

THE PURPOSE AND FUNCTION OF THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES IN EZRA 3

TIMOTHY YAP*

Abstract: *Why does Ezra-Nehemiah single out the Feast of Tabernacles as the first celebrated festival of the Jews after coming back from exile? This article argues that the Feast of Tabernacles serves three purposes within Ezra 3. First, the festival helps define the identity and mission of the returnees. Second, the feast assures the returnees about the presence of God in a renewed way. Third, the feast marks the inclusion of Gentiles into God's reconstituted Israel. The article also examines how the Feast of Tabernacles is celebrated in Ezra 3 as well as Nehemiah 8. The festival, which bookends Ezra-Nehemiah, tells the story of God's restoration of Israel, beginning with the cultic leaders and continuing on to the laity.*

Key words: *Ezra-Nehemiah, Ezra 3, Feast of Tabernacles, Sukkot, restoration, returnees, Nehemiah 8*

Jewish historian Josephus regarded the Feast of Tabernacles as “most sacred and important” (*A.J.* 8.100–123), an evaluation that would have procured the support of the author of Ezra and Nehemiah.¹ Twice in Ezra-Nehemiah, we read of the returnees celebrating the Feast of Booths (Ezra 3 and Nehemiah 8). Not only do the people celebrate the festival, it is also the very first festival in which the Jews participate together after coming back from exile.

Why does the author of Ezra and Nehemiah place such an emphasis on the Feast of Tabernacles? What does the feast have to do with the book's overarching theme of restoration?² What does the feast have to do with the immediate context

* Timothy Yap resides at 11 Regan Place, Rooty Hill, NSW 2766, Australia. He can be contacted at timothyhyap@gmail.com.

¹ This article assumes Ezra and Nehemiah to be a unified document. For debates on the unity of Ezra and Nehemiah, see Kyung-jin Min, *The Levitical Authorship of Ezra-Nehemiah*, JSOTSup 409 (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 22–28; David C. Kraemer, “On the Relationship of the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah,” *JSOT* 59 (1993): 73–92; James C. VanderKam, “Ezra-Nehemiah or Ezra and Nehemiah?,” in *Priests, Prophets and Scribes: Essays on the Formation and Heritage of Second Temple Judaism in Honour of Joseph Blenkinsopp*, JSOTSup 149 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 55–72.

² On the theme of restoration from exile in Ezra-Nehemiah, see Douglas J. E. Nykolaishen, “The Restoration of Israel by God's Word in Three Episodes from Ezra-Nehemiah,” in *Unity and Disunity in Ezra-Nehemiah: Redaction, Rhetoric and Reader*, ed. Mark J. Boda and Paul L. Redditt, Hebrew Bible Monographs 17 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008), 75–97; Joseph Fleinhman, “An Echo of Optimism in Ezra 6:19–22,” *HUCA* 69 (1998): 15–29; J. G. McConville, “Ezra-Nehemiah and the Fulfillment of Prophecy,” *VT* 36 (1986): 205–24; Philip Y. Yoo, *Ezra and the Second Wilderness*, Oxford Theology and Religion Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), esp. 5–31; Melody Knowles, “Pilgrimage Imagery in the Returns in Ezra,” *JBL* 123.1 (2004): 57–74.

of Ezra 3, such as the threat of the “people around them” (Ezra 3:3)?³ What does the festival have to do with the variegated responses of joy and sadness when the temple’s foundation is laid (Ezra 3:13)?

Also perplexing is the manner in which the feast is celebrated in Ezra 3. The feast of Tabernacles is described by John E. Hartley as the “gala feast of the year,” where the feast is a nexus of celebrative events.⁴ From the pages of the Pentateuch, the celebration involves the thanksgiving for the crops of the harvest (Exod 23:16), the cessation of regular work (Exod 29:12), the offering of sacrifices (Num 29:12–40), the building and dwelling in temporary shelters (Lev 23:33–44), and the reading of the Torah (Deut 31:10–12). Of all the various items the celebration entails, the author of Ezra and Nehemiah mentions only the sacrifices offered for the occasion. In fact, the author is so emphatic about the sacrifices that the burnt offerings (עֹלָה) are mentioned five times in Ezra 3:1–6.⁵ Why are the sacrifices the cynosure of the celebration at the expense of the other activities?

Ezra 3 has not escaped the attention of scholars. H. G. Williamson, Joseph Blenkinsopp, Jacob M. Myers, David J. Clines, Gregory Goswell, Derek Kidner, David J. Shepherd, and Christopher J. H. Wright have noted the importance of the Feast of Tabernacles, but they have not explored the question of why the feast is of such importance to the book.⁶ Though Nissim Amzallag has facilitated some discussion of the feast in Ezra-Nehemiah, her purpose is not to unravel the festival’s rhetorical purposes.⁷ Rather, she intends to pinpoint the differences in how the festival is celebrated in Ezra and in Nehemiah as part of advancing her thesis that two distinct authors are behind the books.

