

Why the Bible Began 4

Why the Bible Began 4; Haggai the Prophet, Laying the Foundations—”If you build it, they will come.”

- **Haggai was a prophet who lived in the late 6th c. BCE**, whose “exhortations, not an edict of the empire,...laid the foundation of the [2nd] temple and paved the way for the dramatic developments in the post-destruction period [after 586 BCE]: **‘Go up to the hills, Collect timber, And rebuild the house [Bayit=Temple, the house of God]. Then I will look on it with favor...’** (Haggai 1;7-8)...[Haggai addresses the people as a whole]—**‘this people, ha’am hazeh.’**] The words he delivered in the deity’s name **prompted his community to take their first step together as a people...**[The context is that words, as communicated by scribes in erudite texts] **“ascribe great power to language and the (divine) word...[Underlying this building project is the understanding that the ‘word’ and the ‘building’ are related, and that] divine goodwill is not the precondition for our building activities, it is the result.** Had it not been for the modest triumph that Judah witnessed in raising up a small temple, and later rebuilding Jerusalem’s ramparts...it is unlikely that the community would have ever gone on to commit themselves to more thoroughgoing social reforms and embrace new ways of thinking about themselves.” [169-172]
- Film “Field of Dreams” with Kevin Costner as the farmer Ray Kinsella, dir. Phil Alden Robinson [1989], based on Canadian novelist [W. P. Kinsella's](#) 1982 novel [Shoeless Joe](#). Scenes of the Kinsella farm were taken on the property of Don Lansing in [Dyersville, Iowa](#); some of the [baseball field](#) scenes were shot on the neighboring farm of Al Ameskamp. Source of photo: Wikipedia



Importance of Volunteerism and Collaboration

- ***“In the days of Haggai [late 6th c., when he inspired the rebuilding of the Temple], scribes were just beginning to flesh out the book of Exodus with passages that promote ideals of volunteerism.*** The passages, which appear in the Priestly Source, imagine ***an ideal past when the Israelites come together to construct a dwelling, or ‘tabernacle,’ for Yhwh, who had just delivered them from an Egyptian despot.*** As a communal undertaking, the building project marks their first achievement as a nation after their liberation from bondage...***The repeated references to women in these texts are striking.*** After the downfall of the Judean kingdom...building activities replaced war efforts as the primary theater of communal action. These peacetime enterprises offered more opportunities to participate...***[Women] had much to teach men about collaborating and surviving in a world in which the cards were stacked against them.***” [172-173]
- ***“Breton philosopher and historian Ernest Renan [in a lecture from 1882]...‘What is a Nation?’: ‘... Two things constitute its [a nation’s] soul or spiritual principle...One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received.’*** Notice how Renan underscores both the sacrifices of the past and the voluntary actions of the present. He also ***links this volunteerism to the role of defeat*** in the making of a nation. ***‘Where national memories are concerned, griefs are of more value than triumphs, for they impose duties,*** and require a common effort.’“
- ***“The rebuilding of the temple was a turning point in Judah’s history. After Babylonian Exile, this institution became a central hub of Judean life, taking the place once occupied by the palace. Priests and the scribes who served the temple had a direct hand in shaping the Bible’s emphases and final contours. They also penned the prominent [and revisionist] history of the post-exilic period: Ezra-Nehemiah.”*** [174-175]

