Stories

“That reminds me of a story…” Whenever I speak those words in the classes I teach or in church when I’m preaching, I see faces light up with anticipation. Stories provide a welcome relief from the normal discourse. A multi-storied lecture, like a multi-storied building, stands out against an unremarkable landscape of inert points and propositions. Stories, at least those which are well told, activate our imagination, invite us to participation, and provoke thoughts and feelings as we are amused, shocked, frustrated, allured, angered, intrigued, delighted, outraged, or otherwise excited.

But stories are not just illustrative ornaments that societies hang on the tree of truth. Stories are the infrastructure of reality. More than simply exemplifying truth, stories embed truth, organize belief, demonstrate how life works, and enshrine how it is supposed to work. So rather than seeing stories as illustrating propositional truth, it is better to think of our propositions regarding truth as the distillation of lessons first learned through storied encounters, whether these are stories we have heard or read or whether we experienced them firsthand.

Stories may serve either to reaffirm our current beliefs or to challenge (disconfirm) them. They may do so either overtly (“and the moral of the story is …”) or covertly, employing subversive techniques of irony, suspense, strategically withholding important information (gapping), humorous satire, sudden reversals, and surprise endings. Usually, the more obvious and overt the point of the story, the less interesting: clearness of teaching and interest level are inversely proportional. Stated in reverse, this means that the more interesting the story, the more likely it is to be covert, and thus misunderstood.

For example, Horace Miner once wrote a spoof essay called “The Body Ritual of the Nacirema” which ostensibly was an expert anthropological analysis of a presumably primitive, highly ritualized people group called the Nacirema. In his description, they do indeed sound highly superstitious, with a society characterized at best as primitive, at worst as collectively suffering pandemic neuroses. But in fact, the people group investigated was the American (spelled backwards), and the point of the essay was to show how anthropologists themselves taint their own reported discoveries concerning the societies they study with their own presuppositions. If you don’t recognize it as a spoof, it makes for mildly interesting though somewhat arcane reportage. On the other hand, if you do “get it,” then every detail of the description can be funny and much more enjoyable. It challenges us not only to rethink what we think is “primitive,” but also to read all subsequent, straight-faced anthropologists’ writings with bemused suspicion.

A major factor in reading stories correctly then turns upon our ability to identify, and to identify with, the characters we encounter. Are these good characters, bad characters, or ambiguous? And how do I decide? Do they change or not? If so, do they get better or worse? Does the author make me care about them? Are they presented as real people, as mere agents, as idealized icons, or as evil personified? Are they intended to represent a larger category of people? If so, whom? And to what degree does the author influence me to identify with the characters in the story myself? It is crucially important for us to recognize that the (usually subconscious) decisions we make about the characters will largely determine what we interpret as the main point of the story.

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**Biblical Stories**

Everything I have brought out thus far is true of all stories, regardless of the time frame or culture. But there are certain special challenges when we try to implement them with biblical narratives. Most of us are aware of the difficulties of sorting out what is prescriptive from what is merely descriptive, i.e. what should have happened from what actually did happen. Compounding this problem is the often unstated assumption that the main characters of biblical stories are intended to provide us with positive role models whose example we are to imitate in our own lives.

But it’s not as simple as this, is it? The main character, i.e. the protagonist, of many narratives is usually multiplex, i.e. does both good and bad things. We are supposed to become like the protagonist in some ways, but not in others. A couple illustrations here might help.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Protagonist</th>
<th>Positive trait to be adopted</th>
<th>Negative trait to be avoided</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Noah</td>
<td>Righteous, blameless, walked with God</td>
<td>Drunk, naked (Gen. 9:21-23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moses</td>
<td>Humble</td>
<td>Killed an Egyptian (Ex. 2:12) Failing to “trust in” Yahweh (Num 20:11-12)</td>
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</table>

Here we see that both of these biblical protagonists are a “mixed bag” of good and bad. They offer us examples of actions or traits which we should imitate, but also flaws that we need to avoid. Indeed, most all of the main characters in the stories of the Bible are the same blend of both positive and negative: Jacob, Joseph, the judges, David, Peter, James, John, inter alia.

Curiously, many preachers and interpreters seem to go to great lengths and efforts to defend the Bible’s protagonists by downplaying or explaining away anything that ill reflects on them. The tendency is to whitewash over the blemishes, sins, and failures of the characters, as if defending them is tantamount to defending the Bible itself. But is such effort necessary, or even desirable? Perhaps we would be better able to follow authors’ intentions if we learn to see these characters more as the authors present them, without trying to rescue them from their own wrongdoing. As Adams puts it: “Biblical stories are mirrors for identity and not models for morality. If we clean up the biblical stories, we can no longer identify with them; if we share the full story, we can see ourselves in them.”

Acknowledging the sins and failures of our heroes, then, can not only enable us to learn new lessons from their mistakes, but also to identify with them more closely. We now see them less as paragons of virtue who transcend our own lives; instead we see them as “normal” people who like us are capable of good and evil, wisdom and idiocy, heroism and ignoble self-ism. They become more real to us, and as we identify with them more, we care about them more, and therefore are more receptive to the lessons that God intends us to learn from their failures.