The purpose of this article is twofold: first, I want to explore why the Feast of Tabernacles is of such importance to Ezra-Nehemiah that it takes the trophy position of being the first festival celebrated by the returnees. How does the celebration of this feast advance the themes of the book, and how does it interact with the immediate context of Ezra 3? Second, I want to examine the way the Feast of Tabernacles is celebrated. Why are the sacrifices the focus of the celebration in Ezra 3? I will also compare how the feast is celebrated in Ezra 3 and in Nehemiah 8.

³ Scripture quotations are from the NIV unless otherwise noted.

⁴ John E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, WBC 4 (Dallas: Word, 1992), 388.

⁵ Donna Laird, *Negotiating Power in Ezra-Nehemiah*, AIL 26 (Atlanta: SBL, 2016), 118.

⁶ H. G. Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, WBC 16 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 46; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988), 98; Jacob M. Myers, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, AB 14 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1995), 26; Gregory Goswell, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, EP Study Commentary (Darlington, UK: EP Books, 2013), 86; Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, TOTC 12 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), 51; David J. Shepherd and Christopher J. H. Wright, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, THOTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 18.

⁷ Nissim Amzallag, “The Authorship of Ezra and Nehemiah in Light of Differences in Their Ideological Background,” *JBL* 137.2 (2018): 271–97.

I. THE PURPOSE AND FUNCTION OF THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES IN EZRA 3

1. *The celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles helps define the identity and mission of the returnees.* Celebrated at the “turn of the year” (Exod 34:22), the Feast of Tabernacles, as Joseph Blenkinsopp observes, marks a new beginning.⁸ Ezra 3 ushers in a new epoch. Cyrus king of Persia has already issued an edict in writing that Jewish people could return to Jerusalem. Chapter 1 shows that Cyrus’s edict has been followed to the letter.⁹ The people are prepared to go up to Jerusalem to build the “house of Yahweh” (בית יהוה) (1:5).¹⁰ The material for the rebuilding has been supplied just as Cyrus commanded (1:6). Chapter 2 sees Cyrus’s edict carried out as the Jewish returnees—composed of laity (2:2–35), cultic officials (2:36–58), and those who could not prove their Israelite genealogy (2:59–63)—make their way home. The chapter ends with the returnees arriving at Jerusalem and then settling in their towns.

Ezra 3 signals the commencement of this epoch as the returnees bring out their shovels to commence the rebuilding of the house of God. After the altar has been built, the returnees celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. By making the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles their first collective festival together, two purposes are served. First, the Feast of Tabernacles gives identity to the returnees. The list of returnees presented in Ezra 2 is anything but exemplary. Relative to the book of Numbers, where 603,550 Israelites came out of Egypt, the 42,360 returning in Ezra is trifling. Ezra 2:68 tells us that “some of the heads of the families” give freewill offerings to the building of God’s house. Such offerings are paltry compared with Exodus 36:3–4, where people gave freewill offerings morning after morning until there was more than needed to do God’s work. Moreover, Ezra 2:62 informs us that some of priests are not sure of their own cultic lineage.

To such a community that has been struggling with their own legitimacy and their worthiness to build the house of God, the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles shows continuity with the past. It gives affirmation that the returning Jews are *indeed* Israel, God’s chosen people.¹¹ They are celebrating the feast just as their ancestors prior to the exile did. The Feast of Sukkot, as George W. MacRae points out, is one of the national markers of Israel.¹² Not only is it one of the three feasts that require the attendance of every Israelite male, but the keeping of the festival is connected to the promises related to the land of Israel (Exod 34:22, 23). The Feast

⁸ Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 98

⁹ Goswell, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 81.

¹⁰ Tamara Cohn Eskenazi has shown that בית יהוה does not refer to the temple alone. Rather, it encompasses the city of Jerusalem as a whole. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah*, SBLMS 26 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 53.

¹¹ Sara Japhet has offered a convincing argument for the reason that the returned exiles constitute Israel in Ezra-Nehemiah. Sara Japhet, “People and Land in the Restoration Period,” in *Das Land Israel im biblischer Zeit: Jerusalem-Symposium 1981 der Hebräischen Universität und der Georg-August Universität*, ed. Georg Strecker, GTA 25 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1983), 112–18.