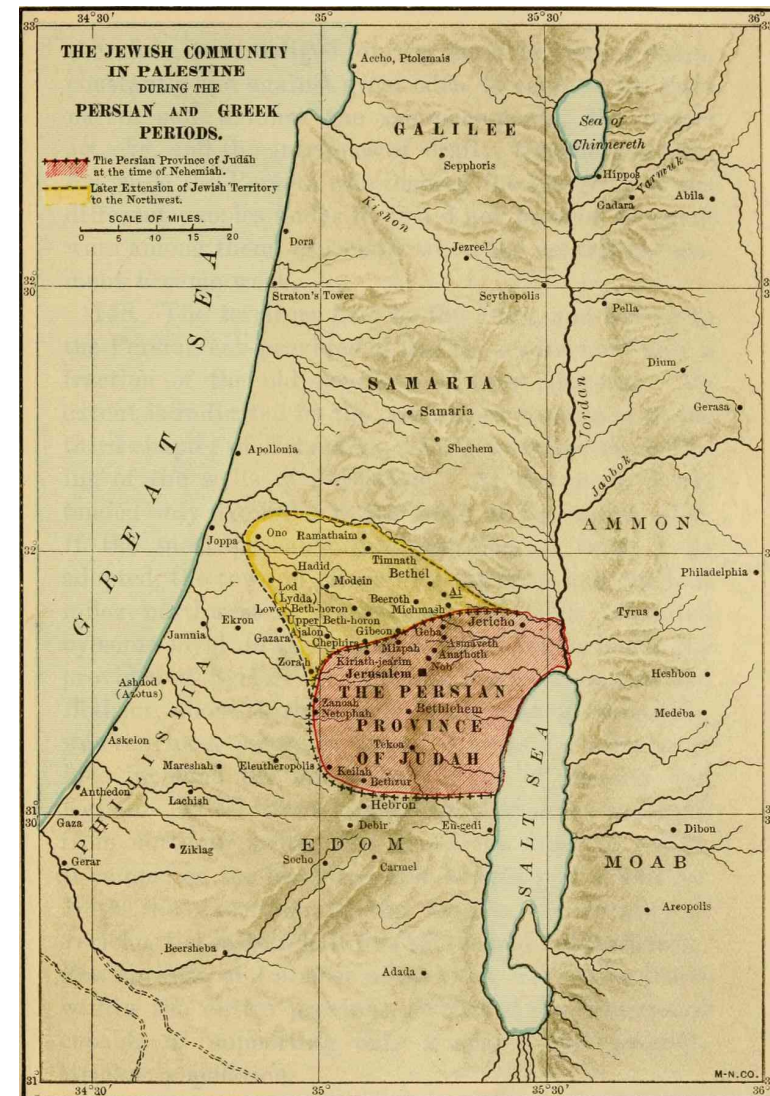
The history behind Ezra-Nehemiah

- “In Ezra-Nehemiah, the community eagerly begins building after [King] Cyrus gives the word.” [**Contrary to the stated argument of Ezra- Nehemiah**]“...A range of sources allow us to be quite confident that: the people of Judah were not united; they were apathetic about the temple; and they did not consult the Torah and ancient textual traditions as they rebuilt their society. From the archives found in both Babylon and Egypt, we know now that many had built a stable existence in the diaspora, and they were not inclined to return to a distant and destitute homeland.” [176]
- **The Cyrus Cylinder, while exemplifying archeological evidence of Persian restorations, actually does NOT mention the rebuilding of the Temple, NOR pronounce freedom for Judean exiles.** “...The community Haggai addressed knew nothing about an imperial decree of Cyrus.” [178] Rather, the similarly named Cyrus edict is a “fabrication from the authors of Ezra-Nehemiah.” [178] Picture Source: British Museum-- **The Cyrus cylinder: clay cylinder; a Babylonian [language and cuneiform inscription] account of the conquest of Babylon by Cyrus in 539 BC, of his restoration to various temples of statues [of Marduk, the deity who slays Tiamat in the Babylonian creation epic] removed by Nabonidus, the previous king of Babylon, and of his own work at Babylon. The cylindrical form is typical of royal inscriptions of the Late Babylonian period, and the text shows that the cylinder was written to be buried in the foundations of the city wall of Babylon. It was deposited there after the capture of the city by Cyrus in 539 BC, and presumably written on his orders.**