The scriptures tell stories that include rough edges—unethical or ambiguous characters, unresolved or surprising endings—and so we laugh and know that we and others may live through the rough times in our lives, too. Biblical stories present patriarchs, matriarchs, and disciples not as perfectly faithful and

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ethical persons whom we could not hope to emulate but, rather, as persons who are often immoral, unfaithful, and thickheaded. Therefore, in spite of our own failings, we, too, can hope to be disciples.\(^5\)

Rarely does the text offer us explicit evaluation of particular actions, i.e. “and this was pleasing to God,” or “and this was wicked.” Most often we must infer from the consequences whether a given action is good or bad or ambiguous or simply a benign “and this happened.” So as we read through a particular biblical narrative, we must therefore constantly assess the words and actions of all the characters, seeking to evaluate whether each action ultimately contributes to their success (i.e. God’s blessing), their failure, or is something that merely happened.

One further consideration is that subsequent texts in the canon often help us to evaluate biblical protagonists. Hebrews 11 does not commend Abraham’s foolish decisions, Jacob’s treachery, Moses’ anger, Rahab’s lie, or David’s adultery, but does commend them explicitly for their faith. The author helps us to isolate the common, defining feature of their lives which we too are to adopt, namely, their faith, without lending any tacit approval of their many sins and misdeeds. The fact that NT authors quote Genesis 15:6 multiple times\(^5\) assists us in identifying the bottom line that we are to get from the life of Abraham, “and he trusted in YAHWEH, and he credited it to him as righteousness.” His success as a man favored by God is attributable to this single feature. Obviously we are not to copy the “other lessons” from Abraham, such as how to give away your wife, the treatment of single mothers, abandoning your child, how to divide property which has been given to you, and so on.

The Story of Ezra-Nehemiah

In my experience the failure to recognize and consider the wrongful actions of biblical characters is perhaps nowhere as commonplace as in the stories of Ezra and Nehemiah. From my youth I remember hearing multiple sermon series on the life of Nehemiah (and Ezra, though to a lesser degree). Frequently, and not without reason, these coincided with fund raising campaigns for church buildings. We were all enjoined to follow in the path of Nehemiah, a godly leader with biblical knowledge combined with practical know-how, construction savvy, resolute determination against “opposition from within and without,” and social dexterity. Combined with Ezra’s passion for moral purity and scrupulous dedication to the Law, they were portrayed as the very incarnation of spiritual leadership, a two-pronged model for spiritual revival (and successful building projects) for our local churches today. Popular-level books and commentaries abound which reflect this perspective.\(^7\)

\(^5\) Ibid.
\(^6\) Rom. 4:3,22; Gal. 3:6; Jam. 2:23.
The purpose of this paper is to call into question the apparent failure to call into question their failures. Upon closer examination, Ezra and Nehemiah, along with the two other characters in the book of Ezra-Nehemiah, Jeshua son of J[eh]ozadak and Zerubbabel, like nearly all other biblical characters, present us with a mixed bag. Along with their good traits and actions, there are also numerous, oft-overlooked actions which we should assiduously avoid. Thus they also teach us how leaders should not behave. And as it turns out, it may be that the main lessons to be learned from Ezra-Nehemiah are from the negative example of these leaders, their mistakes and sins, more than their positive actions. Comparing their actions to other intertexts within Scripture—i.e. aiming the canon at them—will be key to this reading.

**Learning from their Positive Example**

Without a doubt, Ezra and Nehemiah do demonstrate many laudable traits and commendable actions. Here is a listing of many of these positive aspects which we may take as exemplary.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive action (and who is involved)</th>
<th>Reference.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Returned from Babylonian captivity</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>family heads of Judah &amp; Benjamin, priests, Levites returned Israelites</td>
<td>Ezra 1:5; 2:1&lt;br&gt;Ezra 6:21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praise to Yahweh Levites</td>
<td>Ezra 3:10-11&lt;br&gt;Ezra 6:16,22; Nehemiah 5:13; 8:6,12; 12:27,43&lt;br&gt;Ezra 7:27-28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praise to Yahweh People</td>
<td>Ezra 5:11-16&lt;br&gt;Ezra 7:6&lt;br&gt;Nehemiah 2:1-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked within official legal channels; the elders Ezra Nehemiah</td>
<td>Ezra 7:6,11-12; Nehemiah 8:1-3,8-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled in Moses’ teaching, commands, decrees; Ezra</td>
<td>Ezra 7:6,11-12; Nehemiah 8:1-3,8-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devoted to study &amp; carry out torah, &amp; teach the commandments; Ezra</td>
<td>Ezra 7:10; Nehemiah 9:7-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committed to tasks despite obstacles; Nehemiah</td>
<td>Nehemiah 4:6 – 6:9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed holy days; People</td>
<td>Nehemiah 8:16-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remembering past sins &amp; God’s faithfulness</td>
<td>Ezra 5:11-16; 9-15; Nehemiah 1:4-11; 9:5-35</td>
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8 And to a lesser degree, Jeshua and Zerubbabel, the main characters of the early chapters of Ezra.