¹² George W. MacRae, “The Meaning and Evolution of the Feast of Tabernacles,” *CBQ* 22.3 (1960): 251.

of Tabernacles is also intrinsically connected to the story of Israel's history, particularly the exodus. Leviticus 23:43 paints a vivid picture of the time God's people lived in temporary shelters in the wilderness when God brought them out of Egypt.¹³

Second, the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles helps the newly reconstituted community understand the importance of their mission. The Feast of Sukkoth is not only associated with the exodus, it is also linked to the Solomonic temple. The connections between the constructions of the first and second temples, as outlined by Adrian Reynolds, are prodigious.¹⁴ The observation of the Feast of Tabernacles in Ezra 3:4 is also celebrated at the first temple's dedication (2 Chr 7:8). The building material of both temples—cedar logs—come from the same source, Lebanon (Ezra 3:8; 2 Chr 3:2). The giving of food, drink, and olive oil to the people of Tyre and Sidon in exchange for cedar logs in 1 Kings 5:11 is mimicked in Ezra 3:7.¹⁵ The people sing a similar song at both dedications (Ezra 3:11; 2 Chr 5:13). Gregory Goswell further points out that setting the age qualification of the supervising Levites at twenty years old and older (Ezra 3:8) matches the age qualification set by David for the Levites in 1 Chronicles 23:24–32 and 31:17.¹⁶

With the volley of construction activities, including the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles, paralleling the events associated with the construction of Solomon's temple, the author of Ezra-Nehemiah underlines the importance of the returnees' assignment. As Solomon was called to build the first temple, the returning Jews share the same honor and privilege, entrusted with the lofty project of building the house of God as set out in Cyrus's edict.

2. *The celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles gives definition to the presence of God in Ezra 3.* The Feast of Tabernacles is a two-way street that allows Israel to look back to the past to God's redemption through the exodus and to look forward to a future establishment of God's kingdom.¹⁷ Jeffrey Rubenstein explains: "The annual observance of Sukkot [has] ... a substantive eschatological component. That is, the Jews observing Sukkot understood the festival to prefigure life in the eschatological age, and actively sought to bring the blessed future era through prayer and ritual."¹⁸ Gerry Wheaton opines that by the time of the Second Temple period, there was already an eschatological component to the feast.¹⁹

Such an eschatological understanding of the feast is addressed by Zechariah. The prophet believes that at an appointed time, surviving nations will congregate in

¹³ Mark A. Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, IBC (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 23.

¹⁴ Adrian Reynolds, *Teaching Ezra: From Text to Message* (London: Christian Focus, 2018), 93–95.

¹⁵ Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 68

¹⁶ Goswell, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 89.

¹⁷ Gregory Goswell, "The Absence of a Davidic Hope in Ezra-Nehemiah," *TrinJ* 33 n.s. (2012): 30.

¹⁸ Jeffrey Rubenstein, "Sukkot, Eschatology and Zechariah 14," *RB* 103.2 (1996): 163

¹⁹ Gerry Wheaton, *The Role of Jewish Feasts in John's Gospel*, SNTSMS 162 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 129.

Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles (Zech 14:16–17).²⁰ Similarly, Amos anticipates a future where God will restore David’s “fallen shelter” (such as Jerusalem) and it will house the remnant of Edom and all nations that bear God’s name (Amos 9:11–12).²¹

When this eschatological Feast of Tabernacles is celebrated, God will cause his people to dwell in tents (אהל). However, such tents will no longer be made of “palms, willows, and leafy trees” (Lev 23:40). Rather, these tents will be symbolic; they will represent God’s protective presence over those in Jerusalem. For in the eschatological state of salvation, God’s “tent” (אהל) will be “God’s protection of Zion as a cultic centre.”²² Such a view is espoused by the prophet Isaiah, who believes that future Zion will be covered with “a cloud of smoke by day and a glow of flaming fire by night; over everything the glory will be a canopy” (Isa 4:5). Both cloud and fire are symbolic of God’s protecting presence (Exod 14:19–20, 24–25; Ps 105:39). Isaiah 33:20 refers to God’s protective presence in Zion (interestingly called “the city of our appointed feasts”) that makes it “an immovable tent” (אהל). Moreover, H. G. M. Williamson points out that God’s presence in his sanctuary is also often referred to as a tent (Ps 27:5; 61:5 [4]).²³

These references show that among the various writers of these biblical books there is a chorus of belief in a future restoration of the Feast of Tabernacles where God’s protective presence will be the “tent” (אהל) for his people. Such a time has begun in Ezra 3. This explains why mention is made of the people erecting temporary booths (סכה) as part of the celebration, especially when there is such an assiduous attempt by the leaders to abide by the Law of Moses closely. Ezra 3 is implying that this eschatological feast has already begun. God’s protective presence is now over his people; God himself is the people’s “booth” (סכה).

