

The Yalkut Me'am Lo'ez, an 18th Century commentary on the Bible in the Ladino language, also underscores that because the Second Temple was inferior to the First Temple, and it was apparent that the Messiah had not come, several prominent people — Daniel, Mordechai, and Zerubbabel — left Israel (Yalkut Me'am Lo'ez, Zechariah 7:10). The Talmud (Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 21b) discusses the five differences between the first and second Temples. The Second Temple was lacking the *Aron* (ark), *Kaporet* (ark cover), *Cherubim* (these three count as one); fire from Heaven; the *Shekhina* (Divine Presence); *Ruach HaKodesh* (spirit of prophecy); and the *Urim Vetumim* (a parchment with the ineffable name of God written on it that was embedded within the folds of the breastplate (*Choshen*) of the High Priest).

The Yalkut Me'am Lo'ez lists factors that made it clear to the people that the Messiah had not arrived (Zechariah 7:1), including the fact that the ingathering of all the exiles had not taken place. Moreover, much of the Holy Land was occupied by Samaritans and other non-Jews. The people also were aware that Zerubbabel was not a King of Israel but simply a governor who had some powers but the Persians were the true rulers of the country. There was also an awareness that the Divine Presence did not manifest itself. The Holy of Holies was an empty chamber without an ark.

Zerubbabel was disappointed that he would not be the Messiah, but was assured that one of his descendants would fulfill that role and build the Third Temple. Abarbanel sees the prophecy of Zechariah 4: 9 that "Zerubbabel's hands laid the foundations of this Temple and his hands shall complete it" as a prophecy referring to Messianic times when Israel will be governed by descendants of Zerubbabel and Joshua the High Priest.

This prophecy in Zechariah (6:12-13) is difficult to understand, and commentators disagree as to its interpretation. The words uttered by Zechariah were:

And you shall speak to him [Joshua the High Priest], saying, So said the Lord of Hosts: Behold, there is a man whose name is the Shoot (Tzemach), who will spring up out of his

place and build the Temple of the Lord. And he shall build the Temple of the Lord, and he shall bear majesty and he shall sit and rule on his throne. And the priest (kohen) shall be on his own throne and a counsel of peace shall be between the two of them (Zechariah 6: 12-13).

Because Zerubbabel never had a crown placed on his head, Abarbanel and other commentators regard this as referring to Messianic times. This verse may hint that had the people been deserving, Zerubbabel would have been crowned as the Messiah. Of course, this could not happen once Zerubbabel left for Babylon.

This passage from Haggai in which Zerubbabel is referred to as God's servant also intimates that Zerubbabel could have accomplished considerably more than just building the Second Temple.

Tell Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, that I am going to shake up the heaven and the earth. I will overthrow royal thrones and destroy the power of the foreign kingdoms. And I will overthrow chariots and their drivers; horses and their riders will fall, each by the sword of his brother. On that day, declares the Lord of Hosts, I will take you, O Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, My servant, and I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you, declares the Lord of Hosts (Haggai 2: 21-23).

This prophecy of Haggai revoked that of Jeremiah cursing Jeconiah to be childless (Jeremiah 22:30). The Talmud makes the point that God had his vow annulled by the Heavenly Court (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 38a); otherwise, Zerubbabel would not have been born. He was a grandson of Jeconiah, penultimate king of Judah. God has his oath nullified after Jeconiah repented when he was in a Babylonian prison. The Talmud uses wordplay to indicate that Shealtiel, father of Zerubbabel, is a contraction of two words: *sha'al El* (God asked).

Zerubbabel, in fact, never destroyed the "power of the foreign kingdoms" as prophesied by Haggai (2:22) because he did not become the Messiah. Zerubbabel and Joshua the High Priest might have restored the Davidic monarchy, and all the exiles would have returned to a prosperous, secure, and independent Israel. As it happens, Ezra and Nehemiah did much to make the Holy Land prosperous and safe. Thousands of exiles did eventually return from the diaspora. In the times of the Hasmonean dynasty, the Jews achieved independence for a while.