The origin of the “Cyrus Edict mentioned in Ezra-Nehemiah

- The Cyrus Edict [as it is imagined in Ezra-Nehemiah] grew out of an ***anxiety about Jerusalem’s place in relation to its Northern neighbor. Judah had long been inferior, and occasionally even a vassal, to the kingdom of Israel, and its secondary status persisted into the Persian period. At this time, the province of Samaria was much more affluent and influential, and when they built a temple to Yhwh, they likely did not pay much heed to Judean sentiment.***
- Map source: Persian and Greek periods of Levant. www.thoughtco.com



Temple builders: returning exiles or natives

- “The Hebrew narrative of Ezra-Nehemiah... contradicts the depiction in Haggai: the builders [of the Temple] were not those who remained in the land, but those who returned from exile in Babylon... ***The older Aramaic sources embedded in this narrative [on the other hand]...have nothing to say about returning exiles.*** Only the leader, a man named Sheshbazzar, comes to Judah, and he does so because King Darius commissions him to rebuild the temple... ***The older Aramaic sources agree with what we witnessed in Haggai: his prophecies never even mention a return from exile; they address a population that had long resided in Judah. The number of exiles who returned to the province in the two centuries after the Babylonian conquest would have been small...The archeological record shows no signs of significant demographic growth until much later...*** This means that we should not imagine ‘the return to Zion’ with mass migrations from Mesopotamia as portrayed in many biblical texts...Most of this returning population did not originate in Babylonia. ***They migrated instead from lands that bordered Judah, where they had sought asylum during the long period of armed conflict and economic calamity, directly before 586 BCE and the century that followed Judah’s collapse...***

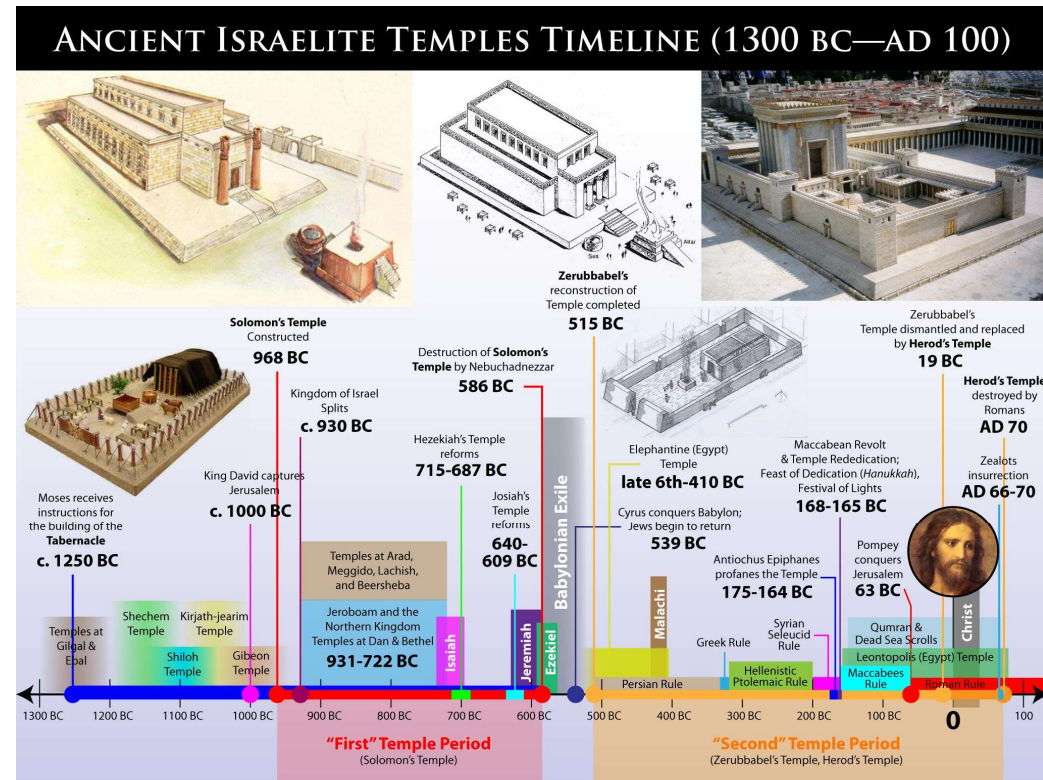
We know of many Judean exiles who planted deep roots in Babylonia...They had built a new existence in Babylonia along ***with new institutions, distinctive identities, and survival strategies, and they were prepared to stay there for generations to come...In doing so they followed the counsel that the prophet Jeremiah... provided in a letter to the exiles: ‘Build houses and settle down...Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to Yhwh for it. Because if it prospers, you too will prosper.’*** [Jeremiah 29:5-7]...Babylonia was home to a flurry of literary activity,...In addition to ***the prophecies of Second Isaiah and Ezekiel, the Palace history was read and reworked...The first chapter of the Bible engages directly with Babylonian Mythology*** that the exiled Judeans encountered after 586 BCE [only after exile]...

