*"I Am Doing a Great Work"*

# Show Notes & Transcripts

## Podcast General Description:

followHIM: A *Come, Follow Me* Podcast with Hank Smith & John Bytheway

Do you ever feel that preparing for your weekly *Come, Follow Me* lesson falls short? Join hosts Hank Smith and John Bytheway as they interview experts to make your study for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' *Come, Follow Me* course not only enjoyable but original and educational. If you are looking for resources to make your study fresh, faithful, and fun--no matter your age--then join us every Wednesday.

## Podcast Episode Descriptions

### Part 1:

Why would people rebuilding God's temple start by building a wall against their own neighbors? Dr. Christina Olson explores Ezra and Nehemiah, the imperfect leaders, contested history, and hard boundary lines that bridge the Old and New Testaments.

### Part 2:

Dr. Christina Olson continues with Ezra and Nehemiah, tracing temple, law, and walls–and the beautifully imperfect work of becoming a covenant people again.

# Timecodes:

## Part 1 -

- 0:00 - Part 1 - Dr. Christina Olson
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- 4:15 Dr. Olson's bio
- 7:38 *Come, Follow Me Manual*
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- 9:45 Recap the exile and archeological evidence
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- 17:54 Why rebuild?
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- 0:00 Part 2 - Dr. Christina Olson
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- 51:48 End of Part 2 – Dr. Christina Olson

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## Biographical Information:

Dr. Christina Olson has a BA from BYU in Ancient Near Eastern Studies, a MA from ECU in Anthropology- Middle eastern Archaeology, and recently received her PhD in Religion-Old Testament from Baylor University. She served a mission in Russia and Kazakhstan, and was part of the piloting efforts to start having missionaries learn Kazakh alongside Russian. As an archaeologist and biblical scholar, she explores the intersection between textual and material evidence to understand the historical and literary contexts of the Hebrew Bible. Her research focuses on burial practices of the southern Levant from the Bronze Age through early Hellenistic periods. Christina's dissertation examined Persian-period burial practices in Judah, investigating how the relationship between postexilic communities and Iron age tombs related to the memory of the ancestral royal dead in biblical texts. She has worked on archaeological projects in Colorado, Italy, and Israel, including seven years at the site of Tell es-Safi/Gath, Israel. She was recently awarded a four-month research fellowship at the Albright Institute of Archaeology in Jerusalem to finish her first book, which is based upon her dissertation. She currently lives in Waco, TX with her husband, Peter, and their two very active boys.

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| Hank Smith: | 00:00:00 | Coming up in this episode on followHIM. |
| Dr. Christina Olson: | 00:00:03 | We look at these scriptures, we look at these figures, and we want them to be perfect. But the whole purpose of this gospel is no one can be perfect because if we're perfect, then how can God show us his great work through us? Because God is the only one that is perfect. He is the one that we're striving to be. |
| Hank Smith: | 00:00:24 | Hello, my friends. Welcome to another episode of followHIM. My name is Hank Smith. I'm your host. I'm here with John Bytheway, who is a ready scribe in the law of Moses. John, I read that in Ezra chapter seven, verse six, and I thought, that's John. John is a ready scribe in the law of Moses. I've seen you write this year more than ever before. You've been taking notes. |
| John Bytheway: | 00:00:49 | My Old Testament is getting filled up with a lot of notes from a lot of scholars. I'm ready, willing, and two out of three ain't bad. |
| Hank Smith: | 00:00:56 | Yeah. Did you know, John, I think that a ready scribe is actually an expert in the law of Moses. The more you write, the more expertise you get. I think you could be an expert at this point. |
| John Bytheway: | 00:01:09 | Oh, I don't know, but I'll take the compliment as a goal to work on. |
| Hank Smith: | 00:01:13 | The Old Testament can be difficult to understand and we have the right person to explain it to us. John, we are joined today by our first time guest, Dr. Christina Olson. Thank you for being here. Thank you for coming on followHIM. |
| Dr. Christina Olson: | 00:01:27 | Thank you for having me. Honored to be here. |
| Hank Smith: | 00:01:30 | This is going to be so much fun. John, when you think of Ezra and Nehemiah, now if you had asked me this in high school, I would've said, bless you. What Nehemiah? I don't know what that is. Through the years, we've come to understand a little bit |

more about these books. What comes to mind when you think of them?

John Bytheway: 00:01:48 How central the temple was. It always seemed to be about building or rebuilding. And I think had I suddenly had a chance to go back to Israel, I was like, let's go to the beach. Let's go to Caesaria, Maritima, right? What is their thing? We got to build the temple.

Hank Smith: 00:02:05 Yeah. I love it. Christina, as you've been preparing, what do you want to do today? What are you looking forward to?

Dr. Christina Olson: 00:02:10 First of all, coming off that comment is just introducing what is Ezra Nehemiah? This is a text where many people probably don't read very often. When I mentioned to my husband that I'm doing this one, he's like, I don't quite know what's in there. What's actually in Ezra Nehemiah? So he was my guinea pig. It's not a really common, easy book to read. Literarily, it's really confusing. Historically, it's really confusing. It's in historical books, but it's not history the way we want to tell history. One of my biggest goals for today is really just to lay down the context. Context is very important as an anthropologist, archeologist, and scholar. To me, context gives you probably half the battle in reading scripture. Where are they writing? What time are they writing? What's going on that influences how they're writing and what they're focusing on? Really talking about the context.

00:02:58 And then there's a couple really strong themes in Ezra Nehemiah, which again, if you look at big picture, are really helpful to understand. Ezra Nehemiah is a bridge between the Old Testament and the New Testament. A time period we kind of forget where you read the Old Testament and you jump to the New Testament and you're like, what's in between? There's actually a lot that happened between these time periods. It's pretty pivotal actually, especially for setting up the New Testament. I've taught New Testament a couple times at BYU and this is where I start. If you want to understand the New Testament, you need to understand everything that happened before that set the stage. But for me, Ezra Nehemiah is an awesome text to show us where did we get from one point to the next, from the kings to the time of Jesus Christ and where's that bridge between them? And Ezra Nehemiah gives us that.

Hank Smith: 00:03:46 You know, I think you are right on there. When I teach Isaiah, I don't teach Ezra and Nehemiah very much, but you're right, context is half the battle. If they just know who he's talking about, when he's talking, all of a sudden, oh, oh, I get it now.

I'm excited to learn the context of these books. John, now Christina, this is her first time joining us. She's out in Waco, Texas. We haven't met her except for today, but who is this woman?

John Bytheway: 00:04:15 Hank, when I read Christina's bio, I was like, oh, oh, wow. Oh, oh, wow. So have your oh wows ready here. Christina has a bachelor's from BYU in ancient near Eastern studies. A master's from Eastern Carolina University in Anthropology and Middle Eastern Archeology. Recently received her PhD in religion, Old Testament from Baylor University where she is. She served a mission in Russia and Kazakhstan and was part of the piloting efforts to start having missionaries learn Kazakh alongside Russian. She's an archeologist and a biblical scholar. She has worked on archeological projects in Colorado, Italy, and Israel. When have you said those three places altogether, including seven years at the site of Telesafe, Gath, Israel. She was recently awarded a four-month research fellowship of the Albright Institute of Archeology in Jerusalem, wow, to finish her first book based upon her dissertation. She currently lives in Waco with her husband, Peter and their two very active boys. What a background. This is great. We're excited to hear from you and welcome to followHIM.

Hank Smith: 00:05:31 John, sometimes when I hear these bios, I think, what have I done with my life? John, I'm old enough to be Christina's seminary teacher. She's taken the fast track through her education. This is amazing. Christina, tell me what it's like to be a young mother writing a dissertation.

Dr. Christina Olson: 00:05:46 Yeah, I started my doctorate program with a six-week-old, actually, and was very, very lucky that the day before I started, he slept through the night. And from there on, he slept, which really saved me those first couple years. No, it's been crazy, but it's been fun, too, to have them along. When we went to Italy, I took my husband and a son and I was pregnant with my second. So they just came on the journey. Fun opportunity to do that with a family.

Hank Smith: 00:06:12 That's fantastic. John and I both have boys in our house so we know a seven-year-old and a three-year-old, I think you said you have. We know about that life. That's something at least I can add to my bio as well. I've had boys in my home. And that's why we don't buy brand new stuff.

Dr. Christina Olson: 00:06:28 Active was my very nice term for...

Hank Smith: 00:06:32 Yeah. Active. That's fantastic.

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| John Bytheway: | 00:06:34 | Just check out the baseboards. That's all you need to know. Look at the baseboards and you'll know how active our children have been. |
| Hank Smith: | 00:06:42 | Recently, both of you, we moved not too far away, just about 20 minutes. But in moving, we had to take down a bunch of posters in boys' rooms and found holes in the wall that I did not know existed. I asked my sons about that and they would, oh, yeah. Yeah, that's when we were wrestling and we just put a poster up over it. Okay, thanks, guys. Let's read from the Come, Follow Me manual. And then Christina, John and I are ready to learn. I really want to understand these books, but the title of the lesson this week is I Am Doing a Great Work. |
| | 00:07:20 | The Jewish people had been captives in Babylon for about 70 years. They had lost Jerusalem and the temple and many had forgotten their commitment to God's law, but God had not forgotten them. In fact, he had declared through his prophet, I will visit you and perform my good word towards you, in causing you to return. True to this prophecy, the Lord made a way for his people to return both to Jerusalem and more importantly, to their covenants. And he raised up servants who accomplished a great work. A governor named Zerubbabel oversaw the rebuilding of the Lord's house. Ezra, a priest and scribe, helped the people turn their hearts back to God's law and Nehemiah led the rebuilding of the protective walls around Jerusalem. They met opposition, but they also got help from unexpected sources. Their experiences can inform and inspire ours because we too are doing a great work. And like theirs, our work has much to do with the house of the Lord, the law of the Lord, and the spiritual protection we find in Him. What a great way to start. That even gives us a little bit of the context you were talking about. Christina how do you want to start? What should we do next? |
| Dr. Christina Olson: | 00:08:25 | To start is just talking about the names of Ezra Nehemiah. Ezra comes from the root word Ezer. You might have heard that word a few times, especially if you go back to your Genesis account. We have the word Ezer kenegdo of Eve. Ezer means help. Scholars think Ezra might be kind of a shortened, a nickname form, Ezrayahu, which is literally God is my, or Yahweh, is my help. So off the bat, we have the name of Ezer, who is God is helping us. This is one of the themes of Ezra Nehemiah. God is helping us. And then you get to Nehemiah that comes from the root word nehem, which means comfort. The -iah at the end is theaphoric, the God name. So God is our comfort. So off the bat, we get the story about God being our help and our comfort, which is what you see throughout the |

whole book. The story of God helping his people, bringing comfort back to his people who had lost so much and had that despair and destruction in their history.

