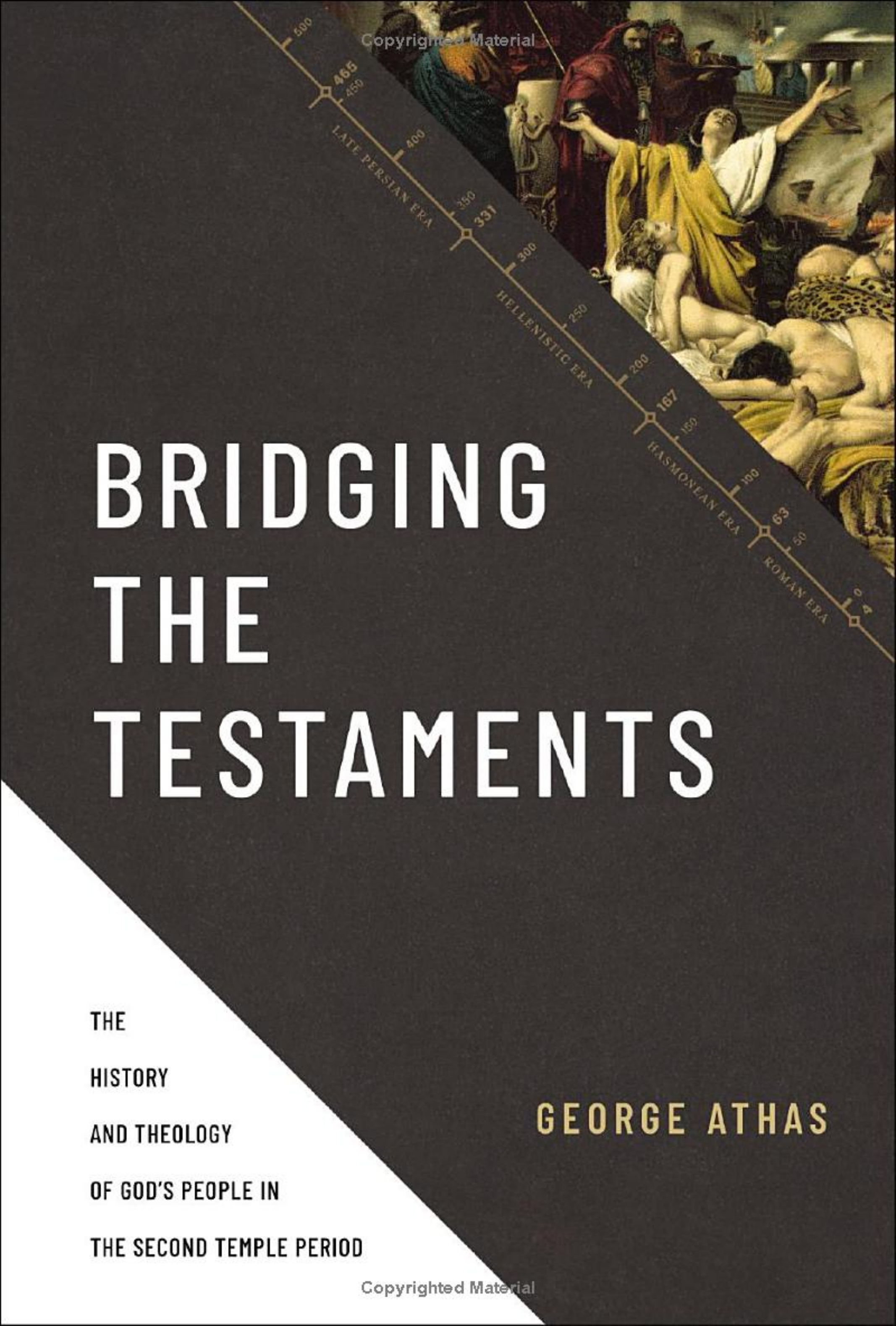


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BRIDGING THE TESTAMENTS

THE
HISTORY
AND THEOLOGY
OF GOD'S PEOPLE IN
THE SECOND TEMPLE PERIOD

GEORGE ATHAS

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For too long students of Scripture have jumped historically from the fall of Jerusalem to the birth of Jesus, skipping some of the key moments in the redemptive story and the key theological role that these wrongly named “intertestamental” years and texts play in biblical theology. George Athas invites us into this era and its literature, showing how the communities of the Second Temple as well as enduring exile continue the history of redemption that emerges with the same community gathered around the temple in the Gospels and Acts. Historically accurate, carefully presented, *Bridging the Testaments* is an extremely helpful invitation to what is for many unfortunately the “dark ages” of Jewish and biblical history.