9 This is actually an imprecatory prayer.
When we combine all these actions which seem unquestionably good and praiseworthy and appropriate, it is quite understandable that these individuals are looked upon as “heroes” of the biblical narrative. So it is not surprising that so many interpreters look to them as positive examples, at least as good as Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. But therein lies the problem, for while we accept each of these other examples as positive role models, we more readily acknowledge that they nevertheless did do things which we should not imitate.

**Telling the Story Backwards**

Stories most often teach their lessons by showing us patterns of actions and results. If someone does something that leads to success, then the take-away for readers is that we too should do the same (or equivalent) things if we wish the same success. Conversely, if someone fails, we should avoid doing what they did that caused the failure. Additionally, even if they ultimately succeed, we should be on the alert for attitudes, words, or actions that delayed or interfered with their final success. These too we should avoid.

Thus we cannot really evaluate any particular story, the individual actions that occur within the constituent episodes, or even the characters themselves, until we have reached the end. While we may have working theories about certain characters, the author may surprise us with elements that are revealed late in the story. If so, we are forced to revise our earlier evaluations of them.\(^{10}\)

Even as a student listening to those sermons, I had this vague but strong sense there was something not right about the book of Nehemiah. After a strong beginning, the sermon series usually fizzled; the storyline lost its inertia as it moved toward the end of the book. The last chapter of Ezra-Nehemiah is so unremittingly sour and negative that the speaker was left with only two choices. The first (and easiest) is to pretend that it is not there at all, skip the last few chapters, end the sermon series early, and move on to another, more positive biblical book that will sustain its energy better. This course of action was taken several times in my experiences. The other alternative was to say, in effect, “Well, not everything ended well, but if we ourselves stay the course, remain faithful and spiritually pure, then we (unlike them) can avoid the same eventual decay.” While arguably this message “can preach,” it is simply not what the ending of the book is actually saying.

The ending of Ezra records the story of Shecaniah coming to Ezra to insist that every Israelite male who had intermarried with a foreign woman should banish that wife and all their children (10:3), and that Ezra was the one to initiate and enforce this policy. Ezra issued a proclamation mandating that every returned exile was to meet in Jerusalem (failure to do so meant forfeiture of all their property and expulsion from the community, 10:7-8). When the assembly took place, the people’s response included agreement that the separation was a good idea, but that they couldn’t do it right away because (1) they were too crowded, (2) it was raining out there, (3) it couldn’t be done in just a day or two, (4) it should be done at a later time in the individual villages, and (5) some—Jonathan, Hazeiah, Meshullam, and Sabbethai—opposed the idea anyway (10:12-15). So Ezra organized the implementation of the separation (10:16-17), and “they finished dealing with all the men who had married foreign women” (17).\(^{11}\) The end of the book—it cannot be regarded as a “conclusion”—contains simply a list of the

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\(^{10}\) For example, our final evaluation of Professor Snape in the Harry Potter series, or Smeagol/Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings* or Darth Vader in *Star Wars VI: Return of the Jedi* is much more sympathetic than our views of these characters earlier in the narrative. And the reverse is also true—a character you initially thought was good turns out to be evil, cowardly, unfaithful, or seriously mistaken. This is a very common plot development in television crime dramas.

\(^{11}\) The phrasing here is somewhat ambiguous. יכלה בהלן אשתו could mean either that the divorces were “finished” (i.e. finalized), that all the cases were “finally” heard and individually adjudicated, or perhaps merely that the matter “came to an end.”
offenders with the summation that “all these had married foreign women, and some of them had children by these wives” (10:18-44). At best, this ending is abrupt and dissatisfying. At worst, the reader is struck by its utter insensitivity and/or its ineffectiveness in getting at the heart of the matter—not the banishment of women and children but the syncretism and failure of the remaining community.

If we take Ezra-Nehemiah as a single literary unit, as has been traditional, then Nehemiah 13, the ending to the entire work, is even more troublesome. It begins with the universal banishment of all foreigners from Israel (13:1-3). It continues with Nehemiah returning to Jerusalem and, upon discovering Tobiah living off the largesse of the Temple storehouses, throwing all Tobiah’s things outside (13:4-9). Nehemiah then discovers that provision for the Levites had been neglected, and therefore they had each left to work in his own fields. So Nehemiah organizes the distribution of food to the Levites (13:10-13). He then offers a curiously self-congratulatory prayer for himself, “Remember me for this, O my God…” (13:14). Next, he discovers that the Sabbath is being disregarded because of work being done, yet his solution is to force Levites to stand guard over the gates (i.e. conscripting them to work) to prevent others from working (13:15-22), and threatening merchants with physical violence (13:21). Following another “remember me for this also, O my God” (13:22), he also discovers “in those days” that there remain many within Judah who have intermarried and had children. He rebukes them, curses them, beats them up, and pulls their hair (13:25), forcing them to take an unspecified oath. He offers a brief, imprecatory “remember them” (13:29). He then purifies (de-contaminates?) the priests and