Such a reading sheds light on two puzzles within the chapter. First, Ezra 3:3 informs us that “despite their fear of the peoples around them,” the Jewish returnees continue to build the altar so that they can celebrate the Feast of Sukkot.²⁴ How can the Jewish community be so confident in the face of opposition? The text does not tell us. But read within the context of the eschatological Feast of Tabernacles,

²⁰ Walter Harrelson, “The Celebration of the Feast of Booths according to Zech XIV 16–21,” in *Religions in Antiquity: Essays in Memory of Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough*, ed. Jacob Neusner, SHR 14 (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 88–96, esp. 92.

²¹ Kenneth E. Pomykala, “Jerusalem as the Fallen Booth of David in Amos 9:11,” in *God’s Word for Our World, Volume 1: Biblical Studies in Honor of Simon John De Vries*, ed. J. Harold Ellens et al., JSOTSup 388 (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 275–93.

²² Gregory Goswell, “David in the Prophecy of Amos,” *VT* 61.2 (2011): 243–57, esp. 252.

²³ H. G. M. Williamson, *Variations on a Theme: King, Messiah and Servant in the Book of Isaiah* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1998), 61.

²⁴ Paul Byun has challenged the common scholarly understanding that the translation of Ezra 3:3a should indicate that the returnees built the altar “because they were in dread of the neighbouring peoples.” Arguing from the perspective of the context and the motive of building altars in the OT, Byun suggests that the better interpretation of Ezra 3:3a should be that they built the altar “despite the threats of the neighboring peoples.” Paul Byun, “Building an Altar Despite Animosity: A Literary Defense of the Concessive Reading of Ezra 3:3a,” *CBQ* 82.1 (2020): 38–47.

the answer becomes apparent. The presence of God dwelling among them gave the people fortitude to persevere despite the opposition coming from their neighbors.

Second, with the penchant the author of Ezra-Nehemiah has to pattern the building of the second temple after that of the first, why is there no mention of the glory of the Lord? Second Chronicles 7:1–2 informs us that at the consecration of the first temple, the glory of the Lord so fills the temple that even the priests cannot enter. Yet Ezra 3 makes no reference to the glory of the Lord. Adrian Reynolds observes, “In the first temple consecration the covenant song was sung and the glory descended on the Ark in the Holy of Holies. Now in this second temple consecration the same covenant song is sung and nothing happens.”²⁵

Read within the context that the eschatological Feast of Tabernacles has commenced, God’s presence is no longer restricted to the precincts of the temple. Rather, God’s presence or his “tent” (אהל) now stretches over all the returnees. Such good news is thus the cause of celebration expressed through a cacophony of exuberant and joyful praise coming from some of God’s people (Ezra 3:11).

Nevertheless, this excitement is not universally shared by the returned community. Ezra 3:12 tells us that “many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud” (בכה). Kristin De Troyer adds, “The emphasis is on bitter weeping.”²⁶ Scholars such as David Clines, Gregory Goswell, and H. G. M. Williamson have suggested that the older priests, Levites, and family heads are disappointed because the second temple is not as glorious as the first.²⁷ Proponents of this view have often cited Haggai 2:3 as scriptural support. However, one should be reticent about harnessing Haggai 2:3, for when the prophet Haggai comments that the second temple is not as glorious as its former counterpart, he compares temples that were fully constructed and standing. At this point in Ezra 3, however, the second temple has not yet been built; only the foundation was laid. Thus, it may be premature to compare the two temples based on their appearances.²⁸ Also unwarranted is the view that the older priests, Levites, and family heads are disappointed because the size of the foundation of the second temple is far smaller than the first. A comparison of the dimensions of the two temples in 1 Kings 6:2 and Ezra 6:3 reveals that the second temple is in fact wider than the first.²⁹

Rather, the older priests and Levites and family heads are weeping because they are unwilling to believe that the eschatological Feast of Tabernacles has commenced, such that God’s presence has already tabernacled among them. They are still pining for the past, longing to see the glory of the Lord as in Solomon’s time.

²⁵ Reynolds, *Teaching Ezra*, 98.

²⁶ Kristin De Troyer, “‘Sounding Trumpets with Loud Shouts’: Emotional Responses to Temple Building: Ezra and Esdras,” in *Ancient Jewish Prayers and Emotions: Emotions Associated with Jewish Prayers in and Around the Second Temple*, ed. Stefan C. Reif and Renate Egger-Wenzel, DCLS 26 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015), 45.