— MARK J. BODA, professor of Old Testament,
McMaster Divinity College

In his volume *Bridging the Testaments*, Athas exposes the political, cultural, religious, economic, and social realities of the Second Temple period. Through a serious inquiry into biblical and extrabiblical literature written in Hebrew, Aramaic, Persian, Greek, and Latin, the author counters the notions that there was a cessation of Jewish literature that led to a silent intertestamental period. Athas provides an exhaustive description of major events under Persian, Hellenistic, Hasmonean, and Roman rules between 597 BC and 4 BC. As stated by the author, “these centuries are laden with fascinating twists and turns, close calls, and a cast of enthralling characters.” This masterpiece bridges the gap between the worlds of the Old and New Testaments and paints a clear picture of Second Temple Judaism during the centuries that precede the advent of the Messiah. Highly recommended.

—HÉLÈNE DALLAIRE, Earl S. Kalland professor of
Old Testament and Semitic languages and chair of
Old Testament department, Denver Seminary

This is a winsomely written yet carefully nuanced account of the historical landscape of Judea in the Second Temple period. It is unburdened by excessive footnotes, yet clearly informed by extensive research. Athas helps us hear how passages both from the Jewish Scriptures and extrabiblical texts spoke to people in their lived contexts during this period—and makes some provocative suggestions for how several Old Testament texts are actually *part* of the bridge between the testaments. I highly recommend this book to those looking for a solid immersion into the story of the deceptively blank page that separates Malachi from Matthew.

—DAVID A. DESILVA, trustees’ distinguished professor of
New Testament and Greek, Ashland Theological Seminary

George Athas has done us a great service in writing *Bridging the Testaments*. This is an outstanding book—it is interesting, well-written, erudite, and relevant for anyone seeking to understand either the postexilic period or the social, historical, and religious background for the New Testament. Providing more information and going more in depth than most other New Testament background studies, this volume will serve as a valuable textbook for any college or graduate class seeking to understand the intertestamental period and its impact on the New Testament. Furthermore, even if it is not required for class, it is a great read.

—J. DANIEL HAYS, senior professor of Old Testament,
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

Taking a traditional critical viewpoint, Athas provides a useful synthesis of the biblical texts and the extrabiblical sources to weave together an important review of these diverse elements. The work is worthy of consideration as a means to understand the complex picture of these centuries.

—RICHARD S. HESS, distinguished professor of Old Testament
and Semitic languages, Denver Seminary

With great detail, nuance, and insight, George Athas walks the reader through a remarkable expanse of history and the way it affected the growth and reception of Scripture. He shows how the texts transmitted within the Bible provide ways to cope with world-changing events carrying great theological relevance both for modern readers and for the ancient communities who experienced them. This book contributes enormously to a thoughtful engagement of the biblical tradition as a cornerstone of the human reckoning with history.

—MARK LEUCHTER, professor of ancient Judaism,
Temple University

Even Old and New Testament experts often ignore or don't pay sufficient attention to the period *between* the Testaments. George Athas provides a detailed yet accessible account of this fascinating period that helps us understand the biblical material more fully. His presentation of the Persian, Greek, and Roman periods with a focus on Judah is riveting and insightful. I recommend this book to all who are interested in biblical history and theology.

—TREMPER LONGMAN III, distinguished scholar and professor
emeritus of biblical studies, Westmont College

Bridging the Testaments is an absolutely wonderful volume! Professor George Athas covers this crucial period so very well—this volume is thorough, carefully documented, very well written, and provides everything that students of Scripture should know about this pivotal period. I highly recommend it for scholars and students alike.