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12 Numerous attempts are made by scholars to soften the severity of the coercive insistence on divorce and expulsion of foreign spouses and their children. The solutions which attempt to minimize the problems caused by divorce include arguments that (1) it was still a relatively small number, (2) they probably would have returned to their original peoples for care, (3) these foreign wives were idolatrous and thus a threat to the religious community as well as national identity of the returnees, (4) perhaps divorce among that community was already commonplace, (5) Ezra’s day was desperate times calling for singular exceptions to God’s normal patterns for marriage, and (6) we don’t really know what happened to them anyway. See Leslie C. Allen & Timothy S. Laniak, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* NIBC 9 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003):81-82; R. J. Coggins, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* Cambridge BC (New York: Cambridge UP, 1976):65-66; J. G. McGonville, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther* DSB (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985): 69-72; Mark A. Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah* Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1992): 56-58. On the first claim, Davies maintains that “in spite of all the threats of seizure of property and excommunication the campaign to exclude foreigners only brought about 113 divorces” (10:18-43). “The text is so theologically constructed that we are not expected to worry about the foreign women and children as full characters. We are not meant to ask what their reactions and their fate were” (Gordon F. Davies, *Ezra & Nehemiah: Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry* Berit Olam [Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1999]: 70). The third claim above, that the wives were guilty of leading the community into sin, is effectively overturned by the arguments of David Jensen, *Witch-Hunts, Purity and Social Boundaries: The Explosion of the Foreign Women in Ezra 9-10* JSOTSS 350 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press).

13 On the ending of Ezra, Blenkinsopp writes, “the conclusion to an important episode in the religious history of the community is, … uncharacteristically abrupt. We might have expected some remarks on the beneficial effects of the reform on the community and something further about Ezra himself… The most likely explanation is that this measure of Ezra’s was not successful. The practice of marrying outside the community was still widespread…Ezra’s solution proved too drastic to win support. The problem remained, and the descendants of those Jews who shivered in the rain in the temple courtyard continued to plot a hazardous course between exclusiveness and assimilation under Persian, Macedonian, and Roman rule” (Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah* OT Library [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988]: 200-201). Throntveit concurs regarding Ezra’s failure: “In Nehemiah’s time, the restoration community would soon find themselves perpetuating the same sin [intermarriage] they so vigorously expunged at this juncture [Ezra 10]… Sin continues to break out in ever new forms” (Mark A. Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah* Interpretation [Louisville: John Knox, 1992]: 58).
Levites of everything foreign, assigning them duties and providing for them, concluding with a final “remember me with favor, O my God” (13:30-31).  

This is certainly not the kind of narrative resolution that convinces us that Ezra-Nehemiah has been a success story. Even if we grant that Ezra and Nehemiah have done certain good things, the net result is that all their efforts to reform the people have been ineffective. Indeed, despite all their combined strategies, legislated policies, calls to repentance, and imposed sanctions, the people’s hearts remain unchanged.

**The Effect of the Ending**

If we admit that the end result of the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah is failure to accomplish any significant positive change in the spiritual climate of their community, then we can entertain the possibility that perhaps not all their endeavors were God-ordained. This sets us up to consider what they did in light of the larger canon. We will begin to see problems emerging, both numerous and often serious.

If the real, ultimate goal of Ezra-Nehemiah is to build a wall that will keep unwanted people (namely gentiles) away from God's holy city and temple, then Nehemiah was successful. But does a theology of God's plan for gentiles throughout the Tanak support this goal? Beginning in Genesis, underscored in Deuteronomy, and especially brought out in the Latter Prophets, God's ultimate plan is precisely the opposite: to incorporate the gentile "foreigners" into the worshipping community. In other words, God wants to populate his anticipated people with the very ones the leaders of Ezra-Nehemiah want to exclude. If this is the case, then Nehemiah was "successful" ... in doing the wrong thing!  

If, on the other hand, the ultimate goal of Ezra-Nehemiah is not with building projects, but with turning the hearts of the people back to internalized love for God and covenant faithfulness, then the ending demonstrates that despite all his efforts, Nehemiah's proposed reforms didn't reform the community at all! They did not experience anything like a real revival—they did not follow through on their earlier promises (Neh.10:29-39). Nehemiah’s coercive tactics end up failing anyway. The problems at the end of the book are NOT from the outside (the foreigners), they’re from within the people themselves.

**Should they have refused help in building the temple?** (Ezra 4:1-3)

When the enemies of Judah & Benjamin heard that the exiles were building a temple for YAHWEH, the God of Israel, they came to Zerubbabel & to the heads of the families & said, "Let us help you build because, like you, we seek your God & have been sacrificing to him..." But Zerubbabel, Jeshua and the rest of the heads of the families of Israel answered, "You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it for YAHWEH, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us.”