Hank Smith: 00:09:24 Help and comfort. I think John means restroom. So that's excellent.

John Bytheway: 00:09:32 Yeah, my parents should have run the etymology down on that one first, shouldn't they?

Hank Smith: 00:09:39 Sorry, you're going to have to get used to our jokes, Christina, along the way.

Dr. Christina Olson: 00:09:42 No, it's good. I'll take it.

Hank Smith: 00:09:45 Now, Christina, I want to test my knowledge here. Here's what I remember so far from what we've read. We had the kingdom of Israel. Then they decided they wanted kings. We went Saul, David, Solomon. Then the kingdom broke in half. Northern Kingdom of Israel, Southern Kingdom of Judah. The Northern Kingdom is destroyed or taken by Assyria. Hundred and something years later, the Southern kingdom is taken by Babylon. A lot of these Jews, especially the royalty, the upper class are taken to Babylon. And then King Cyrus, who's not an Israelite, maybe he saw himself as a liberator. I'm freeing you from Babylon. Go back to Jerusalem. Go rebuild your city. How did I do?

Dr. Christina Olson: 00:10:32 Yeah, that's, in a nutshell. But yeah, I want to get a little more specific to kind of set the scene for what we're going to talk about in Ezra Nehemiah and what the land looks like as well to get more into what they're thinking or feeling. So yes, at the end of the kings, Babylonians came in. They tried to rebel a few times. Babylonians ended up destroying the city. When we read the text, the biblical text, it's written by Judeans. It's written by those who have that history of kingdom of Judah. It's written from their perspective, their biases and influences and memory. They'll talk about certain things in a way that maybe is a little more favorable to them or they remember in a certain way. So they talk about... There's this grand exodus, this deportation. There's actually three different deportation of groups of people, during the time of the Babylonians.

00:11:22 And then we have the destruction of the temple in 586, the destruction of the city. It's this huge big destruction. But actually in the archeological record, they've learned a lot more about Jerusalem in recent years about the archeology of

Jerusalem during this time, during the Babylonian, and especially Persian periods, to kind of see what was going on during this time where there's an exile, people are gone. There's this idea of an empty land that the Bible will refer to. It wasn't quite so empty. You talked about only those elites were taken away. You see in the city in the destruction layers of the time of the Babylonian destruction, not actually everything was destroyed. There was very distinct spotted destruction. The temple, some of the bigger houses. So you see a very strategic destruction. And then you see later on, there wasn't really a complete abandonment of the city. You see people starting to build even pretty recently after that destruction, people build onto these destroyed ruins. From the Persian period on, they're living in the ruins of the city of Jerusalem.

Hank Smith: 00:12:28 That's fascinating because isn't that right where Lehi leaves Jerusalem and he says, look, Jerusalem's going to be destroyed. You're saying the archeological record shows it was destroyed, but it was strategically destroyed by Babylon.

Dr. Christina Olson: 00:12:41 Mm-hmm.

Hank Smith: 00:12:42 Interesting. I like that.

Dr. Christina Olson: 00:12:44 And especially when you think about, I mean, this is very part and parcel of conquering narratives throughout the ancient years. When powers come in to destroy, they're going to destroy the main centers of power. They're going to destroy the temple, the palace, the administrative buildings. And I'll talk about this later with Nehemiah. They're going to often pull out bones of the tombs. And so you're taking away people's inheritance or claims to the land. Other stories, they salt the earth and so you're destroying the economy. And then you get, you're deporting people, you're destroying their society. So it's a very strategic destruction of a community of a nation in this kingdom. And that's what the kingdom of Judah had. It was a very strategic wholesale destruction. It is a wholesale destruction, even though on the personal level, there are still some people living around there. Probably a lot of people related to the temple as we get later into the text. A lot of these are personnel of the temple that are still around this destroyed temple because it's still sacred site, even though it's been destroyed. We still have the ruins of the temple. And possibly we have some evidence of pilgrimage to the temple even before it was rebuilt. So it remains an important site and people are still around the temple there and probably in outlying areas.

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| Hank Smith: | 00:13:59 | How heartbreaking to live... Here comes Babylon. They come in, they destroy the temple, and now you're left looking at what once was. |
| Dr. Christina Olson: | 00:14:08 | Yeah. A lot of the texts that we get in this, on the Old Testament, a lot of the final form of even the Old Testament itself, we're realizing more and more that these texts were written during this time period. In Jerusalem and then a few of the exiles that are outside the land, like Ezekiel, they're writing this period. But they're really writing even about the history of them when all around them is the ruin. There's the tombs of the kings, the tombs of their families, and there's destruction as they're writing these texts. So it's a very strong part of their memory. Even as we get into Ezra Nehemiah, they're building a community, but it's still a community within ruins. They do eventually build another temple. The temple of Zerubbabel in 515. Temple is destroyed 586. By 515, they finally rebuild a temple. Definitely not to the extent that it had been before. Smaller temple personnel. This whole story, Ezra Nehemiah, is a lot of this combination of sorrow for the past as well as hope for the future. It's these mixed emotions throughout the whole text that you see Ezra Nehemiah and then with other prophetic books as you'll talk about, I'm sure later and read more with the other prophets. But it's this mix. Worship is a mix of sorrow and joy and all these feelings are okay. They're available. |
| Hank Smith: | 00:15:25 | I occasionally hear from my scholarly friends things like first temple period and second temple period. The first temple period goes from Solomon to Babylon, I guess. And second temple period basically starts around these books, right? Around that time? And goes all the way to Jesus. |
| Dr. Christina Olson: | 00:15:42 | Yeah. So as historians, we love to categorize, right? We have to set things up straight. Yeah, so you have different periods of time and who's in control. So you have the Babylonian period, the Persian period, which is when the king conquered the known ancient near Eastern world in 539. The Persian period goes all the way until about 332 with Alexander the Great, where you have the Hellenistic period. And then you have another period called the Hasmonean Period. This is around 140-ish to 37. And this is when we kind of get this little resurgence of Judean independence with the Maccabees. This is where that story of Hanukkah comes from. And then you get to the Roman period with the time of Jesus. During this, if you look now towards the temple in that timeline, you have the destruction in 586 of that first temple of Solomon. |

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| | 00:16:32 | And then 515, it finally is finished. It's completed. We'll see in Ezra Nehemiah. They do start the temple in 538 when they first return, but it's not finished until 515. This marks the start of the second temple period, like the early second temple period. By the time we get to Jesus Christ, Herod has taken the temple observable, made it grander, expanded the foundations. We usually call that the late second temple period. And that's how they can divide the time between them. |
| Hank Smith: | 00:17:02 | John, we are becoming ready scribes here. I guess. |
| John Bytheway: | 00:17:08 | Ready or not. Here we scribe. |
| Dr. Christina Olson: | 00:17:11 | I mean, that's another aspect of the ancient world. This idea of memory and this perpetuating of sacred sights. Once a place is holy, it continues to be holy. And it goes back to getting that memory of the holiness and respecting that, what is this holy place and what does it mean for us? And that goes into the temple building account we're going to get with Ezra, the importance of why. Why do we need to even build a temple here? We've been worshiping outside the land for this long. We've already starting to figure out we can worship without a temple. Many of them have this need to come back to the temple, to worship at this site, to rebuild it, to bring God's presence back to his original, the sacred site that they know and they remember. |
| Hank Smith: | 00:17:54 | This is kind of a silly similarity, but it worked for me. Right when the church was tearing down the Provo Temple to rebuild it now, it's well on its way to being rebuilt, but I went over just as they were tearing it down, watching those machines grab big chunks of the building and pull it off. Even that kind of hurt my heart. I was like, oh, there's the locker room right here right there. I see it. And I thought, oh man, this would be a difficult thing to watch a temple destroyed by a different country, by your enemies. Also, I like this lesson, Christina, because as Latter-day Saints, we often know the history up until Lehi. Oh, we'll say, oh, I know the history all the way to Lehi. And then we go away with Lehi and his family. Then we come back for the four gospels. We're like, when we left, Babylon was about to destroy this. And now one thing led to another and Rome's in charge. And we just move on. It's nice to say, all right, let's let Lehi and his family leave and we'll stay here and watch what happens here. It's new ground for a lot of us. |
| Dr. Christina Olson: | 00:19:00 | Yeah, going back to what I talked about being this bridge between the two Testaments, it really goes back to idea of the temple being the house or the presence of God. This is a very |

common ancient Near Eastern principle, this idea that if you have a temple, your deity is housed there. If it's destroyed, it means that one deity let it be destroyed because your God is powerful. It's not going to happen unless he lets it happen. And then once it's destroyed, His presence is gone, essentially. The idea that when they go to exile, again, it's this idea that where's our God? How do we worship Him? How do we find Him? And these are the questions that set up what kind of Judaism looks like at the time of Jesus Christ. They're still asking these questions. They're still asking, where's God? How are we worshiping Him?

00:19:51 We get the different sects. The Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Zealots, all these different Jewish groups. They arise from these questions of how do we relate to our God now that there's not a temple? We don't have our king who is the mediator between God and us. Well, eventually, we get a high priest, but we had, for a while they lost their high priests who were, again, were those connections to God. Before this time period in Ezra Nehemiah, religion and that worship of God was very much centered on your king and your priests. And it trickled down to the people, but it really rested on the king and that authority. What we're going to see in Ezra Nehemiah is what's called this democratization of religion, of worship. It really starts to become a personal aspect for the people. It's now their job. The king is no longer there. It's not his responsibility to be righteous. He doesn't affect us. We actually have to be the ones that are righteous and what we do affects the consequences.

Hank Smith: 00:20:52 You're right. How do you understand the New Testament without knowing all these different groups that Jesus is going to interact with, how do you understand them unless you understand this story?

Dr. Christina Olson: 00:21:02 We go back to the promises that we've been talking about with the Abrahamic promises. He talked about we're going to have land. We're going to have posterity. We're going to have the priesthood. And they've lost all those. People died. We lost our claim, our inheritance. That's that posterity part. We lost our claim to the land. What do we do now? We lost all these promises. Is God a false God because we don't have these promises anymore? Are we going to start just believing what these other people are believing as we're living over here in Babylon? They've been dealing with these issues of all these questions. And then when we get to the New Testament, these are the very specific issues that Jesus Christ addressed. They're saying, who are we? You are children of God. Where's our kingdom? Where's our nation, our people? You're part of the

kingdom of God. Where's our land? How do we worship? And he shows them. So he's really answering these questions that came up during this time of being lost.