The evidence of a cultural exchange between the homeland and the diaspora tells us something important: the ***biblical writings were starting to be shared more widely in the early Persian period,*** even if this circulation was still confined primarily to scribes...[180-181]

Haggai prophecies great results from small beginnings

- Haggai says [2:7]: “The latter splendor of this house [the Temple] shall be greater than the former, ‘ says the Yhwh of Armies.”
- “Haggai foretells a time when...wealth would flow to Jerusalem—not to the palaces of their kings but to the dwelling of their deity. He assured them [the Judeans], ‘It may not look like much now, but if you[-all] build it, they will come.’...***The new temple is the achievement of the people, not the king. Repeating the feat of their liberated ancestors who had long ago built a tabernacle in the wilderness, a wartorn, struggling population had taken its first step as a reborn nation, without a native king guiding the way.*** [184]

- Source of Timeline depicted: www.templestudy.com



Nehemiah the Builder: Restoring Judean Pride

- Around **440 BCE, Nehemiah**, cupbearer to the Persian king, soon governor of the province of Judah, in his singular biblical eponymous memoir [**this is the only text in the Tanach of which we know something about the author**], reveals his ambitious plans: **“How Jerusalem lies in ruins...Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace”** (Nehemiah 2:17). (Jerusalem’s wall was more central to [the Judeans] collective dignity and corporate identity than even the Temple. [The priestly editors later disputed this and added material to show the enthusiasm of the people’s rebuilding of the Temple]). [His] “modest building project, prompted a series of major reforms, restored Judah’s self- confidence, and marks its de facto resurrection as a people...What regenerated a Judean collective consciousness was robust competition with neighboring provinces... [particularly] Samaria, the imperial province that had replaced the Northern kingdom of Israel... **[Yet, Nehemiah describes a community coming together around a building project...just as the biblical project as a whole is a unifying effort]**.
- As in the Siloam Inscription connecting Hezekiah’s tunnel, the wall workers meet at the halfway point...”It all started with a conversation in the [Persian] imperial capital of Susa. His brother Hanani, along with a few others, had returned from a voyage to Judah, and he describes what they had witnessed: ‘The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity live in great distress and shame. And the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, with its gates destroyed by fire.’ (Nehemiah 1:3)...It had been about a century and half since Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian armies conquered their kingdom and laid waste to Jerusalem...[Despite his life in the imperial court, devote to the Artaxerxes’ welfare (the ruling Persian dynasty), Nehemiah realized] he was still a “son of the South”, [a Judean. Therefore he got the king to approve the rebuilding of the walls in 52 days...**He] succeeded in galvanizing a community of builders...by appealing to the sense of collective shame they and their ancestors had endured after the conquest of their kingdom...his larger objective was to restore Judean pride...by convincing a defeated and humiliated population to rise up and rebuild their ruins.”** [188-193]