²⁷ Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 101; Goswell, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 92; Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 48.

²⁸ Peter R. Ackroyd, *The Chronicler in His Age*, JSOTSup 101 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 145.

²⁹ Reynolds, *Teaching Ezra*, 96.

Unbelief about the nature of the presence of God is still rampant, or, to borrow Ched Spellman's metaphor, the shadow of sin still trails each and every step of restoration.³⁰ Sin still runs like a scarlet hue across this otherwise promising tapestry. Though God's restoration has begun, signaled by the commencement of the eschatological Feast of Tabernacles, the exile is still far from over.³¹

3. *The Feast of Tabernacles incorporates Gentiles into reconstituted Israel.* No other festival in Israel shows God's inclusiveness of Gentiles more than the Feast of Tabernacles. The feast is singled out in Ezra 3 because it has "universal repercussions, so that for the nations to participate meant they too have a place in God's final act of salvation."³²

As early as in the book of Deuteronomy, foreigners (והגר) have been a part of the invitation list to celebrate Sukkot (Deut 16:14). In the dedication of the first temple, not only is the Feast of Tabernacles celebrated, but during the festival, Solomon prays that God will hear the prayers of the foreigner (והגר) who "prays toward the house" (1 Kgs 8:41–43, 2 Chr 6:32–33).

The most explicit reference to the inclusion of foreigners is found in Zechariah 14. In this chapter, we are placed in the midst of a battle in which the nations are destroying Jerusalem. At the last possible moment, God steps in with his heavenly retinue. After defeating the enemies, God crushes the Mount of Olives and then re-creates Jerusalem. He goes on to flatten the countryside so that Mount Zion stands above the land. Out of Zion will flow a stream of living waters to fertilize the entire country. God will be the Lord over the entire earth.

The nations will acknowledge God's kingship by pilgrimaging to Jerusalem where they will celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. "There will be no rain" for nations who fail to make the trip (Zech 14:17). The force of such a sanction for an agrarian culture is devastating; the withholding of rain is a death penalty.³³ Projected into eschatological time, Gentiles and Jews, who are in obeisance to God's kingship, will celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles together. This celebration will become the test of their faith.

By positioning the feast as the first collective activity, Ezra 3 is preparing us for the theme of the inclusion of Gentiles in God's reconstituted Israel. As remarked by Peter Lau, the theme of Gentile inclusivity will resurface in Ezra-Nehemiah, most prominently in the Passover ceremony of Ezra 6:19–21 and the community pledge following the reading of the Torah in Nehemiah 10:29[28].³⁴ In these two passages, foreigners who have been separated from the "peoples of the land" are welcomed to join with the community of Israel in following Yahweh ex-

³⁰ Ched Spellman, "Nehemiah's New Shadow: Reading and Rereading the Ezra-Nehemiah Narrative," *Southeastern Theological Review* 9.1 (2018): 3–22.

³¹ For more on this view, see Gary E. Schnittjer, "The Bad Ending of Ezra-Nehemiah," *BSac* 173.689 (2016): 32–56; Joshua E. Williams, "Promise and Failure: Second Exodus in Ezra-Nehemiah," in *Reverberations of the Exodus in Scripture*, ed. R. Michael Fox (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014), 74–93.

³² Konrad R. Schaefer, "The End of the Book of Zechariah: A Commentary," *RB* 100.2 (1993): 227.

³³ MacRae, "Meaning and Evolution of the Feast of Tabernacles," 269.

³⁴ Peter H. W. Lau, "Gentile Incorporation into Israel in Ezra-Nehemiah?," *Bib* 90 (2009): 356–73. See also Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 85, and Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 68.

clusively. Lau writes, “While the bulk of [Ezra-Nehemiah] constructs an almost impenetrable boundary for gentiles, this verse [Ezra 6:21], along with its counterpart in Neh 10:29[28] hints that membership may be granted on religious, not just genealogical grounds.”³⁵

A wave of scholars, such as Jacob Milgrom, Noga Ayali-Darshan, and Håkan Ulfsgård, have stated that the sacrifices of the Feast of Sukkot are symbolic of the nations.³⁶ The law in Numbers 29:12–34 stipulates that two rams, fourteen yearling lambs, and a goat be sacrificed each day of the festival; thirteen bulls are to be sacrificed on the first day, twelve on the second, eleven on the third, ten on the fourth, and so forth. Altogether, the law requires the sacrifice of seventy bulls. The seventy bulls, argues Ayali-Darshan, are representative of “all the nations of the world.”³⁷ Such an association is certainly affirmed by later Jewish tradition: “R. Eleazar stated, To what do those seventy bullocks [that were offered during the seven days of the Festival] correspond? To the seventy nations . . . when the Temple was in existence the altar atoned for them” (b. Sukkah 5.55b).³⁸