Hank Smith: 00:21:58 I'm trying to imagine what this would be like because obviously some of these people are born in Babylon. They've never even been to Jerusalem. They're like go home. And they're like, this is my home.

John Bytheway: 00:22:10 We have gone through this history of kings not working out very well. I was thinking of this this morning, but we always refer to the kingdom of God. And that's what you were just saying, Christina. God is supposed to be our king. The mortal kings have not worked out very well. And making alliances with other nations has not worked out very well. Let God be your king, let God be your ally, seems to be kind of a theme of the Old Testament.

Hank Smith: 00:22:35 I wonder what it would be like to be in Babylon and then to hear that Cyrus is coming and then to hear, okay, go home. I wonder if that's a shock. Really? We can go home. Yep. Go home.

Dr. Christina Olson: 00:22:49 If you're moving from Babylonian control to Persian control, when the Babylonians were in charge, they had a hands-off administration. They went and destroyed, deported everybody. They would place a governor there. We don't really have any other indication of them doing much within these different lands and these places. They're just kind of, I left a destruction, you're there, good luck. When the Persians come with Cyrus in 539, in that first year of his reign, his big edict is, okay, now everybody who is displaced, go home. All the vessels that were taken from your temples, take back with you. It's an awesome thing, but it's also really politically really smart because he sends people back. And now they're starting to go back to their lands. There's more places now that he can get tribute from and taxes. The economy's building up. They have control. And now these people are grateful to this king, Cyrus, who is letting them go back. So it's inspired, but also really smart and strategic. That's how God works through our systems.

Hank Smith: 00:23:50 With that, Christina, are we ready to jump in?

Dr. Christina Olson: 00:23:53 Getting into Ezra Nehemiah, I do want to talk a little bit about that literary context. Now that we've got that history behind us, where does Ezra Nehemiah as a text fit in with this history? Ezra Nehemiah itself is a pretty confusing text. There's probably a reason why not as many people read this as much because it's hard to read. It's confusing. When it was finally completed, it

was completed as Ezra Nehemiah. There's a pretty good tradition of these were originally put together, but they're made up of a lot of different texts. You have a lot of different sources. You have letters, you have official documents and genealogies and a few stories and narratives over here. They're kind of all just kind of put together with themes behind them as far as following Greek tragedy themes and the way they write history. But then you also have the influence of ancient Near Eastern documents and formats and writing.

00:24:46 So it's a brilliant way of how all these texts are put together. But it's not the way probably we as modern community want to see a history made. It's not giving us a very linear story of this happened and then this happened and this happened. Really, when we want to read the story and we read different parts, we kinda want to think of more in terms of, and also this happened at some point. But I'm bringing the story together and bringing different time periods together in a really more of a theological aspect. The person that put this together really wanted to bring out a story and teach a point about the theology of this community and who God is and what he does for us. So when you're reading straight through, you'll get to points where you might stop for a minute and you're like, wait a minute. I thought I was talking about this one guy and now we're talking about another guy. And you have to figure out what it's doing. What is the point of how the story is put together?

Hank Smith: 00:25:39 Okay. So not only are we getting a translation, we're getting a translation in King James English and we're also getting an ancient way of putting a history together. I can see why people might see that as a little daunting. Yeah, I can.

John Bytheway: 00:25:55 So Ezra Nehemiah, because I think I read this, was originally one book. They called it Ezra Nehemiah and now it's split.

Dr. Christina Olson: 00:26:04 Yeah. But it seems to be in its final composition once all these pieces were put together, it was put together as Ezra Nehemiah together. But even that, from there, there's a lot of different traditions and there's still compositional confusion. Some people put Ezra Nehemiah because the first two verses are the same as the last two verses in Chronicles. Some people say it used to be Chronicles Ezra Nehemiah. Others push back against that and say, oh, they're just following the traditions of Chronicles in different, even translations, they're put in different places. In our most Christian English translations, like we see in the KJV, we have Ezra Nehemiah at the end of the historical books. So it's ending this history of Chronicles, getting into the end and that destruction and a little bit of that post-

exile. And then after that, we get the writings or the wisdom books, literature.

00:26:58 In some of the Hebrew traditions, Ezra Nehemiah is put before Chronicles. It's put in this context, a book that's called The Writings. So it's just this group of different books that are just these writings that are different histories or sayings or Psalms, Proverbs. So it's included in that in the Hebrew traditions. It's all over. It goes all over. It's not like the first five books of the Old Testament that are always together always the same. Even past translators, past canons didn't quite know what to do with Ezra Nehemiah.

John Bytheway: 00:27:31 It's kind of a casserole.

Dr. Christina Olson: 00:27:33 So we should really love that.

John Bytheway: 00:27:34 Yeah. We do casseroles.

Hank Smith: 00:27:36 That's right. We should love it.

Dr. Christina Olson: 00:27:39 We do casseroles.

John Bytheway: 00:27:39 There's some broccoli in there or some potatoes. I'm looking at 2 Chronicles 36 at the last verses. And you're right. Verse 22 and 23 of 2 Chronicles 36. Our verses one, two, and part of three of Ezra.

Hank Smith: 00:27:54 Christina, I want to ask you, I can picture a listener at home. They've got their scriptures open or maybe they're driving or something and they're thinking, man, this seems complicated. Maybe I'd skip it or is this really going to matter to me? Why would you say, all right, the Lord wants us to see these texts. Can you persuade me that the Lord wants me to see these? I bet you can.

Dr. Christina Olson: 00:28:16 That's my goal. So maybe let me know at the end if I've persuaded you. It's a harder one because it's not going to give you a happy feeling all the time. There's complicated aspects to it, which I think is actually one reason why we should read it. This idea that being a member of the church, being a follower of God is complicated. There's good parts to it, bad parts to it. God uses really imperfect people. We're going to see mistakes that Ezra Nehemiah both make. This really draws me into Ezra Nehemiah and really thinking about community. There's a lot of us, especially in our global world today. I'm teaching anthropology class right now and we talk a lot about global

connections and just new global world where we move around a lot. We're not centered in our families. My mom told stories about growing up. She actually had double cousins, so they grew up all together with their friends and they had this awesome, cool village of their family around them.

00:29:11 Most of us don't have that, right? I moved to Waco. I have a few family members on my husband's side and for a while I had a sister-in-law here, which was awesome, but she's gone now. So it's really our family by ourselves. It's this concept of who is our community? Who do we belong to? How can we find these connections? And a lot of Ezra Nehemiah is talking about how to find these connections, finding these anchor points. Where can you connect when you are so different? So really comes Ezra Nehemiah, big picture. It's a really important and helpful story for understanding this idea of community and identity and what it really means to figure out your place in God's gospel.

Hank Smith: 00:29:55 It's worth the effort. Christina, I was thinking as you were explaining that perhaps we have listeners who are in a rebuilding phase of their life. Something maybe devastating has happened, a loss of a loved one, a divorce, something where they feel like, wow, I'm picking up the pieces here. Maybe these books can also speak to that.

Dr. Christina Olson: 00:30:16 Yeah. I think they can. This whole point of Ezra Nehemiah is to show God has not forgotten us. All these things have happened. You think you've lost these promises. You've lost some of your connections and this identity, but throughout this whole time, God is our, right, the Ezer and Nechem, He is our help and our comfort. Maybe not always in the way you think it's going to be or quite look like the same as you think or hope for, but he's going to be there. He will stay with you and build you up to do that.

Hank Smith: 00:30:49 Kind of the regrowth after the forest fire. I always find that beautiful to see that green coming up through all that charred wood. Okay, what do you want to do next? Thanks for that, Christina.

Dr. Christina Olson: 00:30:59 One through six really is a return story. We don't actually even get to Ezra yet until chapter seven. So it's laying down the grounds to this overall, we are now returning to Jerusalem. God through Cyrus, who is the king of Persia, gives that edict saying all these deportees, go back home, go back, rebuild your temples. And this was across the board in the texts I like to say, right? This is just for us, but it was for everybody. Again, a political move, but really beneficial to these people who could

go back and very focused on rebuilding a temple. These chapters one through six really follow a pattern of an ancient Eastern literature of a temple building account. So it's building into these traditions, especially if we think about... I know you've talked to some others. I heard you're talking with Carli. She talked about the oral nature of scripture.

00:31:52 In general, people didn't know how to read in these time periods. Very, very small percentage actually read the books. They'd be hearing all these stories. If you have these patterns of stories, you know what to look for and what to listen for and what to focus on. So if you're hearing the story of this return to Jerusalem, you can pick out, ah, this is a temple rebuilding story. So I'm going to know there's going to be this call to rebuild. It has to be through divine command. You cannot build a temple without God being in control with God telling you, you have to build a temple. This can't be done just by a king alone. So already they're starting to see, oh, like, okay, the hand of God is in here. This is a divine story we're hearing of this return and this rebuilding account. And then there's several other aspects.

00:32:38 You see this with the Temple of Solomon and with the tabernacle as well, this idea of usually there's like a history of telling us why, what happened to the temple. It was in ruins. Now we need to rebuild, this call to rebuild. Then you get this acquisition of materials, the laying of the foundation of the temple, certain points along the way that are important to building the temple. And then you get to ceremonies at the end of the final dedication, the final stages, and setting up the personnel of the temple. This rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem follows this pattern. You'll see aspects within there. But also the cool part about this construction is also the fact that they've got these Greek influences too. You also have a bit of this Greek tragedy in here, this drama going on within this temple building. We're not just building the temple, we're also contending with these adversaries.

00:33:30 So you're also starting to root for this community, and caring about them and their wellbeing. Want to move even to verses three and four. We mentioned this a little bit earlier, this idea that these are generations of people who are gone from the land. Most of them were born outside the land. So they actually were given the choice. Who feels that call to go up to Jerusalem? Which is another aspect of, again, setting this new form of religion up. It's saying you do have a choice. You don't absolutely have to go back to the temple because we're starting again to figure out this worship away for the temple, what it means to worship God. Even just the way it talks about these

people in verse three, who is there among you, of all his people? his God be with them, let them go up to Jerusalem, which is actually the same wording that's used for people going up out of Egypt.