Building replaces Battles as a Formative Element

- “Building sites instead of battlefields”... became the theater of public life according to the scribes of the biblical corpus. “Nehemiah’s memoir...pays tribute to individuals, districts, clans, priestly groups, and professional guilds in the province of Judah” whose names are linked to portions of the wall whose repairs they sponsored...[in the process portraying] the political community as a joined circle encompassing Jerusalem...along the wall’s circumference...meeting in the middle.” **[Nehemiah’s authors, the scribes and editors] inscribed the contributors’ names on a portable memoir, not a fixed monument. As such, it was easier to reproduce, circulate, and amplify than a memorial carved in stone...These are, indeed, features of the larger biblical corpus...[as the 19th c. German-Jewish poet Heinrich Heine put it] a ‘portable homeland’...** The completion of the wall is viewed as a great triumph over Judah’s foes: ‘All our enemies heard about it, and all the nations around us were afraid and lost their morale.’
- “The city’s settlement is likewise depicted as a form of voluntary military service: not only do they cast lots (a typical method of selected soldiers for a dangerous assignment), but also the new residents are designate ‘valiant warriors.’..By incorporating martial features into these portraits of post-exilic life, the memoir and **other texts in Ezra Nehemiah ascribe to construction projects the same gravity and significance that major war efforts had had in the nation’s past...**Nehemiah’s wall is an example of a grassroots movement organizing for collective action....The success of coming together to repair the city’s ramparts had laid a concrete foundation for more ambitious social, economic and religions reforms...**What distinguishes Nehemiah is that he acts under the jurisdiction of the Persian king and thus must convince, rather than conscript, others for collective action.**” [194-198]

Reginal vs. National Consciousness

- “Committed to the revitalization of Judah, the authors [of Ezra-Nehemiah] saw Samaria as a potential threat to their project of unifying their community, and when they vilify Samaria [as when they condemn them as the source of ‘foreign wives’] **they deny that its inhabitants belonged to the people of Israel. As ones who worshipped Yhwh and identified themselves as members of the nation, the Samaritans would have taken umbrage at such imputations.** The Southern, or ‘Judah-centric,’ perspective that shapes Ezra-Nehemiah occasioned counter visions that were more latitudinarian or ‘pan-Israelite’ in purview. **The book of Chronicles [a recapitulation of the biblical narrative]...was drafted in the South, and not long after Ezra-Nehemiah [which was likely composed after 400 BCE], its authors embraced communities in Samaria, throughout the North, and across the Jordan as part of their people...It presents [the] temple [in Jerusalem] as a point of unity for ‘all Israel.’** The greatest moments in the nation’s past...was when Northern tribes, especially those farthest removed from Judah, united around major Judean kings (such as David, Solomon, Hezekiah, and Josiah) to lend support to this institution...**The Bible is ultimately a Judean product. Its authors drew upon and learned from the works of Northern writers, but they revised and expanded them from a Southern, and especially Jerusalemite, perspective...**”
- “Before groups could form larger corporate or national identities, they had to come together in their own communities...If Judah had not first united as a provincial community, it would not have been able to join others to form a larger people. This **tension between individual communities and the collective nation lends the Bible much of its intellectual force and enduring political relevance.** The scribes who shaped this corpus sought ways to rise above deep distrust and division in order to form a more perfect union...[After Alexander had conquered Persia and his empire had been divided among his generals] in the second century [BCE], Hasmonean kings [the Maccabees] conquered Samaria and incorporated it into their Judean kingdom [a radical reversal of the historic dominance of the North]. [**Jesus in the New Testament refers to this historic rivalry and attempts once again to assert its opposite by the parable of the Good Samaritan, who behaves with the brotherly ethos of national kinship affirmed in the Torah: ‘You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the members of your own people. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. For I am Yhwh.’** (Leviticus 19:18, part of the Holiness Code).” [200-202]