However, such a message of inclusiveness, is not universally embraced by the Jewish returnees. The people’s xenophobia, which will become full-blown later in the book, is hinted at in Ezra 3:11.³⁹ After the foundation of the temple is laid, verse 10 recounts how the cultic leaders break into worship. The priests with their trumpets and the Levites with their cymbals begin to sing. Two details about this worship session are worth noting. First, we are told that the song they sing is “prescribed by David” (יְדִי דָוִד) (v. 10). Second, we are given the content of the song: “He is good; his love (חַסֵּד) toward Israel endures forever” (v. 11).

The refrain “He is good; his love (חַסֵּד) endures forever,” as Joseph Blenkinsopp observes, is the favorite worship chorus of the Chronicler.⁴⁰ This refrain, for instance, is sung twice when David brings the ark into Jerusalem (1 Chr 16:31, 34) and three more times at the dedication of the first temple (2 Chr 5:13; 7:3, 6). The same refrain is also Jehoshaphat’s marching anthem in his battle against the Ammonites, Moabites, and Meunites (2 Chr 20:22).

³⁵ Lau, “Gentile Incorporation,” 372.

³⁶ Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 247; Noga Ayali-Darshan, “The Seventy Bulls Sacrificed at Sukkot (Num 29:12–34) in Light of a Ritual Text from Emar (*Emar 6,373*),” *VT* 65.1 (2015): 1–11; Håkan Ulfsgård, *The Story of Sukkot: The Setting, Shaping, and Sequel of the Biblical Feast of Tabernacles*, BGBE 34 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 90.

³⁷ Ayali-Darshan, “The Seventy Bulls,” 4.

³⁸ For the widespread tradition concerning the correspondence between the seventy sacrifices and the seventy nations in Jewish traditions, see Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *The History of Sukkot during the Second Temple and Rabbinic Periods*, BJS 302 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 298–300.

³⁹ On the issue of the Jewish returnees and their relationships with their Gentile neighbors within Ezra-Nehemiah, see Brian Rainey, “‘Their Peace or Prosperity’: Biblical Concepts of Hereditary Punishment and the Exclusion of Foreigners in Ezra-Nehemiah,” *JAJ* 6.2 (2015): 158–81; Peter R. Bedford, “Diaspora: Homeland Relations in Ezra-Nehemiah,” *VT* 52.2 (2002): 147–65; Saul M. Olyan, “Purity Ideology in Ezra-Nehemiah as a Tool to Reconstitute the Community,” *JSJ* 35.1 (2004): 1–16; Hyam Maccoby, “Holiness and Purity: The Holy People in Leviticus and Ezra-Nehemiah,” in *Reading Leviticus: A Conversation with Mary Douglas*, ed. John F. A. Sawyer, JSOTSup 227 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 153–70.

⁴⁰ Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 101.

In the songbook largely “prescribed by David” (דִּי דָוִד), the refrain appears in various psalms, particularly Psalm 118 and 136. In the latter psalm, the refrain appears twenty-six times within the chapter itself. Both psalms share a similar narrative plot: the psalmists speak of how they are swarmed by enemies, how God intervenes for them, and how God brings renewal. Psalm 118 envisions that the renewal will include the city gates of Jerusalem being flung open so that all the righteous may enter. Psalm 136 ends with a renewed vision of God’s providence, as he provides for all of his creation, including the animals and the peoples of all nations. In commenting on the conclusion of Psalm 136, Jacob Bazak writes, “The psalm concludes with another praise of God, a praise which refers to his providence, not only to the people of Israel, but to all creatures—animals as well as human beings.”⁴¹

While the refrain, particularly in the Psalms, speaks of God’s unreserved welcome for all nations to return to him, this is not the desire of the returnees. Ezra 3:11 has amended the lyrics of the popular chorus by the addition of the words: “towards Israel.” Instead of praising God for extending his “steadfast love” (חַסֵּד) towards all peoples, the returnees are claiming God’s “steadfast love” (חַסֵּד) for themselves only.⁴² When “the peoples” of other nations (lit. “the peoples of the land”) are mentioned in Ezra 3:3, they are portrayed as adversaries who instill fear into the Jewish returnees.