00:34:18 Then verse four, it says, whosoever remaineth in my place where he sojourneth. They're already talking about these people, even though they've been there for 30, 40 years, this first 539 time. It's still referring to these people as the word that's used as ger. And this is refers to being foreigners. It's saying, even though you've been there, you probably were born there, you are still seeing yourself as a Judean. They're still connecting themselves back to Jerusalem. We are foreigners living in a foreign land. That's your someone that's been deported but they are setting themselves apart. They're saying, we are foreigners in this foreign land because we are still remembering and connecting our capital, our temple, our place where we came from. Which is really goes into that strong memory aspect of we are still the people of Yahweh no matter where we are. And that's actually really unique.

00:35:10 The fact that we even have this Old Testament like this is really unique because this is that policy of conquest is you scatter people and they'll forget who they are. But they're really showing us right here in these first verses, we remember who we are. We remember our past and our heritage. That's really important for them and what they're doing and what they're realizing as this community. So the first part of even being a community, being these worshipers of God is remembering who we are, remembering that we do have that past tradition and this heritage to build off of.

John Bytheway: 00:35:43 Wow. That principle of who am I and whose am I? That's huge. That's applicable today, that identity thing. I know that there's a lot of echoes in the scriptures. Didn't Abraham say I'm a stranger in a strange land and now they're, I'm a stranger in a strange land. I like to use that phrase a lot. They echo and repeat things. They're feeling that way, but now they're going to go back. Before I put Cyrus in my Hero Hall of Fame, it's not like he's saying, oh, nevermind that captivity thing, go home. It's like you can leave, but pay taxes. Is that right? Whether you're here, whether you're staying or whether you're going back, the Babylonian Revenue Service is still in force, so you still got to pay taxes, but you can go back and build your temple. So I like what you said. It's a political move.

Dr. Christina Olson: 00:36:31 That's still very much in the background of a lot of these stories in Ezra Nehemiah and other texts is this fact that honestly, even

back during the kings, they were never really that independent. There was always somebody bigger around them. Other empires. This whole land of Judah, Israel, they were pretty minor characters in the grand scheme. As much as they like to say how great they were, they were pretty minor. And again, they're still pretty minor. They're still within the system, the Persian system. The Persians, in comparison to the Babylonians especially, had a very structured administrative system throughout their empire. But it's still not as big as Solomon.

00:37:09 Later on, you look at the goods that the king is sending them too. The king does help them build up the temple. This is what's a little bit strange. Again, Jerusalem is kind of a far out, not super important place, but the fact that the king is giving so much energy, so much goods to be building it up, that's not common for these out of the way places like that. They're sending back these vessels and he's saying, here's the revenue to help build up that temple. We'll see that even more too later with Nehemiah. You're giving a lot of these good things. Still not quite as good as Solomon, but it's still decent. We have a temple. We're going to have a temple. And it has the vessels inside that we need to worship God and to do what we need to.

Hank Smith: 00:37:52 I love it.

Dr. Christina Olson: 00:37:53 You really start to see a little bit of connections to the Exodus, to this going up out of the land of Persia. They're going to leave this land, go to the land of their inheritance. They're taking with them from their neighbors the goods and the wealth to go and take them to go build the temple. This is what happens when that first Exodus with Moses. So even at the beginning, you start to see these, that this is a repeat return. Like what Moses did, Ezra's going to now do. So it's again, connecting to the past, but looking forward to that future saying, this is a repeated history. God is doing this. This is our proof that God is continuing to help us in different ways, but also in the same way.

John Bytheway: 00:38:34 So it's like a mini Exodus out of Babylon, out of Persian control.

Dr. Christina Olson: 00:38:39 With the Come, Follow Me, we do skip chapter two, but I'm going to give a quick plugin for that. It's a genealogy. They're actually really important. You'll see genealogies placed in the text where there's areas of chaos, of disorganization or times when identity or claims need to be reasserted. This is that time. We're coming back and we need to reassert our claim. We are the inheritors of this land. You'll see that a few more times throughout Ezra Nehemiah, these little inserts of genealogy. And this is, again, another ancient New Eastern tradition. When

Cyrus came into power, he put himself in the genealogy of the Babylonian kings. He's saying, I'm actually part of this tradition. Your God is the one that placed me here. Marduk, your Babylonian God, is the one that wanted me to come here and conquer because Nebuchadnezzar and Nabonidus is the last king, right?

00:39:29 Nabonidus rebelled against Marduk, and he was wrong. I'm coming back because of these Babylonian guards. You insert them, you'll give a genealogy to give your claim. We see this in the New Testament. We have a couple genealogies for Jesus. In each of them, they're slightly different. Genealogies aren't very specific. They can be created. They can be made to make this point of what's important and what this claim we have. Know that there's a genealogy and it's doing important things to, again, establish this claim.

Hank Smith: 00:39:58 To establish a claim.

John Bytheway: 00:40:00 And I love that the Urim and Thummim is mentioned in verse 63. There's, they need a priest with a Urim and Thummim.

Dr. Christina Olson: 00:40:08 And then we get into chapter three, which comes from our genealogy point. Before 538, when Cyrus sent people back, this is with the governor Sheshbazzar. Chapter one, verse eight, he sends Sheshbazzar, the Prince of Judah, which the word for prince really just means like governor or official. Sheshbazzar is the one who comes back. Then we get to chapter three 20 years later. Now suddenly we have Jeshua, the son of Jozadak, and then Zerubbabel. Two new names come on the scene. If we triangulate our sources with the books of Haggai and Zechariah and our understanding of the Persian kings, talks about them being in the year of Darius who becomes king in 522. So now we have the return of Zerubbabel, who is the son of Shealtiel. He, if we go back to the genealogies from before, from the book of Chronicles, Kings, he is a descendant of David.

00:41:08 We have this final descendant of King David. Who is, right, this scion of what all our hopes and dreams are laid on. The kingdom of David, right? This is their hopes and their, this establishment of the kingdom of David. So they're saying, even though our people were taken away, our kings were taken away, here we have a descendant of David. This is our hope for the future. And with him came Jeshua, the son of Jozadak, who with his genealogy, if we also look back, he's connected to the last high priest of Jerusalem. We have a high priest and a king coming back to the land. They come back right off the bat. They actually don't quite start building a temple yet. They build an

altar. We are once again purifying the site. And in verse three, it has this weird phrase.

00:41:53 They set the altar upon his bases, the temple's foundations, for the fear was upon them because of the people of these countries. When they come back to the land, we've talked about before the land wasn't empty. We had people still living there. We had neighboring people around them. We'll get into some of those other neighbors from places like Idumea to the South and Aman to the East. Aman to the East and Edom. We had other neighboring regions and powers. It's always the power struggle. This administration of Persia, these different governors trying to compete for power for how much control they have. There's people around us. We are laying claim to this area right away. This is our temple, this is our place. Our God is coming back. And that gives us this identity, this claim.

00:42:44 And the one other interesting aspect, again, of bringing these two timelines together, we had Sheshbazzar, they're coming out of Persia just like the Exodus, bringing the goods for the temple. And then we're up to Zerubbabel and Jeshua making sacrifices, building an altar. They are keeping the festival the Feast of Tabernacles or this remembrance of the Exodus. Even verse two, as it is written in the law of Moses, the man of God or the prophet. What we're doing is because of this law of Moses, which actually usually didn't connect the law of Moses with the temple. You don't really see that much in books of Kings and Chronicles really. But it's starting to connect this idea of this new temple worship with the importance of this law we're going to establish because again, we're changing what it means to be in this community. We're following the law as well as the temple.

John Bytheway: 00:43:40 Those feasts were part of the law. Bring back those feasts. When they were in Babylon, I guess they just didn't do any of those feasts at that time. Now they're saying we can start that again because we have a temple. Part of the feast of tabernacles was they went to the temple and poured water on the altar.

Dr. Christina Olson: 00:43:59 Yeah. Well, and really, most of these festivals, these feasts, they were pretty temple-centered. They wouldn't really be a very communal affair except for the one reference in Leviticus. We don't really have any examples of the whole people actually celebrating this Feast of Booths. It was very much a temple aspect. We're going to see a little bit later it starts to become for the people a holiday. So yeah, you're really starting to kind of connect the dots and bring these traditions together for this

new community. In chapter three is where you get towards the end. We're kind of condensing time and we're going to expand it again as we get to other chapters. But in chapter three, it talks about the builders laying the foundation of the temple. It talks about this joyful celebration. And they're singing together in verse 11. They're praising, giving thanks. He is good. The people shout and praise the Lord. Then verse 12, but many of the priests and Levites and chief of the fathers, who were ancient men, the ones who had seen the first house, there are a few people who had seen the first temple, had seen it there, had seen it destroyed. And when the foundation of the house was laid before there eyes wept with a loud voice and many shouted aloud for joy.

John Bytheway: 00:45:10 I can't tell if they're laughing or crying. I mean, that's verse 13, right? Yeah.

Dr. Christina Olson: 00:45:15 But that's the cool thing too about the scripture and how you're reading, because you can kind of take it two different ways. The word weeping doesn't really have a good or bad connotation. So they could be weeping for sadness for the weeping of the past, which is probably what you'd probably expect or see. Because lamentation was a form of worship. Being sorrowful is a very important part. But also it could be some weeping for joy. We're getting started now, that weeping for the future.

Hank Smith: 00:45:45 So it's like when we found out we were having twin boys. We were happy and sad at the same time. And you couldn't tell which the tears were for. Because we were happy, but we were also like, oh, wow.

John Bytheway: 00:45:59 Oh, boy.

Hank Smith: 00:45:59 Our lives are changing dramatically.

John Bytheway: 00:46:02 Yeah. Here it comes.

Hank Smith: 00:46:05 Or like when your son or daughter goes on a mission, happy for what you have and sad for what you're losing.

John Bytheway: 00:46:11 Absolutely.

Dr. Christina Olson: 00:46:13 Well, we'll move on briefly to the next couple chapters, but I'll try not to spend as much time on some of them. We're going to move from that temple ceremony aspect and then we get part of the drama, the story that gets brought in. In chapter four, now we get our adversaries. Now we get the conflict that comes

in. It's not all just a nice story. We build the temple and we're good and we're happy. Or sad. Now we have our adversaries. We have some opposition here coming in where it talks about the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin. They heard that they were building the temple. And at first, they're actually not adversaries. In verse two, it says they came to Zerubbabel to the chief of the father, so the heads of the families and said unto them, let us build with you, for we seek your God as ye do and we sacrifice unto him since the days of Esar-haddon, so the days of Babylon when other people had also been in the land.