Sellin (1898) suggests that Zerubbabel was actually treated as the Messiah by the people and was crowned as King of Judah but was then executed by the Persians. The latter would not have been happy with his royal and messianic pretensions and seen this as a rebellion. Some claim that the Persians did not execute him but removed him as governor (see Goswell, 2010). This approach answers the question of what happened to Zerubbabel, however Abarbanel's solution is more plausible. If Zerubbabel was executed (or removed from office) by the Persians, it would have been noted in Scripture. According to *Seder Olam Zuta*, a ninth century work that is based on and continues the chronology of *Seder Olam Rabbah*, Zerubbabel returned permanently to Babylon in order to assume the position of exilarch, lay leader of the Jewish community in Babylon. Eisenstein (1935) and Hirsch and McLaughlin (1906) both state that there is a Jewish tradition that Zerubbabel went back to Babylon. The apparent reason for Zerubbabel's departure was that he was not crowned the Messiah.

As an aside, there is a seventh century, medieval apocalyptic work, the *Book of Zerubbabel*, that describes the revelation Zerubbabel receives from the angel Metatron regarding the final redemption, i.e., the Third Temple. It was probably composed during the period when the Byzantine Empire was fighting with Persia over control of the Holy Land. Two new figures are described in the Book: Hephzibah, mother of the Messiah, who is an important warrior and Armilos, son of Satan (Reeves, 2013). Abraham Ibn Ezra in his commentary on Exodus 2:22, underscores the point that the *Book of Zerubbabel*, like many other apocryphal works, is not reliable. Despite this, Reeves (2013) asserts: “Sefer Zerubbabel’s importance for the history of medieval apocalypticism cannot be overstated.”

Ezra Arrives in the Holy Land

There is some controversy as to the date Ezra arrived in Jerusalem. He did not come alone and was accompanied by thousands of people. The verse states that he arrived during the seventh year of the Persian King Artashast’s reign (Ezra 7:7). Artashast is usually translated as Artaxerxes I, but some believe that he arrived during the reign of Artaxerxes II. Wright (2005) discusses the problems with dating Ezra’s arrival and concludes that Ezra came to Jerusalem in 458 BCE and Nehemiah arrived 13 years later in 445 BCE. Angel (2009) also accepts those as the dates when Ezra and Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem.

The return of the Jews from exile would have been of little value if the people returned to their old ways. It was crucial to rebuild Jerusalem on a foundation of social justice and ethical monotheism. Had Ezra and Nehemiah failed in this mission, the Jewish people may have disappeared 2,500 years ago.

The first major challenge that confronted Ezra when he arrived in Jerusalem in 458 BCE was that “the people of Israel, the priests and the Levites, have not separated themselves from the people of the land.... For they have taken from their daughters for themselves and for their sons, and mixed the holy seed with the peoples of the land” (Ezra 9:1-2). One of the most dramatic and intense episodes in the *Book of Ezra* is the crisis over intermarriage (Ezra 9:2). Mixed marriages between Jewish men and foreign, pagan women was not a small issue since the women marrying Jews did not give up their idolatrous beliefs for monotheism. Ezra was a person of vision and understood that these women posed a threat to the future of the Second Commonwealth. Ezra knew that the Jews were given a “brief moment” or a temporary reprieve by God (Ezra 9: 8) and that there was no guarantee that the “surviving remnant” would be allowed to stay in the Holy Land if they continued their wicked ways. The children were unaware of the Torah and their heritage, with many not even speaking Hebrew. The Jews were becoming more like Samaritans.

This may explain Ezra’s strong reaction upon hearing that it was not only the common people who had intermarried: The priests, Levites, and the officers did so too. Moreover, the Jews were doing the same “abominations” as the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians, and Amorites (Ezra 9: 1-2). Scripture (Ezra 9:3) states: “And when I heard this, I rent my garment and robe, tore out the hair of my head and beard, and sat forlorn and bewildered.” Ezra began to weep and referred to “our iniquities” and that “we have forsaken Your commandments” (Ezra 9: 6-10). Ezra understood that the Torah had to become the blueprint for the Second Commonwealth. By taking responsibility and including himself in his criticism of Jews, he was able to get all the people to cry. Shechaniah said to Ezra:

We have been unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women from the peoples around us. But in spite of this, there is still hope for Israel. Now let us make a covenant before our God to send away all these women and their children, in accordance with the counsel of my lord and of those who fear the commands of our God. Let it be done according to the Law (Ezra 10:2).

