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The Inspired List of Ezra 2 and the Human Register of Nehemiah 7



The portions of Scripture that are one of the most often attacked by atheists, Muslims and Bible bashers as “proving” that the Bible is not the inerrant words of **God** are the two contradictory lists of the numbers of those who returned from **Babylon** to **Jerusalem** during the time of **Ezra** and **Nehemiah**. In **Ezra Chapter 2** we find one list that is similar in many ways to that found in **Nehemiah Chapter 7**, but there are also many obvious differences, and it is these different numbers that have given rise to attacks on the Bible itself as being the inerrant word of **God**, and have caused many, even believers, to doubt the truth of our Holy Bible.

In **Ezra Chapter 2** and in **Nehemiah Chapter 7** there are about thirty-three family units that appear in both lists of **Israelites** returning from **Babylon** to **Judea**. Of these 33 family units listed in **Ezra** and **Nehemiah**, nineteen of the family units are identical, while fourteen show discrepancies in the number of members within the family units. Two of the discrepancies differ by 1, one differs by 4, two by 6, two differ by 9, another differs by 11, another two by 100, another by 201, another differs by 105, a further family differs by 300, and the largest difference is the figure for the sons of Azgad, a difference of 1,100 between the accounts of **Ezra 2** and **Nehemiah 7**.

Not only do many of the numbers not agree in each list, but there is a further

problem. Both **Ezra** and **Nehemiah** give the same total of the whole congregation as being **42,360**. But as one Bible scoffer has said: “We have a listing of the sub-clans that returned from the Captivity and the number of people in each. Out of approximately thirty-five sub-clans listed over half of the numbers are in disagreement. Furthermore, someone doesn’t know how to add very well because the totals are in error. **Ezra 2:64** says: **The whole congregation together was 42,360,** when one can see by easily adding the figures together that the total is 29,818. **Nehemiah 7:66** also says: **The whole congregation together was 42,360** when one need only add those figures to see that it’s actually 31,089. **Ezra** supposedly erred by 12,542, and **Nehemiah** by 11,271.”

There have been many attempts to reconcile these different numbers, but most of them seem to me to fall short of giving an adequate explanation. Unfortunately, most apologetic sites and books usually end up with the stated position that this is a case of “many scribal errors” in all Hebrew texts, and that “only the originals were inspired”. The end result is that they cave in to the Bible mockers and side with their view that there is no inerrant Bible in any language on the earth today.

Among the suggested ways to reconcile the different numbers, some believers have offered the explanation that the two censuses were taken at two different times, once at the beginning of the journey and the other at the end, or perhaps several years later. However a close reading of the texts shows that both lists are referring to the same event – **the children of the province that went up out of the captivity, whom Nebuchadnezzar had carried away into Babylon, and came again unto Jerusalem and Judah.**

They also tell us that some people may have enrolled their names on the list, then changed their minds and decided not to go after all, and that others later decided to go. They also suggest that some died on the way, and others were born, but that the total ended up being the same anyway – **42,360**.

The problem I have with this view is that none of this is stated in Scripture itself and it stretches the imagination to the breaking point to think that all these differences would end up giving us the same final number of **42,360**. None would die in most groups, but 1000 died in another. This is a little hard to believe. Neither does it explain the 12,000 to 13,000 people that are not numbered in either list.

So how do we explain these very real differences without denying the inerrancy of Scripture? First, when we look at the names, we find that

certain names are mentioned in alternate forms. The sages teach that the differences, generally speaking, are attributable to the changes over time. After all, it had been over 100 years since the inspired list of **Ezra** had been complied. Most of the differences can be explained because of a random process of corruption during the process of copying the text. Hebrew numbers are notorious for their difficulty in translation. It is important to understand that every letter of the 22-letter Hebrew alphabet has a numerical equivalent. Through the method called *gematria*, every letter of a word can be reduced to its numerical value.

Typically, when a Jewish scribe finished copying a line of Scripture, there was a total number for that line from the original document and he would add up all the numerical equivalent of his copy and it needed to be equal to the original or a mistake had been made somewhere. So if a word had the wrong letters (and consequently the wrong number) it could be translated as a different name or a variation of the same name. Errors in spelling names or copying numbers could easily creep in over a century. Furthermore, the scribes who kept the public records certainly updated them after the community was established in Jerusalem. When the list was updated, some of the people had died, and others who were too young when the list was first recorded had grown up and secured a place on the list.