00:47:07 These are people that probably were in the land, possibly had been moved into the land from all these conquests and other, they were deported out of their land, came into this land and men started worshiping the God that was here. Yahweh. We've been worshiping your God too. We want to be part of you. We want to help build your temple. But then verse three, Zerubbabel and Jeshua, chief of the Fathers, they say to them, You have nothing to do with us. Basically, you can't build the temple with us. A lot of times, especially when we're reading scripture, we really want to see the best of everybody, which is a great trait to have. You want to see the good in everybody. But I think we also need to sometimes acknowledge that there's not always complete great in everybody. We see these leaders as they're chosen by God.

00:47:55 They're the perfect image of how we should be following God and these people of God. So you could explain it in one way saying, oh, yes, they're not actually Judeans. That makes sense that they excluded them. Yes, because we're reading the narrative of these people who are writing that story. But on the other hand, they're excluding people. They're saying, even though you've been worshiping Yahweh for a couple decades now, so you're very much entrenched in this religion, this worship, no, we're not going to let you because we're the elite. We're the ones that came from exile. We're going to see a lot more of that, especially as we get to Nehemiah. These really kind of this staking this claim in these boundaries of community, which again is both good and bad. Maybe this is my main theme of Ezra Nehemiah, good and bad together kind of shows this image of the fact that God is using a lot of imperfect people. We look at these scriptures, we look at these figures, and we want them to be perfect. But the whole purpose of this gospel is no one can be perfect. Because if we're perfect, then how can God show us his great work through us? Because God is the only one that is perfect. He is the one that we're striving to be.

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| Hank Smith: | 00:49:01 | Christina, I really like that because as a teacher, I might say, well, these guys never do anything wrong. So it was important that you be from the house of Judah, from... Right. Instead, just say, yeah, that's me. That's probably not the best way to go. You probably could have made some friends with these people and then they don't fight you the entire time. You move into a neighborhood, there's people already there and you're like, I don't want anything to do with you. Probably not the best way to make friends and influence people. |
| Dr. Christina Olson: | 00:49:30 | Yeah, they're really starting off the bat as like we're setting our lines. This is our community and no one else. Which probably at the heart of it, you're like, okay, we understand this. You're trying to follow God's law, his commands to be his people, but maybe you're making some mistakes along the way. Like what you said, they have a lot of problems because of that. They're kind of the cause of that problem. Sometimes just sitting in that a little bit. Leaders aren't perfect. We've seen that a lot, especially with there's been a lot of work done in early church history, right? Becoming more clear about what was this church history like? And there are a lot of leaders that were not perfect. And it can still be God's work and we can still not be perfect. |
| Hank Smith: | 00:50:06 | I love that. If you want perfect leadership, there's only one guy you can look to. Why do we exclude? Why do we do some boundary maintenance like that? Is it fear? Is it, no, you can't be part of this because you'll change it? Even sometimes we act like we're in junior high. We have our little friend group and no one is allowed into our friend group because we're elite. And we do that even as adults, even in our own words. Either of you have any thoughts on that, on why we do that? I need to look to your wisdom, both of you. |
| John Bytheway: | 00:50:41 | Somebody wrote an essay years ago called Why the Church is As True as the Gospel. His point was because we have to learn to deal with imperfect beings who have to learn to deal with us who are also imperfect and that is part of the refining process of the gospel. I like that so often this year we have talked about the Old Testament's not telling you be this way, it's just reporting. This is what they did. It's not necessarily saying, so you should be this way. Sometimes it's pointing out that, yeah, that was mean. And you can just go, huh, that was mean. |
| Dr. Christina Olson: | 00:51:19 | Yeah. I mean, it's really kind of just showing... We're looking in the past, we're looking at big pictures, but people are people. This is like one of the base points of anthropology, this idea that humans are humans throughout history. They don't change. You |

always want the basics. You need food, you need shelter, but you need connection. You need community. And that's part of it. Community building means at some point you build a boundary. So it cuts up to us as where do we build that boundary and how do we build it?

John Bytheway: 00:51:48 If you were just to jump into the New Testament, you might not understand why they even avoided walking through their lands. We often say, well, they had intermarried, but there's a more of a history here too about the temple at first starting to offer help and then hindering is what it says in the italics at the beginning of chapter four. So would this also be part of the backstory of the Samaritans as they're portrayed in the New Testament?

Dr. Christina Olson: 00:52:17 I'm going to complicate this a little bit too, because I like to do that. Yes, we do start to see this antagonism, this clear story of this us versus them. We have these names of these regional layers around them. Sanballat was the governor whose seat was in Samaria. But if we go back to that compositional history of Ezra Nehemiah and this fact that it was written later, some people think Hellenistic times, so after the time of Alexander. Some people even think it might have been completed during the time of the Hasmonean period. So this is the time of the Maccabees when they're establishing the king of Judah and very, very much having issues with the people in Samaria, especially with them who had, they had built their temple in about 450BC decades after the Jerusalem Temple. So they're competing between these two different temples and these capitals.

00:53:07 Actually, during the Hasmonean period, that 140 to 37BC, as you see a lot of this conflict rising. The stories were composed more towards that time. They're writing these issues into the story now. And this goes back to that history when we're jumping between different peoples and communities. You didn't see any of these issues with Sheshbazzar. And later there's another little aspect where you actually have a governor who likes them. Later, Tatnai comes in chapter five who's like, hmm, why are you building this? Okay, God commanded you. There's a decree. Okay, cool. So there's no antagonism there. So you start to see these pictures of a little bit of differences, but also archeologically as well, first, they don't start out as enemies. They don't start as antagonists. They're all just people of these different regions. There's squabbles between their leaders as most political systems are.

00:54:01 But it's really later that you see some of this antagonism starting maybe rooted here and started here. It's kind of written into

that history. And this goes back to that memory and why they're writing this story. They're putting this establishing, especially if it's during the Hasmonean period when they're saying, we are a kingdom. This is our history. We came back to the land. It was just us. We are the people of Judah. We are setting that boundary. It is our people. It is not the Samaritans and their temple. It is Jerusalem and our temple. And that's what brings a little bit, a bit of the complication to Ezra Nehemiah. When we talk about our own traditions, our histories, how much do we change things up a little bit? Unintentionally or intentionally? This is one aspect of what I study is this idea of memory. It's really important to understand who we are by understanding what we remember in our traditions, but they can change or they can look different for different people. For them, it's really important to start to show there are some issues between us, even though originally we didn't quite have that issue before.

Hank Smith: 00:54:57 This I think is a crucial skill to understand in reading scripture. I try to teach it to my students when we read 1 and 2 Nephi. These aren't written as he's going. These are written, he is an old man and he's looking back. Very difficult to write all that has happened since then out of the story. This is probably written hundreds of years later and they're saying, okay, here's our history. And the conflict that's happening when they're writing is written into the history. That makes sense.

Dr. Christina Olson: 00:55:31 Yeah. We see that in the New Testament. They're talking about stories about Jesus. Several of them weren't alive during the time of Jesus. They're repeating stories. They're bringing in their current issues and it's affecting how we're reading the text. And that's something we need to kind of keep in mind sometimes when we're reading. You're like, oh, they hated everybody. They didn't really. There's an issue they're dealing with now. Or maybe that's how we relate to the text too. We see all this conflict and we're like, maybe we need a pause or our context with where we're living or understanding what's going on.

Hank Smith: 00:56:02 So into my history, I build in this bad guy who probably wasn't the bad guy in real, but he's a bad guy now in my life. I'm going to write him in. That's a complication when you start to understand it. It's like, oh, wow. It opens up the why of the text that maybe it didn't happen exactly like this, but I'm writing it a certain way because of when I'm writing the history. Wow, that's fun. Also makes it hard to know what actually happened.

Dr. Christina Olson: 00:56:28 Yes. Why it's difficult to read Ezra Nehemiah, because you don't have the history that we want to see with this timeline. And why they're jumping between these stories and time periods

because they're trying to get this idea across to set the stage of what it looks like for them and how we're building this people of God of who we are. Even in chapter four, we're getting more time skipping. So it talks about these adversaries coming, them writing letters to the King of Persia to complain about these Jews who are building a temple. And they're saying, why are you building a temple? You shouldn't be. And they write to the king saying, hey, this guy's building a temple. That shouldn't happen. They're going to rebel against you because if you start to take power and you're building your own temple, your own city, that means you're undercutting the authority of the king. So it actually talks about three different letters that are written, but we only get one of the letters.

00:57:18 So they mentioned writing a letter to Xerxes who wasn't even a king until 486. This is like going back to the time of Ezra. So now we've skipped forward even more. And then they talk about Artaxerxes who was king in, starting in 465. So that's the time of Nehemiah. We're in the time of Zerubbabel and Jeshua, supposedly. And they're doing the time of King Darius who is king in 522. They're thrown all the time around to get across this point that they're antagonists and they are trying to get the power of the Persian Empire to come and stop this work because they're upsetting the balance and the region.

John Bytheway: 00:57:55 It's kind of fun to read the letter. Be it known unto the king, the Jews, which came up from thee which are come up to Jerusalem, building the rebellious and the bad city. I've never heard it called that before. It gets in verse 12. The bad city and have set up the walls there. They've joined the foundations, be it known unto the king if this city be builded. How do they get possession of that letter anyway?

Dr. Christina Olson: 00:58:19 Yeah. This is coming from a Persian king and they didn't actually rebel against the Persian king. It was against the Babylonians. So they're pulling from history. They weren't rebellious during these kings and the Persian kings. They were rebellious during the Babylonian kings.

Hank Smith: 00:58:32 I can see why this is complicated, but it's fun. Is this chapter, like, this is why the Samaritans or those people up there, this is why they're the bad guys. Look at what they did to try to stop us.