Ezra the Educator--the birth of the People of the Book

- “Ezra [a priest and a scribe] was not a typical [scribe]...Instead of training other scribes, **he formed a larger community of learners.** The account of him reading the Torah in Jerusalem [The Scroll of Moses’ Teaching, which he brought from Babylon] repeatedly underscores broad participation...**Torah study is the prerogative of the entire community [both men and women of all classes]...**What is portrayed...is actual learning...**the Levites who join Ezra on the podium translate (presumably into Aramaic [from Hebrew]) and explicate the meaning of what is read to the people (literally, ‘help the people to understand’)**...At the end of the month, the community assembles again, yet now they are reading and studying without his help. **The text is firmly in their hands, and together they have embraced a groundbreaking paradigm for their future as a people.**” [206]
- “These scenes are truly remarkable...For eight or more centuries connecting the age of Moses and Joshua to that of Ezra and Nehemiah, **the people had never petitioned a scribe to read the Torah to them; indeed, they hardly seem aware of its existence.**”
- “In this new textual garb, **what was esoteric [secret knowledge of the divine reserved for a cult] is now exoteric:** circles with a wide range of affiliations and perspectives produced these scrolls, and they bequeathed them to the wider community.”
- Most political communities have had to deal with defeat, yet **few have responded by reorienting their collective identities around bodies of texts, and none have done so on the scale that we witness in ancient Judah.**” [206-208]

Elephantine

- [Correspondence in Aramaic between the Jewish communities in Elephantine and Jerusalem **do not refer to the Torah or any body of authoritative scripture**, but contain requests for religious information from religious authorities in Jerusalem. “Surprising[ly], the Jerusalem community acknowledged temples to Yhwh outside of Jerusalem. In fact, they encouraged the Elephantine Jews to rebuild their temple [after it had been destroyed by an Egyptian riot] ‘on the place where it once stood.’ In assuming this supportive position, **they stand in direct contradiction to the book of Ezra-Nehemiah and the laws of Moses, which stipulate that there be only one temple to Yhwh.**” [212]
- The Jewish Temple at the military “Jewish Garrison” on Elephantine island has been known from papyrus sources since 1911, when Otto Rubensohn, a classical archeologist, unearthed an archive of papyri documents. **Built sometime in the sixth century, after Judean soldiers and their families took up residence there in 540 BCE to guard the southern frontier of the Persian Empire, it was destroyed in 410 BCE at the hands of the priests of the Egyptian god, Khnum. Although rebuilt, the temple was eventually abandoned sometime after 400 BCE.** The papyri, and other rich remains including inscribed potsherds (ostraca) of a Judean community, obtained from locals on the island, date to the Persian period and reveal much about the lives of the Jewish mercenaries who worshiped in the temple. Photo of Jewish Temple at Elephantine, island at the Nile’s first cataract, Aswan, Egypt. Source: Wikipedia



The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Qumran Community

- ***[The archive from Elephantine] “stands in stark contrast to another important archive that we found: the Dead Sea Scrolls [also called the Qumran Caves Scrolls, a set of ancient Jewish manuscripts from the Second Temple period. They were discovered over a period of 10 years, between 1946 and 1956, at the Qumran Caves near Ein Feshkha in the West Bank, on the northern shore of the Dead Sea. Dating from the 3rd century BCE to the 1st century CE]. These texts...are products of a community at Qumran that spent their days studying and copying most of the writings that would become part of the biblical canon (in addition to a host of others). Elephantine and Qumran are the most important finds of ancient Judean texts, and together they provide concrete evidence for the dramatic cultural and political impact of what began as an exercise of scribal imagination.”[213]***
- Picture Source: [Barack Obama, visiting the Shrine of the Book in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem](#), viewing a facsimile of the [Isaiah scroll](#), dating from the second century BCE, the most intact of the Dead Sea Scrolls, 2013, Wikipedia.