—CHRISTOPHER ROLLSTON, professor of Northwest Semitic languages and literature, George Washington University

Sooner or later all students of the Bible must consider the relationship between what we call the Old and the New Testaments. The relationship is complex, rich, and important. There is continuity (the God of Israel is the God and Father of Jesus) and discontinuity (there *is* something “new” about the New Testament). All this may be profitably explored from various angles. In this impressive and stimulating volume George Athas explores chiefly the *historical* connections between the Testaments. How did the “world” of the Old Testament become the “world” of the New? Dr. Athas dispels popular misunderstandings (for example, that there were 400 years of prophetic “silence” between the Testaments) and introduces readers to outstanding characters and world-changing events unfamiliar to most of us. Some of his suggestions will raise further questions for readers, but all will benefit from Dr. Athas’s deep grasp of his subject. The careful reading of this book will enrich the reader’s understanding of the message of the New Testament that has turned the world upside down.

—JOHN WOODHOUSE, former principal of Moore Theological College

In this extremely useful volume, George Athas provides an accessible, highly readable, and comprehensive guide to the crucial period covering the end of the Old Testament era up to the beginning of the New Testament. In a remarkable achievement, Athas successfully weaves the interpretation of biblical books dealing with that later period and essential elements of New Testament background into the broader tapestry of world history of the centuries that saw the rise and fall of the Persian and Hellenistic kingdoms and the rise of Rome. This is a book that will engage both scholars and students, while providing an essential reference work for years to come.

—IAN YOUNG, professor of biblical studies, Australian Catholic University



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IN THE SECOND TEMPLE PERIOD

GEORGE ATHAS

 **ZONDERVAN
ACADEMIC**

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*For my students past, present, and future,
and most especially for the students who
have sat in my Zechariah class.*

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1.1 THE RETURN TO JERUSALEM (539–515 BC)

1.1.1 THE RISE OF CYRUS

On 29 October, 539 BC, Cyrus, king of Persia, walked unopposed through the gates of Babylon and took possession of the greatest imperial city in the world. The Babylonian Empire had fallen. Two weeks earlier, he had defeated the unpopular Babylonian king, Nabonidus, in battle, leaving the imperial city open for capture. Prior to Cyrus, the Persians were an insignificant people who had only recently made the transition from nomadic to settled life in the mountains of what is today southwestern Iran. Yet within the space of eleven years (550–539 BC), Cyrus carved out an enormous empire along the frontiers of Babylon before striking at the heart of Babylon itself. The mountain dwellers of Persia surprisingly now possessed the biggest empire the world had ever seen.

The Persian conquest of Babylon represented a seismic socio-political change in the ancient Near East. Both the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires, which preceded Persia, had been built on policies of brutalization. Their kings intimidated smaller states into submission and dismantled them if they were opposed. A key method of such dismantling was forcible migration in which communities were uprooted from their homelands and settled in other territories. This attempted to annihilate the community's identity and make them dependent on their conquerors. Although the Persians were not averse to using brute force, their policies were generally more beneficent than their imperial predecessors. Rather than suppress the cultural identity of subject communities and their ties to their homelands, the Persians promoted them. This was, in part, necessitated by demographic realities. Both Assyria and Babylon were heavily populated, with the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers providing the lifeblood of their sophisticated cultures. By contrast, the mountain-dwelling Persians were fewer in number and less able to press their culture onto their more populous subjects. The Persians, therefore, took a more symbiotic approach to their imperialism so that their empire became truly multicultural.

Cyrus initiated this by permitting some conquered communities to

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collect the statues of their gods from the temple of Marduk in Babylon and return them to their temples in their respective homelands (538 BC). The temple of Marduk housed the paraphernalia of many such conquered gods. Nabonidus had also brought many more idols into Marduk's sanctuary in a bid to gain divine protection for Babylon against Cyrus. It evidently failed, and the attempt was lampooned in Isaiah 44:9–20. Cyrus's initial decree, preserved in the Cyrus Cylinder, related only to certain communities east and north of Babylon, but he issued a similar decree of repatriation for Judeans and the temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem (2 Chr 36:22–23; Ezra 1:1–4).

The Babylonians had deported numerous Judeans in 597 BC after Judah's king, Jehoiachin, surrendered during a siege. Judah rebelled again a decade later, and the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, razed its temple, removed the Davidic dynasty from power, and wiped out much of the remaining population. Meanwhile, the surviving Judean deportees lived in various settlements around Babylonia, including at one place named Judah Town (Akk. *al yabudu*), from which numerous archival documents give us a glimpse into the daily lives of exiled Judeans and their neighbors. By the time Cyrus took Babylon in 539 BC, Judeans had been living in these settlements for three generations. As is usually the case with migrants, the later generations born in Babylonia knew of their roots in Judah but saw Babylonia as their home. So, when Cyrus permitted Judeans to collect the vessels of Yahweh's temple and return to Jerusalem, few answered the call. Only the most ardent of devotees considered such a costly and perilous endeavor.