Dr. Christina Olson: 00:58:44 Yeah. And that's what bringing in these antagonists and these letters and these stories you're going to keep, we're going to keep seeing throughout this idea they're trying to set up this history of we have been building this temple despite opposition,

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| | | going towards this is the power of God working in it. We are doing this great work. God is making sure it's happened despite all these conflicts and these oppositions that you keep seeing over and over, even though they come from later. So they're setting that drama of the story. I'm proving to you that this is what's happening, even though I'm going to take my proof from a couple, like hundred years later. |
| John Bytheway: | 00:59:20 | I can hardly imagine people being opposed to building a temple. Can you imagine that, you guys? |
| Hank Smith: | 00:59:24 | Yeah. I can't imagine that would ever happen in this world. Well - |
| John Bytheway: | 00:59:27 | Who would do that? |
| Hank Smith: | 00:59:30 | So they're put together to show, like, Exhibit A, exhibit B, exhibit C. Look at all this proof that they're the worst. They need more room to write in scripture. |
| John Bytheway: | 00:59:42 | These margins just aren't doing it, but yeah. |
| Hank Smith: | 00:59:45 | It's fun to have an expert here, John, to show us this because there's no way I would've known this. |
| John Bytheway: | 00:59:50 | Yeah, me neither. So you say there were three letters, but we're only hearing one. |
| Dr. Christina Olson: | 00:59:54 | Yeah, we don't get the other, the other letters. So they're assuming someone knows those letters. |
| John Bytheway: | 01:00:00 | Then I'm looking at the bottom line in verse 24, then ceased the work of the house of God, which is at Jerusalem. |
| Dr. Christina Olson: | 01:00:07 | So we've gone back in time again. |
| Hank Smith: | 01:00:09 | If I'm a reader of the history when it's published, it's meant to persuade me too, right? That we're the good guys, they're the bad guys, we were rebuilding, they tried to stop us. |
| Dr. Christina Olson: | 01:00:21 | Yeah. Now the temple stopped, right? So there's a halt in our plans. And then we get to chapter five. We're again back to the time of Zerubbabel, Jeshua. It mentions Haggai and Zechariah. These are names we're kind of familiar with. We have those books, the prophetic books, which I'm sure you'll talk about in other weeks. It just mentions them. The fact that the prophets are there, they're there at this foundation of building the |

temple. We read later in Haggai, they're complaining about the fact that the temple's not built yet. You've been here for this many decades and there's no temple yet. What are you guys doing? But here in chapter five, we have Ezra Nehemiah saying, okay, now we are building the temple. Our prophets prophesied it. We have this interesting connection to the prophets. Also, this is the very last time that we see Zerubbabel mentioned.

01:01:12 We probably have these prophets here. They're excited. Zerubbabel's here. We have our Davidic king coming back. We have our high priests. We have our prophets. Zerubbabel is here. They begin to build the temple of Jerusalem, and then we never hear about Zerubbabel from here on out. He kind of silently disappears from the scene. No one knows what happens. There's plenty of theories. You no longer have your Davidic king figure. We have our temple, it gets built in a couple years. In 515, we don't hear Zerubbabel's not part of any of this. This is one of those times, again, we've gone back in the past where probably these, some of these tensions aren't there as much, where it talks about this governor, Tatnai, who is one of the Persian governors, probably was installed about the time of King Darius. So he's kind of on a general survey of this province and seeing what's going on.

01:01:59 He's not antagonistic at all. He's just asking, you're building your temple. Who said you could do that? What's the backstory? Tell me what's going on. And then he sends to Babylon, these guys said that God is the one who commanded us to do it rather than Cyrus, which is interesting. They're focusing on God being the one to command them to build the temple. But he goes back to the king and says, these people say they had a decree they could build a temple. Is this true? In chapter six, you get this response from Darius. So we're still staying in the same time this time. We get that response from Darias saying, we looked in our records and oh yeah, Cyrus said they could go back and build their house or build the temple of God. Let them keep building it. An interesting contrast between these two relationships with these different governors maybe given that indication that the history is not quite as neat as we think or they want to show us.

01:02:51 We get more here. Now he's saying, yes, let them rebuild and then here's some more stuff to give them to help build their... Here's some more provisions. Here's more goods to go in their temple. So it's giving the, a little more idea of like a resurgence of building this temple. Even though we're focused on Zerubbabel, we've gotten the indication that that building had ceased. There's pretty good indication that Sheshbazzar did lay

the foundation back in 538 and there's been construction. There has been work on it. It's just not done yet. That's the issue. The temple is not complete yet. We've been here for this long. We need this temple.

John Bytheway: 01:03:26 I love the letters going back and forth. That's just fun. That, reminds me of some Book of Mormon stuff.

Dr. Christina Olson: 01:03:32 Yeah. And the cool thing about these letters too, actually, if you're reading in the Hebrew Bible, it actually switches to Aramaic, which is the official language of letters in the Persian Empire. Basically, like, the general language of the empire was Aramaic. To kind of keep the official nature of these texts, they leave it in Aramaic as they're writing these. And then when they go back to the narrative a little bit later, they'll switch back to Hebrew again.

Hank Smith: 01:03:56 Rebuilding is not as linear as you might think. I'm going to rebuild my life after some tragedy. It might not be a perfectly linear process. You have ups and downs in the rebuild. It's kinda like the Jazz. Right.

Dr. Christina Olson: 01:04:14 I was going to say the Salt Lake Temple, but Jazz is too. It took them 40 years. At one time they had to cover the foundations and redo it all. So it's the same kind of concept. Sometimes it does take a long time and doesn't always look exactly like you think it's going to look.

Hank Smith: 01:04:28 Because you want to say, oh, it's going to be amazing. We're back. We're going to rebuild. And it actually is, yeah, it's amazing, but it's also a struggle. We got to keep our energy up. We got to persevere because it's not going to be as easy or as perfect as we thought to rebuild. I like that. That's very human.

Dr. Christina Olson: 01:04:44 Towards the end, when Darius makes his decree saying, yes, go let them build their temple. No one disturb them. And then in verse 11, part of this declaration is, I've made this decree. Whoever alters this word or basically opposes it or does something against it. Let timber be pulled down from his house and let him be hanged thereon. Some translations are impaled on this. Let his house be made a dunghill. There's some pretty strong language for if you don't do this, it's pretty serious consequences. Your house will be a dunghill. Good insult there.

Hank Smith: 01:05:15 It seems like a dig towards their enemies. If you don't like us rebuilding the temple, well, look what he said about you.

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| Dr. Christina Olson: | 01:05:21 | And then we finally get the completion of the temple. It's dedicated. Everybody comes to celebrate. It has this huge long list of sacrifices. So this is another concept I bring up with my students in New Testament class. When we're talking about the temple and going to the temple to celebrate to sacrifice, we think about our temples today. It's a very pure, very clean, peaceful atmosphere. It is not peaceful. If you talk about how many sacrifices they had, that's a really bloody day. There's a lot of smells, a lot of blood. It's a really sensory experience to worship, to celebrate the temple and to worship. It would be very sensory for your whole body. This is a full plan. |
| John Bytheway: | 01:06:02 | Yeah. Imagine the noise, the smells, the animals. There are days when I think of that and think, I'm kind of glad we're not doing law of Moses anymore. Because this would be a noisy, messy place to come worship. |
| Hank Smith: | 01:06:16 | One time I was in Jerusalem and I had like a, one of those smoothies they offer, you know, almost everywhere. I took a wrong turn down like a butcher alley and oh my goodness, it was smelly. There was animal parts everywhere. And you're like, wow. I like what you said there, Christina. This is a sensory experience. |
| John Bytheway: | 01:06:38 | Yes, that's a good way to put it. They had open markets in the Philippines when I was on my mission and I was like, oh, this is changing my relationship to meat. It was something. Sensory experience is a good way to put it. |
| Hank Smith: | 01:06:53 | And also that burning meat too. You live in Texas. There's some barbecue joints. |
| Dr. Christina Olson: | 01:06:58 | All my neighbors have smokers. We smell it quite often. It's good barbecue. |
| Hank Smith: | 01:07:02 | All right, let's keep going. What do we do next? |
| Dr. Christina Olson: | 01:07:04 | Yeah. So we have these sacrifices and it refers again to according to the Book of Moses. And then it talks about the celebration of the Passover. But once again, we're connecting to the Passover, the Exodus, this return, just like it was for the people from Egypt as they're setting God back in the temple, back in their presence. |

John Bytheway: 00:01 Welcome to part two of Ezra and Nehemiah with Dr. Christina Olson.

Dr. Christina Olson: 00:06 Then chapter seven, we finally get to Ezra. The whole name of this book we don't even get to Ezra till chapter seven. This is another return group. We're actually at another group again coming up to Jerusalem. Zerubbabel and Jeshua were over in 521. Now we're to the time of Ezra, probably around 458. There's some debate on that again, historically-wise. Some people put Ezra actually later after Nehemiah. That's an interesting thing to think about. But for most traditions, we think, we see, we put Ezra at 458. So another return, he is returning with the king's backing behind him. He talks about Ezra being this scribe and this priest. He's also connected to, if you look even at the genealogy, again, genealogy is important. It connects him to all the way back to Aaron, the first high priest of the tabernacle. So he's connected to Aaron, he has that authority.

01:02 He's also connected to the scribes of Jerusalem, to the pre-exilic time. So he's got that authority in the Judaic community, this idea he is a priest, he is a scribe. In the KJV, it says a ready scribe, which you discussed at the beginning. Ready also means more like skilled or expert. And if we talk about scribes in the ancient Near East, it's not at all what we picture a scribe nowadays. They're not just writing. These are very involved people within administration, within the elite. They're the few people who can write. They're important figures within these systems. Even the fact that we're talking about Ezra having this release from the king to go to Jerusalem, give the law, but also check on everybody. And this is the same instruction that Nehemiah's going to get to. So he comes to teach the Torah. He again brings more supplies to the temple.

01:57 He's there to teach the people of Jerusalem. And then in later chapters, we'll get the words that he teaches, which is this law of Moses. So he is this bringer of the law back to the

community. So we have our temple. Now we're getting our law. This is the second aspect of this return.

Hank Smith: 02:14 Like a Moses 2.0.

Dr. Christina Olson: 02:16 Bringer of the law. Yeah. We'll see Ezra later in the book of Nehemiah. Again, these stories being brought together which shows us how he does really give that law.

Hank Smith: 02:26 So the rest of the book is Ezra teaching.

Dr. Christina Olson: 02:29 And dealing with some issues too. This goes a little bit back to the issues of imperfect community building. There's issues of intermarriage, which is actually not an issue in the law of Moses, but it becomes an issue here. They force people to be divorced from people who are not part of that community. So there's some sorrow there as that part of that building the community, that imperfect part of deciding who we are.

John Bytheway: 02:53 In verse seven, there went up some of the children of Israel and of the priests and the Levites and the singers and the porters and the Nethinims. Maybe Nethinim, because -IM is plural in Hebrew. What are Nethinims?

Dr. Christina Olson: 03:08 These are all personnel of the temple. So it's setting up the people that come into work at the temple. So we have priests. The singers are probably like musicians or people who help with the chanting. And then we have these porters. Other times they're called gatekeepers. They're probably more of the administrative part of the temple. And then we have these Nethinims that comes from the root natan, which means to give. So the givers of the temple really refers to more like the servants of the people, the people who are serving in the temple, which is kind of a cool base, right? Think about the people giving... They're temple workers, but they're giving. The ones that are giving to the temple, giving of themselves to do that.