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14 See also Neh. 5:19 “Remember me with favor, O my God, for all I have done for these people.”
15 Kort’s comment is helpful here: “Story-following” is the process of trying to understand what has already happened by finding out what will happen next. Events ... reveal the meaning of previous events by revealing their consequences (Wesley A. Kort, Story, Text, and Scripture: Literary Interests in Biblical Narrative [University Park: Penn State Univ. Press, 1988]: 79).
16 While a comprehensive theology of the nations merits book-length treatment, a few references must suffice here to indicate that Yahweh elected certain people through whom he will bless all people: Gen. 12:2-3; 18:18; 27:29; 35:11; Exod. 19:6; Num. 24:9; 2 Sa. 7:19; Isa. 27:13; 42:6; 55:4-5; Jer. 4:1-2; Ezk. 36:23; Jonah; Psa. 72:11,17; Dan. 7:14; 1 Chr. 16:8,24). The centripetal draw of gentiles to Jerusalem is seen in many other passages as well: Isa. 22:4; Amos 9:11-12; Mic. 4:1-3;
This is not what Cyrus said. In fact, his edict mandates the cooperation of (non-Jewish) supporters in the building of the temple (1:4), narratively indicated in 1:6 “all their neighbors assisted them” (סְבִיבֹֽתֵיהֶם).

And the people of any place where survivors may now be living are to provide him with silver and gold .... (NIV)
And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold ... (ESV)
Wherever this Jewish remnant is found, let their neighbors contribute toward their expenses by giving them silver and gold, ... (NLT)
And all the remnant from all the places where he is an alien there let the men support him with silver and gold ... (Formal trans.)

So Zerubbabel and Jeshua are wrong both theologically (promoting an unscriptural exclusivism) and technically (misquoting Cyrus, their authoritative source). And they are even factually wrong. In their later letter to Darius (Ezra 5:14-16) they state that Cyrus directly commissioned Sheshbazzar—a Babylonian governor—to rebuild the temple, and that it actually was he, not they, who had laid the temple foundations.

These two individuals are canonically indicted further by the words of Zechariah, their contemporary:

Tell him this is what YAHWEH Almighty says: “Here is the man whose name is the Branch, & he will branch out from his place & build the temple of YAHWEH..., & he will be clothed with majesty & will sit & rule on his throne. And he will be a priest on his throne. And there will be harmony between the two.” ...

Those who are far away will come & help to build the temple of YAHWEH, & you will know that YAHWEH Almighty has sent me to you.

... many peoples and the inhabitants of many cities will yet come... And many peoples & powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek YAHWEH Almighty & to entreat him. This is what YAHWEH Almighty says: “In those days ten men from all languages & nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.'”

What was the result of the temple-building effort?

Once the foundation had been laid the initial response of the people was mixed (Ezra 3:12-13), mingling joy over finally beginning the restitution of the temple with grief over the loss of the former temple and the comparatively meager nature of this second temple. After spurning the offer of help from other people (Ezra 4:1-3), however, they encountered opposition resulting in a halt to the work (Ezra 4:4-5), leaving it unfinished for many years (Ezra 4:24). Had they instead welcomed the help, it may have been finished much earlier. Eventually it was finished under the divine prompting through Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5:1-2; 6:14-15; Hag. 1-2).

Should they have feared the people of the lands surrounding them? Were Zerubbabel and Jeshua, and later Ezra and Nehemiah and their contemporaries motivated by genuine holiness or xenophobia? It seems clear that these leaders thought of themselves in parallel to the children of Israel coming from Egyptian captivity to enter the land under Joshua son of Nun. The land back then was

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17 “Thus the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.”
occupied by certain people groups whom Yahweh specifically commanded them to destroy, and with whom he had forbidden them to intermarry.

But maintaining these standards against a different people, viz. all non-Israelites and mixed race people, at this now very different historical context amounts to nothing less than racial bigotry, a pro-Israelitism that counters scripture by adding to its teachings. Even when they are praising Yahweh, this ethnocentrism emerges (Ezra 3:11):

He is good, his loyal-love to Israel endures forever.19

Jeremiah even anticipates their captors being fully incorporated into the worshipping community, provided they themselves (1) call upon Yahweh and (2) learn from his people.

This is what YAHWEH says: "As for all my wicked neighbors who seize the inheritance I gave my people Israel, I will uproot them from their lands ... But after I uproot them, I will again have compassion and will bring each of them back to his own inheritance and to his own land. And if they learn well the ways of my people and swear by my name "", then they will be established among my people (Jer. 12:14-16)

At that time they will call Jerusalem "The Throne of YAHWEH, and all nations will gather in Jerusalem to honor the name of YAHWEH. (Jer. 3:17)

Did Yahweh forbid intermarriage between Israelites and non-Israelites in Scripture?

The commands regarding intermarriage with non-Israelites are given in Deuteronomy.

When YAHWEH your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations--the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations larger and stronger than you--and when YAHWEH your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons,... (7:1-3)

Here we learn that there are seven specific people groups indigenous to the land of Canaan during Joshua’s day with whom they are strictly forbidden to intermarry. Beyond these, a further limitation is found in Deuteronomy 23:3,6-8.