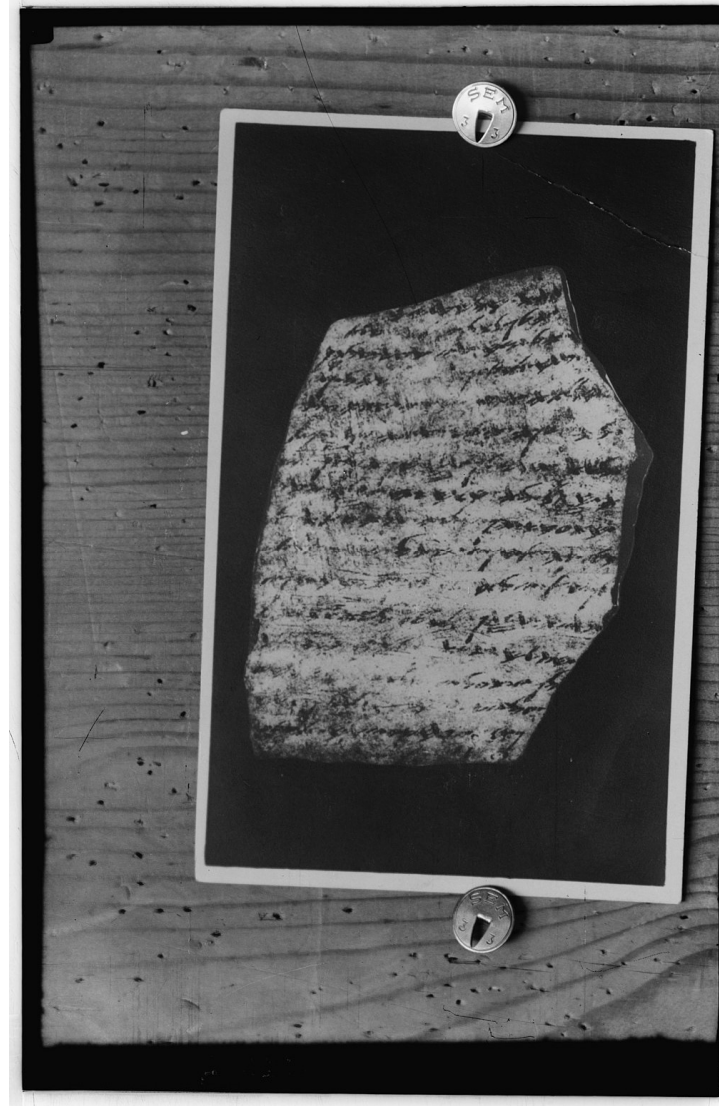
The terminology for “seeking-inquiring”

- “**The terminology for ‘seeking-inquiring’**, both in [Ezra-Nehemiah] and in many other **post-exilic writings**, is the same terminology used to describe divination practices in pre-exilic writings [as when David decides whether to launch military campaigns he first ‘seeks/inquires of Yhwh’]...The method of oracular inquiry usually goes unsaid, but at certain points **we hear of the Ephod, the Urim and Thummim, and teraphot—ancient divination paraphernalia that remain shrouded in mystery.** Now when members of the Judean province desire to know the divine will, **rather than engaging in divination, they seek/inquire in written texts...**Michael Fishbane [“Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel,” 1985, p. 244] calls it ‘a new stage of legal rationality, when **a text becomes an oraculum for rational-exegetical inquiry.**’” [216]
- [In the book of Nehemiah (10:32-35) the people make a pact among themselves to tax themselves for the service in their Temple and to bring there the first fruits of their soil]. **In contrast to the earth-shattering covenant ratified on Mount Sinai, this pact is made solely among the people themselves [‘all who have knowledge and understanding’]**...Reconstruction takes place ‘In **An Age of Prose**’ (the title of an important book [1988] on Ezra –Nehemiah by Tamara Cohn Eskenazi). In keeping with the consciousness of defeat they sought to cultivate, the scribes who shaped the biblical corpus identify this age as not only a formative period but also **an abiding one.**” [216-219]
- Source: Wikipedia-- "God speaks through the Urim and Thummim," 1705 engraving (in the Rijksmuseum) by [Jan Luyken](#). The breastplate projects the word ברקת (*barakat*, "[emerald](#)")