Hank Smith: 03:47 This is great. I love understanding this. Ezra, he's a good guy, but you said he's doing some hard things.

Dr. Christina Olson: 03:53 Yeah. I mean, probably most of these leaders, right? They're good guys. They're important. They're good religious leaders. But doing hard things. Maybe the right choices, maybe not. We can't really judge that. It's not our place to judge the good or bad or what God specifically commanded him to do or not. We

just know that there are good and bad that are happening together.

Hank Smith: 04:15 Could I summarize it that way? Would that be okay, that 7 through 10 are Ezra's teachings and community building and solving issues, stuff like that?

Dr. Christina Olson: 04:23 Yeah, in reforms.

Hank Smith: 04:26 I know you're excited about the book of Nehemiah. What do we do with this book?

Dr. Christina Olson: 04:29 We're going to move on to the story because they were connected. This is just the next stage in rebuilding. We've got the temple. We've got the law. Now we need to build the city and its walls. The physical boundary of our community. This is what Nehemiah does for us. He builds our walls. I do love Nehemiah. Wrote some of my dissertation on some aspects of that because of what he does to it. I'll get into that. Starts out with Nehemiah. He is the cupbearer to the king, this Mashkeh Lamelech, which is a pretty important position. At any age we have cupbearers throughout history. The person that's close to the king that makes sure he doesn't die. He's a very, very trusted individual. And in the beginning of chapter one, it talks about some of his family members, a brother, or maybe someone in his community comes and gives him word about Jerusalem.

05:20 We're now probably about 445 BC. We don't completely know history. It says during the time of Artaxerxes, there's a couple different Artaxerxes. We don't know exactly, but most people put it with Artaxerxes the first who reigned from about 465 to 423. So we put Nehemiah probably around 445 coming to Jerusalem. And his brethren come and they say, this land is in ruins. Jerusalem is in ruins. The people are suffering. Nehemiah becomes very sorrowful. He's mourning because of the sadness that, of the people, which at the moment is kind of a little weird because you just read this really cool part about a temple being constructed and people being happy. And now we're sad again. Makes you pause, especially if you're hearing it, right? You're like, all right, we're happy. We're good. We're setting community. Oh, wait, we're in ruins again. But it makes you pause. You're thinking, oh, it's not done yet. We actually aren't complete. We've got the temple, we've got the laws. This job isn't done. This restoration's not complete. So we're still kind of sad because we haven't got everything ready yet.

Hank Smith: 06:21 That's real life. It's going well, but it's not sometimes. So...

Dr. Christina Olson: 06:25 Or it can be both again, right? The Persian period, Jerusalem is still in ruins. Economy is good, but not near like what it was before with some of the past kings. So he's sad. He comes to the king. The king is, notices his countenance, he says. He sees that he's sorrowful and asks him what's wrong. In chapter two, we get to that one. These are the verses that I think are really significant and what I talk about a lot in my work. In verse three, the king asks, why are you sorrowful? Are you sick? And he says, no, I'm not sick. I'm just really sad. Why should not my countenance be sad? I'm going to give you the King James version and then give you my own translation. The city, the place of my father's sepulchres lie waste and the gates are consumed with fire. They have been destroyed.

07:12 Whether we're talking about the historical memory of them being destroyed in fires from the Babylonians, or if there's recent fires, we don't really know that one, but we get this idea of this really severe destruction. And then the king asks him, so what's your request? And he says, if it pleases the king, if your servant has found favor in thy sight, send me to Judah. Send me to the city of those tombs of my fathers so I can rebuild it. This is where I pause a lot to think about this context of what he's calling. So he doesn't actually name the city Jerusalem here. In this whole conversation, he doesn't say, oh, Jerusalem's destroyed. I got to go fix it. He just refers to the house of the tombs of my fathers. I mentioned about tombs and them being important for inheritance and the fact that people will come in and take bones out of tombs to desecrate and lose that inheritance.

08:02 But also tombs being this very permanent aspect of a family, of a house, this household, this kindred of families and lineages is so important having that tomb. That's your claim to your land, your claim to inheritance. That's why we keep talking about Abraham and the Cave of Machpelah. You see that throughout the stories into the books of Kings and Chronicles. We talk about the burials of the kings in the city of David and Kings and Chronicles. It's very important to note where burial is and to know and to remember and to maintain your tombs. There's these traditions in the ancient world and actually continuing of tombs being these places of memory. We continue to come back to our tombs. We come back to where we have buried our people, both to retain that memory of them, also that connection to them.

08:52 It was like so much more in ancient times. We talked about the fact that Lehi and his family left. They left their home, but they left the tombs of their fathers also. No one was left to care for

their family tomb, to care for their families. One really cool thing that in my research, is I found, I look at the tombs around Jerusalem, the destroyed ruins and the settlements. The sediment's a lot smaller. So there's not as many people living there. Some of the elite were gone. But if you look at these tombs that were built, so they're carved into rock, they were built during the Iron Age, during the time of the kings. In the tradition of barrow, you'd go in this tomb, like a room with some benches around it. You'd lay out the dead, observe the dead and have a ritual of mourning for about a week.

09:36 Then you'd leave the body there. Probably you'd return over the course of a year. But then after a year when the body's disintegrated and the bones are left, you gather up the bones and you put them into a hole or some type of collecting space. So you're gathering all the bones of your fathers, the people that you are inheritors from. They also have remains and goods and pottery. And there's a site called Ketef Hinnom or these Mamilla tombs that are near the city of Jerusalem. They notice there's continuity in some of the material. Even though there's the destruction of the Babylonians, you still see material from the Persian period in these tombs. There's this indication that these tombs were continued to be used to be remembered. They weren't robbed out like a lot of tombs are. In the ancient world, tombs are like free game for robbers.

10:25 But someone had memory of the tombs as well as ability to protect the tombs to make sure they weren't robbed out because plenty of others were around, especially around Jerusalem. But there's a few times that weren't, that weren't robbed out and they continue to have goods in them from the Persian period. One of the things I argue is these people who are living Jerusalem, living in ruins, it's been destroyed. They're farther away from these tombs because the city's a lot smaller. They're still going to these tombs. They're still remembering their dead because this claim to their dead is really important to this claim to both their inheritance and their claim to the city as well as those traditions that they're passing on in this worship of Yahweh. When Nehemiah comes here and says to the king, this is the city or this household of the graves of my fathers.

11:11 He is staking that claim to the king of Persia who also, for them, this idea of tombs, they have these grand house-like tombs that they have traditions of in Persia too so the king would know this. He'd directly associate this idea of these tombs of these kings being important in claims to land. So he's, instead of just saying Jerusalem, he's saying, this is my inherited land that is in ruins and destroyed. This is what the legacy, the traditions of

my family rests on. My identity is over here in ruins. That sets the stage for the whole reason I'm going back to this city is because this is where my ancestors are. They have that claim to the land and I need to rebuild that and retain that memory.

Hank Smith: 11:52 Yeah. That's interesting when we talk about redeeming the dead. Might not just be about temple work, but about rebuilding the legacy they left and connecting to them.

Dr. Christina Olson: 12:06 Yeah. But also just anchor points and tradition. During the time when I was writing my dissertation and getting into this material, actually towards the end, my dad passed away. It was very real to me, this idea of what do we do with our dead? How do we bury them? What do we think about what's important to us? Why do we care about burying our dead? What are we remembering about them? And it really is a very intentional, a very personal aspect of who you are and your identity. And you carry those traditions and those stories on. And you have that here in the text, this idea, this is our anchor point. This is my tradition of remembering my past.

Hank Smith: 12:46 Wow. You were writing a dissertation. You had two little boys and your dad passes away.

Dr. Christina Olson: 12:54 It was a rough time. Going back to these times when things aren't always fun, but in having those anchor points, that really drove home to me. There are certain traditions that I can hang onto even if other things are rough or struggling when it comes to especially the gospel or things I learned right from my parents, from my dad that I can hold onto, that make me part of this community even if I don't always feel like it. If I don't feel like I'm being the perfect community member, I'm not the perfect churchgoer right now. I'm not doing all these things right. But sometimes it does go back to my dad knew this was true, right? He taught me these traditions. My parents taught me how to do this. It's important for me to continue it to my own son. Sometimes maybe I go to church some days because I just need to take my son to church. He needs to go to church even if I'm not feeling like going to church. We build upon those traditions and those anchor points. I think that's one of the things that Nehemiah is doing, is building on the anchor.

Hank Smith: 13:51 Christina, is Nehemiah giving up a pretty nice position to go back and do a bunch of work?

Dr. Christina Olson: 13:59 Yeah. Yeah, he's probably living in the palace, having some life of luxury there with servants and having the ear of the king. And he doesn't completely forego that. He builds the temple. At one

point, he actually does go back to Persia, but then he'll return again 12 years later. But yeah, it's not a simple thing to just be like, hey, I'll just go up. I'm going to go to Jerusalem for a bit. It's a big step, big thing to do.

John Bytheway: 14:24 If you are in Persia, present day what? Iraq? How long does it take you to get to Jerusalem?

Dr. Christina Olson: 14:33 Going back to Ezra, part of chapter seven actually really does get into not actually the trip, but the preparation for the trip. I mean, it says it takes five months to get there. You definitely cross a desert.

John Bytheway: 14:44 Wow, that seems dangerous too because those vessels were a lot of gold and silver and precious things in your, in the open traveling with them. We had our stake conference recently and President Swinton, our stake president, talked about going back to help rebuild the Nauvoo Temple. How he drove in air-conditioned comfort 19 hours from Salt Lake City back to Nauvoo and helped pour concrete for that. And how he pondered how much longer a walk it was for the pioneers to go the other direction from Nauvoo to Salt Lake City. But how important it was to build a temple. The travel time and effort is magnified so much when we think about what these people did. And like you said, Hank, Nehemiah has got a high position and he's like, yeah, I'll go. I mean, that's impressive.

Hank Smith: 15:35 He drinks yummy stuff for a living. I would love that job.

Dr. Christina Olson: 15:38 He might die, but...

John Bytheway: 15:40 Where's my cup bearer and the Dr. Pepper? Yeah.

Hank Smith: 15:44 Maybe it might be a bit of a stretch, but I might be able to say, what am I willing to do to go to the temple to help my ancestors? Nehemiah is sacrificing a lot to go to the temple and rebuild. How much am I willing to sacrifice to go to the temple and return to my ancestors there?

John Bytheway: 16:05 If only we had some temples close by in Utah where we live, you know, if only there were maybe one or two options or 10 or 12.

Hank Smith: 16:14 Yeah.