No Ammonite or Moabite or any of his descendants may enter the assembly of YAHWEH, even down to the tenth generation.... Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them as long as you live. Do not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother. Do not abhor an Egyptian, because you lived as an alien in his country. The third generation of children born to them may enter the assembly of YAHWEH.

18 These people who are rejected are those who came from other nations during Assyrian occupation, were sent to the area of the former Northern kingdom of Israel, and had intermarried with the surviving Israelites. Ignoring the fact that the two kingdoms were to be reunited after captivity (Hos. 1:11; 3:4-5; Amos 9:11-12), Zerubbabel and Jeshua in this move finalize a hostility between themselves and these “Samaritans” that continues through New Testament times.

19Jer. 33:11; Ps. 106:1; 107:1; 118:1,29; 136:passim; 1 Chr. 16:34; 2 Chr. 5:13; 7:3. In each of these cases, it simply says, “he is good, his loyal-love endures forever.” In the context of 1 Chr. 16, this phrase is explicitly for all peoples (v. 23-24, 28). Yet here under Jeshua’s direction, that loyal-love is to be restricted to Israel.
However, beyond these specific groups, the “dirty seven,” there are no racial or ethnic restrictions on any other non-Israelite who seeks to be part of the worshipping community (Num. 15:14-16).

For the generations to come, whenever an alien or anyone else living among you presents an offering made by fire as an aroma pleasing to YAHWEH, he must do exactly as you do. The community is to have the same rules for you and for the alien living among you; this is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. **You and the alien shall be the same before YAHWEH:** The same laws and regulations will apply both to you and to the alien living among you.

So the list of forbidden marriages is expanded to include Ammonites and Moabites for ten generations, and Edomites and Egyptians for three. Though the statute of limitations had long since passed for these people groups by Ezra-Nehemiah’s day, we find that they go far beyond what Deuteronomy commands. Any neighboring people are now likened to the original “dirty seven” to Ezra, and interpreted as a blanket statement forbidding any intermarriage with anyone ever in Nehemiah.

... the leaders came to [Ezra] and said, “The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites. They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. (Ezra 9:1-2)

On that day the Book of Moses was read aloud in the hearing of the people and there it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever be admitted into the assembly of God, ... When the people heard this law, they excluded from Israel all who were of foreign descent. (Neh 13:1)

Just as they misrepresented Cyrus’ edict, the people are also misrepresenting the Torah. Furthermore, there are many clear examples of Israelite leaders who married those of foreign descent without biblical or community censure: Joseph and Asenath (Egyptian), Moses and Zipporah (Midianite), Salmon and Rahab (Canaanite), Boaz and Ruth (Moabite), Bathsheba and Uriah (Hittite), Esther and Xerxes (Persian). Under the regime of the leaders of Ezra-Nehemiah, however, each of these marriages would have been disallowed.

**Should Nehemiah have built the walls around Jerusalem?**

For many it may come as a surprise to discover that nowhere in the book is Nehemiah ever commanded by God to rebuild the walls. Most simply assume that what he does is **prima facie** the right

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20 In Deut. 20, when attacking any foreign city other than the “dirty seven,” they were to extend an offer of peace. If it was refused, then it was permissible to take the surviving women (20:10-18).

21 While the expression “Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them as long as you live” (לְעוֹלָֽם כָּל־יָמֶ֖י) might be taken in the sense of forever, its limitation specifically to ten generations (דּוֹר כִּיּוָי), when compared in context to three generations (23:8) with the same terminology indicates that it should be taken literally. In Ezra 9:1-2 it becomes “Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them at any time” (לְעוֹלָֽם כְּלוֹם).

22 Note that this claim is not an equation but a comparison, i.e. the current neighbors are not literally descended from the “dirty seven,” but are like them in practice (as are the syncretized Israelites themselves).

23 נֹחַ֑תְרִים (Ezr 9:1).

24 Myers sees Ruth as the antidote to the flawed social policies seen here: “The Book of Ruth is regarded by most scholars as a reaction against the demands of Ezra-Nehemiah.” Jacob Myers, Ezra-Nehemiah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary Anchor Bible 14 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965): 84.
thing to do. But it is particularly important in this case to look at the canonical intertexts. Nehemiah categorically forbids any participation of non-Israelites within the community of the remnant.

But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. “What is this you are doing?” they asked. “Are you rebelling against the king?” I answered them by saying, “The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it.” (Neh. 2:19-20)

But Zechariah, who assures the success of the completion of the second temple by Zerubbabel (Zech. 4:9), paints a strikingly different picture when it comes to rebuilding the walls surrounding Jerusalem.

Then ... another angel came to meet him and said to him: “Run, tell that young man, ‘Jerusalem will be a city without walls because of the great number of men and livestock in it. And I myself will be a wall of fire around it,’ declares YAHWEH, ‘and I will be its glory within.’ ... Many nations will be joined with YAHWEH in that day and will become my people.” (Zech. 2:3-4,11)

Similarly Isaiah sees Jerusalem, the future temple, and the people of Israel as magnetically attracting foreigners to be included into the worshipping community.