The medieval French-Jewish commentator Gersonides (also known as the Rambam), opined that Ezra did not want to have an ugly confrontation with the people over the issue of mixed marriages. This would have been a battle that would have negative outcomes for all sides. It is likely that the people would not have listened to Ezra had he publicly berated them over this issue. His approach of using an emotional appeal was considerably more effective. Ezra was attempting to establish a new polity — actually, “a community with limited autonomy which would be grateful and loyal to Persia” (Margalith, 1991) — built on morality and spirituality. Fighting with the people over this may have resulted in resistance. Inter-marriage was a sensitive issue because it is not easy banishing a beloved wife even if she wanted to continue worshipping pagan deities. Ezra’s approach, which involved including himself in the “iniquities” and showing the people how painful this was to him was a better way. A good leader knows when it is better to use moral suasion than threats. By indicating that he was part of the people and not invoking his authority, he accomplished his goals.

The *Book of Ezra* ends with the people agreeing to banish their foreign wives. The Talmudic sages admired the accomplishments of Ezra and compared him to Moses. The Talmud states (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 21b): “Had Moses not preceded him, Ezra was worthy for the Torah to have been given to Israel through him.” Both were moral and spiritual leaders and ensured that the Second Commonwealth would be established on a strong foundation.

Arrival of Nehemiah

Nehemiah, cupbearer for the king of Persia, arrived in the Holy Land 13 years after Ezra in 445 BCE. Scripture states that “he wept, mourned, fasted, and prayed” when he heard how badly things were going for the remnant of Jews that were in Jerusalem. The breached wall was just one of many problems that needed a leader (Nehemiah 1: 2-5). In ancient times, walls provided security for the city against invaders. Scripture recounts:

They [Hanani and the men of Judah] said to me, “Those who survived the captivity and are back in the province of Judah are in great misery and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.” When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I fasted and prayed before the God of heaven (Nehemiah 1: 3-4).

He was permitted by the King Artaxerxes to depart for the Holy Land. The broken wall of Jerusalem was not the only problem Nehemiah faced. The problem of inter-marriage reappeared. It seems that despite Ezra’s accomplishments, the Jewish men again gave in to temptation and were marrying the idolatrous, foreign women (see Gersonides commentary on Ezra). Nehemiah was now the governor of Judah and took a different approach than Ezra to the problem:

Also in those days, I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or the language of one of the other peoples and did not know how to speak the language of Judah. I quarreled with them, and I cursed them, and I beat some of the men, and I pulled out their hair. I made

them take an oath in God's name and said: "You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons or for yourselves." Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon king of Israel sinned? Among the many nations, there was no king like him. He was beloved by God, and God made him king over all Israel, but even he was led into sin by foreign women (Nehemiah 13: 23-26).

The verse states that Nehemiah "pulled out *their* [the people's] hair," whereas Ezra pulled out his *own* hair. Some scholars attribute these differing approaches to a difference in leadership styles (Angel, 2009; Coggins, 2012). A simpler explanation is that Ezra had to deal with a new problem. He solved it in a way that did not cause any strife. This fix lasted for several years before reappearing on Nehemiah's watch. Ezra's softer approach generally did not work, and some men succumbed to marrying pagan women. Nehemiah, on the other hand, took a hardline approach to the mixed marriage issue.

One of Nehemiah's first tasks was to rebuild the city wall around Jerusalem. This was a daunting undertaking given that the Jews had many enemies such as Sanballat the Choromite, Tobiah the Ammonite, and Geshem (Nehemiah 2:19) who conspired to attack the Jewish workers (Nehemiah 4) during construction. Nehemiah had to station guards to protect the workers and "[t]hose building the wall and the carriers burdened by the loads did the work with one hand while the other held a weapon" (Nehemiah 4:11). The wall was speedily built in 52 days (Nehemiah 6:15). Foreigners were so impressed with how fast the wall was constructed that they attributed it to Divine Providence (Nehemiah 6:16).