Peoplehood as a Pedagogical Project

- “In 1938...the British archeologist James Leslie Starkey discovered a stockpile of ancient texts. He had been excavating at Lachish [an important Judean city in its final days]...in the guardroom of the gate complex.” In Lachish letter #3 [on ostraca--inscribed pottery shards] an officer named Hoshayahu says, **“My lord said, ‘You do not know how to read a letter.’ As Yhwh lives, never has anyone ever had to read a letter to me! Also every letter that comes to me, surely I am the one who reads it. Moreover, I can repeat it completely’...Many of the officers in Judah’s army must have been illiterate...Yaush, his commander, assumes he is one of them....Because he could read and remember things so well, there was no opportunity for a third party to modify the messages he received...**Literacy was not only critical to the many functions of society, but also the trademark—and trade secret—of the ruling class...**When all that David built had been destroyed, and when it was no longer possible to re-establish a native monarchy and military force, a new kind of text takes center stage, and with it, a new kind of readership..In keeping with this shift, the final editions of Psalms differ dramatically from the older book of Samuel by presenting David as one who studies and mediates day and night on the Torah.”** [221-223]
- Photo Source: Wikipedia, Library of Congress-- Lachish letter No. 3 *Abstract/medium*: G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection



Education to create a people

- “A range of evidence suggests that **Northern scribes**, after the downfall of their kingdom in 722 BCE, **found employment at the Davidic court** in Jerusalem, **and that they reacted to its propaganda by composing core components of the National Narrative**. Their work...imagined Israel become a people and establishing itself in the Promised Land without the institution of the monarchy...Instead of promoting education as a way of demarcating themselves from others in their society, **they adapted and applied it to their project of creating a people**. Education is still about the competitive advantage it promises, but the contest is no longer primarily between individuals and groups within their society. The goal is rather that everyone learns and internalizes the nation’s history, laws songs, and wisdom, so that together they will be able to make a name for themselves on a global stage.”
- “**The scribes who curated the biblical corpus consciously took what priests and palace members had long guarded as their special heritage and made it available, and indeed mandatory, for the education and edification of the entire nation...As part of this process, the ancestors of the few became the ancestors of all...this novel, national orientation of education is...explicitly delineated in Deuteronomy as Moses delivers laws and lectures to the people as they prepare to cross the Jordan. In what many scholars agree is a late addition to the book, Moses identifies himself as the nation’s teacher: ‘For this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples...They will say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and intelligent people!”** [Deuteronomy 4:5-8]’...This remarkable text collectivizes, or nationalizes, the competitive edge that education promises....” [225-227]

Demarcating a space for a defeated people

- “Having forfeited territorial sovereignty, communities in both the North and South needed to create for themselves a space in a foreign empire. The space they carved out is not so much territorial and political as it is social, one demarcated by practice and behavior. And because this project was by and large the work of scribes, the tools they used for demarcating it were written traditions...***By highlighting the presence and participation of a much broader cross-section of the community, the biblical writings promote a momentous shift in ethos: a People of the Book supplants a People in Arms, and the ability to understand replaces the capacity to bear weapons as the criterion for participants...[It was] a pragmatic strategy of survival...***”
- “***...A vanquished and exiled people struggling to hold its own against kingdoms and empires needed to include as many as possible in public life...***[Through storytelling, creating a narrative capable of uniting rival communities, and education, promoting collective participation by encouraging everyone to read, write and interpret text] ***the biblical authors [as their raison d’être, their pedagogical project]...consolidated a people in the aftermath of defeat by reshaping earlier writings into a national curriculum. This suggestion can best explain the diversity of writings contained in the biblical canon: its historical narratives, laws, songs, poetry, and wisdom collections.*** [231-235]