Let no foreigner who has bound himself to YAHWEH say, “YAHWEH will surely exclude me from his people.” ... And foreigners who bind themselves to YAHWEH to serve him, to love the name of YAHWEH, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations. The Sovereign YAHWEH declares—he who gathers the exiles of Israel: “I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered. (Isa. 56:3,6-8)

Foreigners will rebuild your walls, and their kings will serve you... Your gates will always stand open, they will never be shut, day or night, so that men may bring you the wealth of the nations (Goi). (Isa. 60:10-11)

So also Ezekiel envisions the cohabitation of gentile believers among the Israelites.

You are to distribute this land among yourselves according to the tribes of Israel. You are to allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the aliens who have settled among you and who have children. You are to consider them as native-born Israelites; along with you they are to be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. In whatever tribe the alien settles, there you are to give him his inheritance," declares the Sovereign YAHWEH.

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25 Twice in the text Nehemiah makes the claim that “the gracious hand of my God was upon me” (2:8,18). Similarly he also says, “I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem” (Neh. 2:12). But given that both Cyrus and Torah have been misrepresented already within Ezra-Nehemiah, and that it is Nehemiah who is both speaker, narrator, and author here, it would be unwise to accept this claim uncritically. Roberts offers a cautionary note that is relevant: “Sometimes ... in our zeal for righteousness we misconstrue God’s leading no matter how honorable our intentions may be” (Mark D. Roberts, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther The Communicator’s Commentary v. 11 [Dallas: Word, 1993]: 155).

26 God is concerned with all of creation and therefore all of the nations. Homecoming, then, must not be a return to a self-secure, insulated nationalism, yet another attempt at building a home with even higher protective walls. Rather, homecoming for Isaiah is a matter of renewed covenant. Isaiah 42:5-7 does not say that Yahweh will make a covenant with Israel, but rather that Yahweh will give Israel to be a covenant to the peoples. See Brian J. Walsh & Richard J. Middleton, Truth Is Stranger Than It Used Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995): 160.
Since these passages precede Nehemiah and his ministry, he should have known that Yahweh’s plans for the gentiles did not exclude them, but offered them full participation into the worshipping community of faith. Indeed, walls meant to exclude are the antithesis to the Isaianic vision of Jerusalem following the captivity.

Should Ezra and Nehemiah have acceded to the leaders’ demands on divorcing foreign wives?

That Ezra and Nehemiah not only allowed these divorces but also commanded and implemented them is the most troublesome aspect of the book. Virtually all who take them to be exemplars of godliness find difficulties explaining away the obvious problems that this creates for readers of the Bible.

Whose idea was it that the wives of foreign descent and their children should be banished? It was prompted not by direct command of Yahweh, nor a prophetic utterance, but at the insistence of others. Ezra was pressured by the leaders into mandating the banishment of foreign wives and children (9:1-2; 10:2-5,10-11) and the compulsory registration of the returnees to verify their racial pedigree (10:7-8) upon pain of forfeiture of their property.

Nowhere else in scripture is divorce encouraged. At best it is tolerated, under limited circumstances, due to hardness of heart (Mat. 19:3-9), but it is never presented as a command to reverse any problems associated with intermarriage. Indeed, the text indicates that four individuals did speak out in opposition to divorce policy (Ezra 10:15).

Writing after this time, Malachi explicitly enumerates the total failure of the community of returnees. Worship in the second temple is corrupt and insincere. The priesthood is abnegating their responsibilities, the people have nothing but contempt for God, and it is widely believed that the wicked and arrogant are those who are blessed and prosper (3:15). The heart of their failure, however, stems from the fact that they have “broken faith” with their covenant relationships, both with Yahweh (2:11-27).
12) through their idolatry as well as with their wives through divorce. The very thing that Ezra and the leaders insist upon is what displeases God.

You flood YAHWEH’s altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, “Why?” It is because YAHWEH is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has he not made them one? ... So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. “I hate divorce,” says YAHWEH God of Israel....

In the New Testament this is borne out further, when Paul clearly teaches that a believing spouse is not to divorce the unbelieving partner.32

Should the leaders of Ezra-Nehemiah have used social reforms to effect inward change?
Perhaps one of the most important lessons to be learned from the book of Ezra-Nehemiah is that, however well-intentioned, leaders cannot precipitate inward change by prescribing outward measures. While establishing and enforcing behavioral demands may achieve short term conformity, there is little evidence that doing so causes a change of heart or perspective: “[Laws] do reflect values. But laws cannot generate values, or instill values, or settle the conflict over values.”33 For all of the effort expended by the leaders in Ezra-Nehemiah, the changes are neither profound nor lasting. 34

Conclusion
Before we can evaluate how we are to view Ezra and Nehemiah as narrative characters overall, we should ask several, very basic but important story level questions. What we make of the book of Ezra-Nehemiah, and of these characters especially, hinges precisely upon how we answer, consciously or unconsciously, these questions.