The few who went were led by Zerubbabel, the grandson of Jehoiachin and scion (“Sprig”) of the Davidic dynasty, and Joshua, the high priest.¹ They most likely did not depart from Babylon as soon as Cyrus issued his decree in 538 BC. The endeavor required considerable planning, finance, and a campaign of sorts to gather a viable quorum with the requisite skills to rebuild and start an entire community anew. In fact, indications are that they only arrived in Jerusalem about thirteen years later in ca. 525 BC.²

In the meantime, Cyrus died in 530 BC, and his son, Cambyses, succeeded

1. Ezra 1:8–11 says the temple vessels were given to Sheshbazzar, “the leader for Judah.” It is often thought that he took the vessels back to Jerusalem, but Ezra 1:11 is better understood as saying that he had the vessels taken to Jerusalem with those who returned, implying that he himself did not return. This reading helps demystify the confusion over Sheshbazzar's role, especially in relation to Zerubbabel.

2. Ezra 4:5, which mentions opposition that discouraged Judeans from building the temple, may imply the returnees arrived in Jerusalem before the death of Cyrus in 530 BC, but not necessarily. Such opposition may also be explained as occurring in Babylonia, causing the delay of the return throughout the reign of Cyrus. See also George Athas, “The Failure of Davidic Hope? Configuring Theodicy in the Book of the Twelve in Support of a Davidic Kingdom,” in *Theodicy and Hope in the Book of the Twelve*, ed. George Athas et al., LHOTS 705 (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 230–33.

him. Though disparaged as a madman by some ancient sources, Cambyses was evidently a competent ruler, as he managed to conquer most of Egypt between 525 and 522 BC. By adding this most lucrative of countries to the Persian realm, Cambyses pushed the empire's frontiers well beyond Judah, providing enough security for the intrepid few among the Judeans to make good their return.

1.1.2 PIONEERS IN JERUSALEM

The pioneering community in Jerusalem faced several challenges. Archaeology informs us that they numbered no more than about a thousand people.³ There were the challenges of maintaining an adequate workforce, acquiring resources, feeding a community, and dealing with suspicion and hostility from neighboring communities. Nonetheless, under Zerubbabel's leadership, they re-settled Jerusalem and prepared to build Yahweh's temple.

This was significant for two reasons. First, as the house of Yahweh, the temple was the hub of Judean religion. Without it, Judean identity was necessarily impaired. Second, the temple was the physical symbol of Yahweh's permanent covenant with the Davidic dynasty (cf. 2 Sam 7:11–16).⁴ It was not just a religious building but a political monument. It was the prerogative of the Davidic heir(s) to build and maintain Yahweh's temple, and this is what Zerubbabel intended to do. In so doing, he would be reinstating the Davidic covenant and sowing the seed for a future independent kingdom of Judah. As long as Persia ruled Judah, the dream of a restored Davidic kingdom could never be completed. But few imagined the Persians were there to stay long term, for they were not a traditional superpower. Most saw them simply as the ones who brought down the Babylonian Empire, much like the Medes, who had helped bring down Assyria before being swallowed up by Cyrus themselves. Persian rule was a mere novelty. How long could it possibly last?

That question became focused in 522 BC as crisis struck the Persian Empire. On his way back from Egypt, Cambyses was thrown from his horse

3. Cf. Oded Lipschits, "Achaemenid Imperial Policy, Settlement Processes in Palestine, and the Status of Jerusalem in the Middle of the Fifth Century B.C.E.," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period*, ed. Oded Lipschits and Manfred Oeming (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 30–34. The figure of 42,360 people in Ezra 2:64 is most likely a cumulative number of those who migrated to Judah between the initial return (ca. 525 BC) and the governorship of Nehemiah (458–ca. 433 BC) or perhaps even later (the genealogies of Neh 12 go down to the end of the Persian era). There is no reason to assume that all those listed in Ezra 2:2 formed a single wave of migration.

4. This is the primary difference between the portable tabernacle and the permanent structure of the temple.