Nehemiah had to deal with another serious situation: the exploitation of the poor Jews by the wealthy in the Jewish community he was desperately trying to rebuild. It is worth observing that the debtors had to bring their children "into bondage" in order to pay off their debts:

And there was a great cry of the people and of their wives against their brothers the Jews. For there were those that said: "We, our sons, and our daughters, are many: therefore, we must buy grain for them, that we may eat, and live." And there were those that said: "We have mortgaged our fields, vineyards, and houses, that we might buy grain, because of the famine." And there were those that said: "We have borrowed money for the king's taxes, and that on our fields and vineyards." Now, our flesh is as worthy as the flesh of our brothers, our children as worthy as their children: yet, see, we bring into bondage our sons and our daughters to be servants! Some of our daughters are brought to servitude already: neither is it in our power to redeem them; for other men have our fields and vineyards (Nehemiah 5: 1-5).

Nehemiah understood that without social justice, the Jews would have no future. He succeeded in convincing the nobility to remit the debts and restore the forfeited fields of the poor. This type of financial and agrarian reform was unheard of in its time, and represents one of the earliest examples of progressive land reform. Nehemiah did not place heavy tax burdens on the people as did his predecessors (Nehemiah 5:15) and was known to host a huge number of people at his table daily (Nehemiah 5:17).

Public Reading of the Torah on Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year)

After the wall was built and Nehemiah resolved the difficulty posed by the crushing debt of the people, the Jews asked Ezra to bring the Torah and read it for them (Nehemiah 8). This occurred on the first day of the seventh month, i.e., Rosh Hashanah. At the first public reading

of the Torah, Ezra read the Torah from a wooden platform so that everyone could hear him. The people were weeping when they heard the words of the Torah (Nehemiah 8:9). They began to realize that they were not obeying its laws. Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites told the Jews not to mourn or weep for this was a joyous day.

The people were told to go home and eat a sumptuous meal with sweet drinks. They were further advised to make sure to send food to those who had nothing prepared to eat (Nehemiah 8: 10). The people repented on the 24th day of the month and bound themselves with a curse and oath to follow the Torah of God that was given through Moses (Nehemiah 10:30). Thus, Ezra and Nehemiah were successful in having the Jews commit themselves to living a life based on the Torah. Ezra and Nehemiah caused a spiritual awakening and religious revival that stand in marked contrast to the less successful efforts of the great prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah.

Ezra and Nehemiah wrote the *Omana*, the “first constitution in any people’s history,” an [endeavor] “proved everlasting” (Weisel, 1991, p. 130). The *Omana* described in Nehemiah 10 was a lasting covenant that declared that the people would obey God’s law. Hope for the future of the Jews, then, was renewed. The first signature on this document was that of Nehemiah; Ezra’s signature was not on it, one theory being that Azaryah is Ezra (Weisel, 1991, p. 131).

Nehemiah was not averse to using force. This is illustrated by the issue of the desecration of the Sabbath. The Jews were conducting commercial activities on the Sabbath such as “treading on winepresses,” “loading their donkeys,” and selling produce (Nehemiah 13: 15). Nehemiah quarreled with the dignitaries of Judah over this violation (Nehemiah 13: 17). He stationed his youths over the gates to ensure that no one could enter the city on the Sabbath to conduct business. When he saw that merchants were congregating outside the walls of Jerusalem to conduct business, he warned them that he would send his army against them, thus successfully putting a stop to Sabbath desecration (Nehemiah 13: 21).

The Great Assembly

Both Ezra and Nehemiah were key members of the Great Assembly (*Anshei Knesses HaGedolah*), founded by Ezra, that established many of the customs Jews have today. It served as a legal body and consisted of 120 people. Some of the accomplishments of the Great Assembly include (Wein, 1995, pp. 13-15; 2012):

- Closing the biblical canon – the 24 books that make up the Hebrew Bible
- Composing the words that make up the key prayer recited three times daily, the Amidah (the *Shemoneh Esrei*, 18 blessings) as well as surrounding prayers. This prayer is still used today.
- Developing a permanent calendar so that Jews all over the world know when to celebrate holidays.
- Changing the Hebrew alphabet from Old Hebrew (Paleo-Hebrew) to the familiar current form.
- Establishing a system of education in Israel and a Sanhedrin that could act as a supreme court for all of Jewry.