II. THE MANNER IN WHICH THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES IS CELEBRATED IN EZRA 3 AND NEHEMIAH 8

What is also intriguing is the manner in which the Feast of Tabernacles is observed in Ezra 3. The various accounts in the Pentateuch present an array of activities associated with the feast’s celebration.⁴³ These include the celebration of the harvest, the cessation of work, the offering of sacrifices, the reading of Torah, and the building and inhabiting of booths. Most puzzling is that other than the emphasis on the offering of the sacrifices, Ezra 3 makes no reference to any of the other celebrative events. In order to understand why the author of Ezra-Nehemiah chooses to single out only one item from a litany of festive activities, we have to situate Ezra 3 within the larger context of Ezra-Nehemiah.

The Feast of Tabernacles is mentioned twice within Ezra-Nehemiah, in Ezra 3 and Nehemiah 8. Jacob Wright is right to suggest that both accounts of the feast are strategically placed.⁴⁴ Ezra 3 is situated right at the commencement of the book, right before the construction of the temple. Nehemiah 8 is bookended at the final section of the book, right after the completion of the house of God.⁴⁵ Significantly, both Ezra 3 and Nehemiah 8 are preceded by almost the same lengthy list of re-

⁴¹ Jacob Bazak, “The Geometric-Figurative Structure of Psalm CXXXVI,” *VT* 35.2 (1985): 137.

⁴² Laird, *Negotiating Power*, 117.

⁴³ Exod 23:16; Lev 23:34–36, 39–47; Num 29; Deut 16:13–15.

⁴⁴ Jacob L. Wright, “Writing the Restoration: Compositional Agenda and the Role of Ezra in Nehemiah 8,” *JHS* 7 (2007): 20.

⁴⁵ Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose*, 95.

turnees. Even the opening words of both accounts are strikingly similar: Ezra 3:1 begins at the seventh month with Israelites settled in their towns, where the people (עם) gather “as one man” (כַּאִישׁ אֶחָד) in Jerusalem. Similarly, Nehemiah 8:1 begins at the seventh month with the Israelites settled in their towns, where the people (עם) gather as “one man” (כַּאִישׁ אֶחָד) at the front of the Water Gate.

However, there are also striking differences between the two accounts. Ezra 3 is specifically situated in Jerusalem, where the activities all hover around the altar within the precincts of what is to be the second temple. Meanwhile, Nehemiah 8 is situated at the front of the Water Gate, outside the temple precincts in the eastern side of the city.⁴⁶

Of note also are the personalities mentioned in both accounts of the feast. Ezra 3 is focused on the cultic personnel (specifically, Joshua son of Jozadak, Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, and their fellow priests and Levites) and their responsibilities in the administration of the Feast of Tabernacles. Five times within the first six verses of Ezra 3 we are told that the religious leaders sacrificed the “burnt offerings” (עֹלָה). Not only do they offer the “burnt offerings,” but we are told twice that they offered the sacrifices “in accordance with the Law of Moses.” More cultic details follow when we are told that the newly constructed altar is on its “original bases” (מִכּוֹנֵתָיו). This means that the temple personnel placed the altar on the “precise spot that the altar had occupied before the Babylonians destroyed it along with the temple.”⁴⁷ This concern for continuity with Israel’s past is again repeated in the restoration of the temple, where care is taken to ensure that the details of the newly built temple correspond to those of the first temple (2:68; 5:15; 6:7).

It is therefore apparent that the concern of Ezra 3 is to present the temple personnel as agents of God’s restoration. By focusing on the sacrifices offered for the Feast of Tabernacles, Ezra 3 shows us that these priests and Levites are not only abiding by the details of the Torah, but they have a desire to continue the legacy of Israel’s history. This, however, is not the end of the story. In attaching another celebration near the ending of Ezra-Nehemiah, the author is showing us that it is not just the temple personnel who are involved in God’s restoration, but the laity as well.

While the Feast of Tabernacles in Ezra 3 is celebrated in the temple precincts of Jerusalem, the same feast is celebrated at the Water Gate in Nehemiah 8. The shift in location marks a shift from the sacred precincts to a more accessible and public location. This is to ensure that no one, especially the women (who are mentioned twice in the first three verses), is barred from the celebration.⁴⁸

Unlike in Ezra 3 where the priests and the Levites are the only participants being mentioned, Nehemiah 8 lists among the assembly “men, women, and all who understand.” According to Tamara Cohn Eskenazi the word “people” (עם) appears

⁴⁶ Millar Burrows, “Nehemiah 3:1–32 as a Source for the Topography of Ancient Jerusalem,” *AASOR* 14 (1933–1934): 115–40.

⁴⁷ Goswell, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 85.