1. What were their goals?
To build things? If so, then they are successful. To change lives for good? No.

2. Did they do what they were supposed to do?
They did return to the land. The temple was completed. Sacrifice, prayer, worship, scripture reading, and the Levitical order were all re-established, and these were all good things. However, they also added their own rules and interpretations to their reading of God’s word, attempted to evoke spiritual reform through coercion, instituted both polices and a spirit of ethnocentrism that excluded foreigners, and forced the dissolution of families. All of these were far from God’s intent, clearly revealed in other scriptures.

3. Were they successful?
They were successful in some things that were good (see above).

32 “If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy” (1 Cor. 7:12-14).
34 The social policies which are backed by force in Nehemiah concern lending practices (5:5ff), guarding of the gates (7:1-3), purging of the temple storehouses (13:8-9), neglect of the house of God (13:10-13), shutting of the doors to prevent Sabbath-day commerce (13:19-22), and intermarriage with foreign wives (13:23-28).
However, they also failed in other, very important things, viz. in leading the people into lasting, constructive change. Further, they were “successful” in doing things that were very bad, especially in adding to God’s word, their legalism, their exclusionary policies, and in forcing people to break their marriage covenants.

So if the book of Ezra-Nehemiah presents us with examples of leaders who are not successful in leading people into spiritual revival and reform, then what value can this book offer us? Why is it in the Bible?

First, Ezra-Nehemiah demonstrates to us how easily and how dangerously we can confuse our ministry goals and agenda with God’s will. This is an ever-present risk for all those in spiritual leadership. Second, it exposes how very wrong it is when God’s people seek to hoard his grace as if they own it, refusing to share it with “outsiders.” Thus it implicitly condemns any forms of classism, racism, nationalism, or legalism. Third, it teaches us that misguided religious fervor and zeal cannot compensate for misusing God’s Word. Fourth, by offending our sensitivities toward family abandonment, it teaches us to prioritize family commitment and fidelity. Fifth, it should cause us to have a healthy cautiousness toward those who abuse their roles and power in spiritual leadership. And finally, Ezra-Nehemiah shows us that morality and spiritual renewal cannot be legislated or precipitated through external policies.

As a sobering reminder of the gravity of these lessons above, we should note that the Pharisees, whom we know so well from our New Testament, consider Ezra to be the founding father of their movement. Did they pray? Read Scripture? Fast? Take their faith seriously? Expect others to conform to their standards? Assiduously work at keeping every command? Exclude all outsiders? Deem themselves as better than others? Add their own rules to God’s commands? Were they sincere? The answer to all these questions is, of course, yes, just like we find in Ezra-Nehemiah. And rather than seeking to replicate this kind of “godly leadership,” we should seek our positive role models for spiritual leadership elsewhere.

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35 Levering describes the situation in this way: “While the temple sacrifices and festivals resume, the returned exiles appear to make little effort in general to practice holiness in accord with the Torah.... For his part, Ezra the Scribe induces a certain obedience to the Torah, but even this obedience seems a halfhearted and sad affair.... Does it not seem that these leaders’ continuous struggles are hopeless, at best a noble exercise in religious nostalgia and at worst an exemplar of nationalistic fanaticism in religious garb?” (Matthew Levering, Ezra & Nehemiah Brazos Theological Commentary [Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007]: 113-114). However, he then goes on to attempt to “rescue” them, going beyond the book to establish this trajectory: “Salvation history does not stop building upward, toward a greater and greater divine presence.... [The people’s] striving and limping are increasingly embodied only in a remnant and indeed (ultimately) can be embodied only truly and fully in one man, Christ Jesus.” (114-15).

36 This was the problem that needed to be dealt with in the first church dispute in Acts 15—what are we supposed to do with God-fearing gentiles who want to have a part of OUR messiah, OUR new covenant, OUR status as the people of God? This is the “mystery” that Paul needs to explicate in Ephesians. In a very real sense, the very “wall of hostility” that Christ demolishes in Eph. 2:14-16 was constructed by Nehemiah “the wall-builder.” Similarly many of Jesus’ parables of the kingdom communicate that his kingdom extends beyond the boundaries of Israel, and that Israel’s response will be to begrudge God’s grace being given to anyone else?

37 “In the Pharisaic tradition Ezra was regarded as—after Moses—the real founder of Judaism; and his work is summed up in saying that he raised the Torah to the supreme place in Jewish life and thought which it has held ever since. To Ezra, the Torah was first and foremost the written text of the Five Books of Moses; and the scribes of his own and succeeding times (he was a scribe himself) made it their business to teach and interpret the sacred text so as to make available the revelation contained therein” (The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia, Vol. VIII: 474, http://www.come-and-hear.com/uje/uje_474.html).

38 The ex-Pharisee Saul/Paul regards all this effort as σκύβαλα (Phil. 3:8).
### Timeline of Captivity

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Events</th>
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<th>Passage</th>
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<td>2 Kings 25, Jeremiah 52, [2 Chr. 36:11-21]. Daniel 1:8</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem, rebuilds wall</td>
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<td>Xerxes (Ahasuerus)</td>
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*Some of these dates are contestable. My chief concern in this chart is sequence of events and relationships between biblical passages.*