Sacks (2009) argues that the synagogue was a revolutionary concept and made possible by the formulation of prayers by the Great Assembly. What was unique about the synagogue was

that its portability, it could be built anywhere in the world as a place of study and prayer. Once prayer replaced animal sacrifice and did not require a Temple, Judaism became a religion that could survive anywhere. Wein (2012) observes the following about Great Assembly:

They not only closed the breaches in the physical walls of Jerusalem, built the Second Temple and set the foundation for the Second Commonwealth (the Second Temple era), but set the spiritual foundation and built the spiritual walls of the nation for the foreseeable future lasting to this day (Wein, 2012, para. 2).

Conclusion

The major accomplishment of Zerubbabel was the building of the Second Temple. However, this achievement would have been of little value if the Jewish people had disappeared because of intermarriage with foreign, idol-worshipping inhabitants of the land. Without the efforts of Ezra and Nehemiah, the Jews would have assimilated and joined the pagans inhabiting Judah. Ezra and Nehemiah put into place a system that would last for hundreds of years until the Romans destroyed the Second Temple in 68 or 70 CE. Even after the destruction of the Second Temple, the policies established by Ezra and Nehemiah ensured the survival of the Jewish people in many different social and political climates throughout the diaspora. When Ezra and Nehemiah started their reforms, any small mistake could have derailed their efforts.

Zerubbabel did not recognize the importance of establishing the Second Commonwealth on a foundation of righteousness and justice. This paper contends that by leaving the Holy Land for Babylon, he made it clear that if he could not be crowned as the Messiah, there was no point in his staying. He did not realize that building the Second Temple was only the first step. Without social justice and ethical values, would be a purposeless structure. The more crucial undertaking, even more important than building the Temple, was working with the people to teach them the values of the Torah. They both understood that the Temple was not sufficient; the Torah had to become the blueprint for the Second Commonwealth.

Friedman and Kass (2018) describe the “substance over form” problem that is a serious issue in measuring the true performance of leaders. CEOs and politicians should be more concerned with the long-term viability of their organizations. Instead, they tend to be more interested in expansion rather than safety and reliability. This means that sometimes the long-term strength of an organization is sacrificed for short-term goals. Congress has been known to spend huge sums of money on bridges to nowhere.

The infrastructure of the United States is in trouble because of such short-term thinking. Ten percent of all bridges (58,495 out of 609,539) in the United States are considered structurally deficient (Cardno, 2016). The American Society of Civil Engineers [ASCE] has identified 17% of American dams (15,498) as potentially dangerous (American Society of Civil Engineers, 2017). Politicians would rather invest in something new rather than maintaining and repairing old infrastructure (Friedman & Kass, 2018). Zerubbabel suffered from this problem. He must have felt that the construction of the Second Temple was sufficient. Repairing the wall and getting the people to renew their covenant with God was only of secondary importance and could be left for others. Zerubbabel placed the entire Second Commonwealth at risk by not staying in Israel.

Sacks (2017) posits that a major idea contained in Deuteronomy is that a civilization will fail when it loses its spiritual bearings and compassion for the poor. According to Sacks (2017),

one of the Torah's greatest insights was that only faith, righteousness, and morality could save a society from decline and fall:

Inequalities will grow. The rich will become self-indulgent. The poor will feel excluded. There will be social divisions, resentments and injustices. Society will no longer cohere. People will not feel bound to one another by a bond of collective responsibility. Individualism will prevail. Trust will decline. Social capital will wane (Sacks, 2017, p. 2).

Ezra and Nehemiah were spiritual leaders and did not use their positions for personal enrichment. They viewed their primary role to build a nation on a foundation of ethics and social justice.

The lesson learned from Zerubbabel is that a leader must be concerned for the long term. Without a wall surrounding the city, the Temple could easily have been destroyed. Zerubbabel should not have left for Babylon after building the Temple. At the very least, he should have stayed in Judah to secure the city and work with the people to transform Jerusalem into a “faithful city” and “city of righteousness” (Isaiah 1: 26). A Temple can become meaningless if the people are unjust and do not care for the poor and the helpless.

The work of Ezra and Nehemiah — the agrarian and financial reforms and the authorship of a constitution based on the values of the Torah — was the underpinning of a just and ethical society. It was because of the vision, moral clarity, and leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah that a local construction project started by Zerubbabel in a provincial backwater of the far-flung Persian Empire resulted in the revival of Judaism and ended in a call for social justice.

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