Second, it is the men and not the women who are being counted. That is, unless the **women** are specifically mentioned as **they** are in both **Ezra 2:65** and **Nehemiah 7:67.** For **ADONAI** to give only the number of **men** in a group is very common both in the TaNaKh and the B'rit Chadashah. In the TaNaKh we read: **Then the Bnei-Yisra'el (the children of Isra'el) journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about 600,000 men on foot, as well as children (Exodus 12:37).** And in the New Covenant it says: **Now those eating were about 5,000 men** (Greek: *aner*)**, besides the women and children (Matthew 14:21)**. In addition, when we compare the same event recorded in both **Mark** and **Luke** we read: **Now there were 5,000 men** (Greek: *aner*) **who ate the loaves (Mark 6:44); for there were about 5,000 men** (Greek: *aner*) (**Luke 9:14).** The Greek word in all three gospel accounts is the word for **men** (Greek: *aner*), or **males** as opposed to general term that may include both male and female. Notice very carefully what it says at the beginning of both lists found in **Nehemiah 7:7** and in **Ezra 2:2**: **The number of the men** (Hebrew: *ish*, meaning *man* and not *woman*) **of the people of Isra'el: The sons of Pharaoh, 2,172**, etc.

By comparing one with the other, we see that only **the men** were counted in these two lists in **Ezra** and **Nehemiah**. Here are just a few examples: **the sons of**

Azmaveth in **Ezra 2:24** are **the men of Beth-Azmaveth** in **Nehemiah 7:28; the sons of Gibbar** in **Ezra 2:20** are **the sons of Gibeon** found in **Nehemiah 7:25**, and **the sons of Beth-Lehem** in **Ezra 2:21** are **the men of Beth-Lehem** in **Nehemiah 7:26**. There are two different Hebrew words used in the two lists. The one is *ben*, and means **sons**, and the other is *ish* which means **man**. There are distinct words for daughter (Hebrew: *beth*), and for woman (Hebrew: *ishshah*), and neither is used in either of the two lists.

The two principal differences to explain between these two lists are: First, the different numbers in several verses, and secondly, the differences between the total number in each list (**Ezra** differs by 12,542, and **Nehemiah** differs by 11,271) with the same total of **42,360** given in both.

Here is how we reconcile the differences in the two accounts: In **Ezra 2:1** we have a statement that indicates that the numbers found in **Ezra's** list is the true number of those who made up the different groups who left **Babylon** and journeyed to **Jerusalem**. The names and numbers in **Ezra** account are accurate. Here we read: **Now these are the people of the province** of **Judah who went up from the captives of the exile, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had taken captive to Babylon. They returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his town (Ezra 2:1).**

However, what we have recorded in **Nehemiah 7:5** is a list that was not the accurate and true number. **He** didn't discover the original inspired document because it no longer existed or was lost. Over 100 years had passed between **Ezra's** inspired list and **the register of the genealogy** discovered by **Nehemiah**. There we read these important words of **Nehemiah:**

"And I found a register (Hebrew: *sepher* meaning *a large book*) **of the genealogical record of those who formally returned. I found the following written there. . . "**

Nehemiah is merely reporting the numbers in the erroneously written **register he** found, but the true numbers were given by the inspiration of **the Ruach Ha'Kodesh** in **Ezra Chapter Two**. There are several things written in Scripture that are not true. For example, when the fool says: **There is no God (Psalm 14:1);** when the Adversary said to Eve in the Garden of Eden: **You shall not surely die (Genesis 3:4);** when **the Pharisees** say **Aren't we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed (John 8:48)?** And when the

Great Sanhedrin reached their decision regarding the Messiahship of **Christ**, and announced to **the Jews** of **Isra'el,** "**He is possessed by Beelzebub! By the prince of demons He is driving out demons"** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ, to see link click Ek – It is only by Beelzebub, the Prince of Demons, That This Fellow Drives Out Demons**). In the book of **Nehemiah** itself we read: **But the fifth time Sanballat sent his young aide to me, he had an open letter in his hand. In it was written, "It has been heard among the nations – and Geshem substantiates it – that you and the Jews are planning to revolt. That is why you are rebuilding the wall. Furthermore, according to these reports, you are to become their king and have even appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem saying, 'There is a king in Judah' (Nehemiah 6:5-7a)." What was written in the letter from Sanballat was not true, and neither was what was written in the register Nehemiah found.**

The second point of contention is the differing numbers listed in each account where the total is given as **42,360**. Some apologists tell us that the additional 12,542 may refer to the number of women or wives in the group, but this leaves us with only about one out of every three men being married. This is highly improbable. When others tell us it may refer to both the women and the children, their case gets even worse.

Rather than the explanations provided by most apologists, I think the difference in numbers can be accounted for by looking at the context. The difference in **Ezra**, the true account, is 12,542 persons. In both lists **the men** who constitute the different groups of **singers, sons of gatekeepers, Temple servants, sons of Solomon's servants, priests and Levites** totals about 30,000. The total number of **the whole congregation** of **42,360** refers to the 29,818 found in **Ezra**, plus the additional number of 12,542 **male children** who would eventually grow up to take their part in each of the groups of the adult **men** already listed.

This explains why the two lists are significantly different from each other over a century later. Ezra 2 contains the true, inspired numbers, while Nehemiah 7 was erroneously recorded by a fallible man. This also explains the difference in the total number, while at the same time upholding the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture.[283]