⁴⁸ Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 297.

thirteen times in the first twelve verses of the chapter; while the expression “all the people” is repeated nine times.⁴⁹ The focus, as Arvid Kapelrud puts it, is “upon the fact that it is the people themselves who take the initiative.”⁵⁰

Lest we think of the lay people as passive observers, Stan K. Evers is right in pointing out that the people function more as leaders than even Ezra himself.⁵¹ Just as the cultic leaders are active in the building of the altar and the administration of the sacrifices, the people tell (ויאמרו) Ezra to bring the law of Moses (Neh 8:1). Coterminal with the reading of the law is a list of seven activities as the people stand up, lift their hands, shout “Amen! Amen!,” bow down, worship, and bow with their faces on the ground (v. 6). There is hardly a moment of stillness in this activity-packed chapter.

Though the Torah plays an important role in both passages, it serves different purposes. In Ezra 3, the law functions as a checklist to ensure that the right sacrifices are carried out, while Nehemiah 8 is focused on the reading of Torah. Indeed, twelve verses in the chapter are devoted to the reading of the Torah. Jacob Wright further notes that just as the sacrifices are offered “each day” (יום ביום) in Ezra 3:4, the Torah is read “day after day” (יום ביום) in Nehemiah 8:18.⁵²

The reading of the law is not an end in itself in Nehemiah 8. Rather, the people read the law with a “clear intention of putting it in practice.”⁵³ Instead of being taught by Ezra, the people in their own reading of the law realize three actions that are needed in keeping the Festival of Tabernacles: they needed to (1) live in temporary shelters, (2) proclaim this message of joy, and (3) spread this message throughout their towns and in Jerusalem.

Nehemiah 8 features a joyous note as verse 12 tells us how the people go away to eat and to drink, to send out portions of food, and to celebrate with great joy. If the goal of the feast is to “rejoice before the Lord” (Lev 23:40), the people certainly have obtained it. This is in stark contrast to the variegated response associated with the first celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles, where “many of the older priests, Levites, and family heads” are weeping amidst some rejoicing (Ezra 3:12).

Therefore, the two Feasts of Tabernacles are strategically placed in Ezra-Nehemiah to tell the story of the restoration of Israel. The first mention of the feast in Ezra 3 begins the narrative with the emphasis on the religious leaders celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles by bringing in the various sacrifices as prescribed by the Law of Moses. The contagiousness of such reformation spreads to the laity in such a way that by Nehemiah 8 the people themselves “decide to celebrate Sukkot rather than being ordered by Ezra.”⁵⁴ Such a decision is exemplified by their

⁴⁹ Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose*, 97.

⁵⁰ Arvid Kapelrud, *The Question of Authorship in the Ezra Narrative: A Lexical Investigation* (Oslo: Dybwad, 1944), 15.

⁵¹ Stan K. Evers, *Doing a Great Work: Ezra and Nehemiah Simply Explained*, Welwyn Commentary Series (Darlinton, UK: Evangelical Press, 1996), 157.

⁵² Wright, “Writing the Restoration,” 22.

⁵³ Goswell, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 292.

⁵⁴ Lester L. Grabbe, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, OTR (London: Routledge, 1988), 55.

eagerness to listen to the Torah with the intention of acting it out in obedience. The joyous celebration, the living of the people in temporary booths, and the spreading of the good news of the restoration paint an encouraging picture that restoration has not only begun but has spread from the leaders to “all the people.”

III. CONCLUSION

It is not coincidental that, according to Ezra 3, the first collective festival the returnees celebrate together is the Feast of Tabernacles. The feast details the nature of God’s restoration of his people in at least three ways. First, the festival assures the returnees of their identity. They are the reconstituted Israel, where they share the same story and promises as their ancestors prior to the exile. Such identification also empowers their mission of rebuilding the “house of God.” As Solomon was called to build the first temple, the returning Jews now share the same honor and privilege. Second, the festival redefines the presence of God. No longer is God’s presence restricted to the precincts of the temple, but now God tabernacles among them. This presence gives them strength to face the animosity from their neighbors and a renewed reason for worship. Third, the feast anticipates the enlargement of God’s tent to include Gentiles into this newly reconstituted Israel.

Ezra 3 not only recounts the observation of the Feast of Tabernacles, but it also centers the celebration around the precision of the offerings in accord with the Law of Moses. This is to signify that the restoration has begun first and foremost with the cultic leaders and their desire to obey the Torah. By the end of Ezra-Nehemiah, the Feast of Tabernacles is celebrated once again, but this time the emphasis is on the laity. In Nehemiah 8, the lay people are the life of the party. They take the initiative to have the law read; they react enthusiastically to the reading of the Torah; and they are ready to live out what they have read.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ I would like to thank Dr. Gregory Goswell for encouraging me to write. I would like to dedicate this article to my late grandparents Mr. and Mrs. Lim Yeow Tong for teaching me to love the God of the Bible.