Dr. Christina Olson: 16:16 Babylon, like the capital of Babylon was part of modern day Iraq and then Persia is a little more south and modern day Iran.

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| Hank Smith: | 16:24 | I heard somewhere once that there are Jews in Iran who say they've been there since the exile. |
| Dr. Christina Olson: | 16:31 | Yeah. Well, actually a lot of Arab countries, but especially Iraq and Iran, do have Jews living there basically since the time of exile up until like the 1940s when there were issues and they left. There's a long history of Judaism in those other countries as much as we like think about Israel being right, being the place of Judaism. We have a whole Talmud from Babylon, right? This whole manuscript of the Hebrew Bible. They were writing their scripture over there too. |
| John Bytheway: | 16:58 | Of all the sons of Israel, of Jacob, it seems like the Jews are the ones, Judah, who have always remembered their identity and the rest of us have to be reminded from a patriarchal blessing. |
| Hank Smith: | 17:15 | When I read about Nehemiah, I'm like, wow, good guy so far. Should I be thinking that, Christina? |
| Dr. Christina Olson: | 17:21 | For the most part, yes. |
| Hank Smith: | 17:23 | Yeah, he cares about his homeland. |
| Dr. Christina Olson: | 17:25 | Yeah. He does care about his land. And we see that throughout there. The cool thing about Nehemiah is throughout this story, whenever there's kind of time of conflict and chaos, we get a prayer from Nehemiah. He's kind of like our prayer guy. Like in the end of chapter one, this is that sorrow of Jerusalem and this issue there. He ends it with a prayer to God even after he's spoken. So he's first he's spoken to the king, now he's speaking to God. So you'll see like bits of times he will always respond to conflict with a prayer towards God. |
| Hank Smith: | 18:00 | Interesting. Says that he tells them the things of God and they laugh at him. He doesn't fall into it. He's like, no, I'm going to keep bearing my testimony. |
| Dr. Christina Olson: | 18:10 | Definitely a very strong figure. |
| Hank Smith: | 18:13 | I might walk through the end of chapter two with my teenage sons. Just this little exchange. I told them of the hand of God which was upon me. They laughed and scorned and despised me. Then I answered them and said, the God of heaven, he will prosper us. I like that little back and forth. I talked about God, they laughed at me, so I continued to talk about God. |

Dr. Christina Olson: 18:38 Yeah. And that's kind of like part and parcel of how Nehemiah reacts and responds to these adversaries. So we finally get the names of the adversaries similar to the ones they were talking about in Ezra Nehemiah. We have Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem. These are regional leaders. Then they probably do have pretty good claim to the land. And some of the other chapters later, they're related to the high priests of the temple. One of their sons is married to the daughter of the high priest. They're not really that much outside the community. They are very much part of it. They're worshiping Yahweh. They're related to members of the priests of the temple. But we get this opposition between, hey, Nehemiah's come. He's building the wall. A little bit we get this parallel with Ezra. They want to help. Nehemiah says, no, you're not part of our people. You can't help. So they get mad.

19:32 We get some more letters to the kings. But also we get some of this drama. Right when he comes, he has opposition right away. These leaders meet him. They're like, you're kind of upsetting the balance of our system. We don't like you. So it says at nighttime, he has to secretly go out and go around the city to check the city in secret. And then he'll tell everybody what he's here to do. We get this more direct confrontation. These leaders are saying, we don't like you. You shouldn't be here. And he responds with, I should be here. This goes back to, again, that claim to the land. My ancestors are here. The tombs of my fathers are here. You don't have claim to this land. He's saying, you don't have the tombs of your fathers here. This is not where you are from. And he's really going back to that message saying, I'm clarifying our boundaries here.

20:17 You don't have your ancestors buried here. I do, so it's our land and it's our God who is the God of heaven. And this is actually a really interesting phrase, this God of heaven term. We start to see it in Ezra as well as into Nehemiah. This is a term that's not very common. You see only in post-exilic texts like Daniel, Job, Psalms, you get it twice in Genesis, but it's not really a common word for God beforehand. You also don't see in Ezra Nehemiah any other description of any other gods. Whereas in the past stories, you're going against the priests of other gods. You're acknowledging a priest of Baal. That's a pretty common antagonist in the earlier stories of the kings. But in Ezra Nehemiah, you have no mention of any other gods. You're really getting to see these distinct signs of our God is the one God, he is universal.

21:10 He is in the heavens. He is overall. He's directing. He's that puppermaster with these other foreign kings, with Cyrus, with

other leaders. God is the one king, he is overall. They're starting to not even acknowledge this idea that other people have other gods because God is our supreme God. We're building a temple and he dwells there, but his presence can be felt or seen anywhere else. And this goes back to that development of what becomes Judaism, this fact that we can worship without our temple. We can have access to God even if we're not at his temple as well. Temple's important, but you don't absolutely have to have that temple to worship God. That goes back to that Ezra, what he did with setting the boundaries. Was it right? Was it not? We don't know. They seem to be wanting to be worshiping God too of Yahweh.

21:59 It's their same God, but they're not part of that community. And later on, they build a temple at Samaria, which again, when we're reading it, because we're reading it from the view of this, the Hebrew Bible from the Old Testament, we're like, oh, bad, there's a temple over there. Or you could also look at it as, hey, these people are also worshiping God. They want a place to worship. There's some political struggles in there too going on as who has control over this house of God?

Hank Smith: 22:24 Christina, in your mind, if they just allow other people to come and worship with, they save themselves a bunch of problems. But at the same time, in their problems, they're trying to be faithful in the problems they created. That is my life. I'm trying to be faithful in the very problems I created.

Dr. Christina Olson: 22:44 Right. You take your kid to school, you're like, we're going to go to church. We're going to be respectful. We're going to be righteous. And the whole time you're not very righteous when you warn him and threaten him to be righteous at church. I think it also gets to this idea that it's complicated. There's not always a perfect answer to follow God's law, to worship, or to do, you do the best you can. Know that you can unintentionally make wrong choices, but it's just that complexity of being human, of believing God and trying to do the best you can.

Hank Smith: 23:13 Yeah. Was it a good idea to do that boundary maintenance? Because it sure causes them a bunch of problems. Maybe they'd be here saying, oh, you don't realize they wanted to change things. I don't know.

Dr. Christina Olson: 23:25 On the other side too, maybe that was the reason they were able to retain who they are as we are Jews to retain that identity by making sure their community is smaller instead of expanding it and maybe it diffusing into other things. Maybe some of both.

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| Hank Smith: | 23:40 | It's the opposite of missionary work. It's like, no, do not come in. We want to be part of it. No. Lock the doors. |
| Dr. Christina Olson: | 23:46 | Yeah. That makes me think of the fact that again, this is like God's gospel, the basic doctrines are true, but different aspects of it or how we practice it change over time. It looks different between different decades, different centuries. Our church today looks very, very different from the early church with the things that we practice and do and how it looks, but we're still based in those basic doctrines. |
| Hank Smith: | 24:11 | Then you could say that their adversaries, they're not doing the right thing either, even though they weren't allowed in. Going to attack and kill these people and stop their work, probably not the best idea either. |
| Dr. Christina Olson: | 24:23 | We have very clear picture saying these are not the good guys. They're plotting secret plans to come and kill Nehemiah. If we skip over chapter three is another kind of a genealogy list, which is important and that's the people building the wall. But if we skip that for now, this establishing part. If we go back to chapter four, Sanballat and all the other enemies, right? They're plotting to kill Nehemiah. There is a lot of conflict going on in dangerous aspects to this wall building. |
| Hank Smith: | 24:51 | The dangerous job building the temple. |
| John Bytheway: | 24:54 | Look at verse nine. We made our prayer unto God, set a watch against them day and night. Verse 18, the builders, everyone had his sword girded by his side and so builded. It's a dangerous job to build the temple. |
| Dr. Christina Olson: | 25:09 | They're like building with a hammer and they got a sword on the other hand. |
| Hank Smith: | 25:13 | The drama is definitely building. Does that take us to chapter five? |
| Dr. Christina Olson: | 25:17 | Yes and no. They've been building the wall. They have these outside adversaries. Suddenly we get to chapter five where it says there's a great cry of the people and of their wives against their brother and the Jews. Then you have this whole issue of actually some internal strife. Now they've got issues within their community. People are charging interest on loans. They're already it's a hard economic system. There's tributes to the king. They're paying taxes. But also now it's internally they're becoming in debt to one another. It says they're taking slaves of |

one another. This goes very much against the law of Moses where they're absolutely not supposed to take slaves of one another.

25:58 We moved the building part and now we're looking at the inside of the community. So it's kind of saying we're actually not done with figuring out who our community is and building that community and who we are because now we've got to deal with this internal problems. Besides all the other outside, it's like problems they're dealing with. It's a really random, like, just throw it in the story. Because yeah, we want to see what happens with the wall and all these opposition, but you're like, nope, first we got to work on inside. First, we got to deal with this conflict. There's Nehemiah for you. He had to deal with all those issues. Seems like a pretty good leader.

Hank Smith: 26:28 I think of every Bishop, Relief Society President or Stake President who's like trying to deal with all these external problems and then my people start fighting each other and you're like, oh okay. Internal problems now.

Dr. Christina Olson: 26:43 This is the time when Nehemiah goes to his community and says, you got to stop. He makes them give back the interest. Kind of rights the wrongs. This is where he also says, I'm a governor of Persia, but I'm working alongside you. I'm not taking your taxes. I'm not taking your tributes. A little bit of a proof to God saying, I'm doing your work. I'm being the leader you want me to, and I'm being this example. Then we get to chapter six. We're back to the wall building. This is where the antagonism hypes up with this idea of these leaders trying to kill Nehemiah to assassinate him through different combinations and plots of inviting him to these meetings saying, we need to come meet with you. And he says, no, I'm doing my work here. I'm not going to go, knowing they want to do him harm.

27:31 They bribe a temple official, which he also sees behind those lies saying, come be safe in the temple. Come lock yourself up in the temple so they don't kill you. They're trying to kill you. Nehemiah goes, I'm not even allowed to be in the temple. I'm not a priest. So he sees behind the lengths that these antagonists are going, these enemies, to kill him and to stop this work of this wall building. If we set it within the ancient near-eastern context, we think it's walls around a ruined city. We actually don't have a lot of archeological evidence for walls during the Persian period. If there were walls, they would've been not very well-built. And this is not the greatest city in the world during the time of the Persian period. But this concept of

wall building is actually related to kingship in the ancient near east.

28:13 The legacy of a king is building a city, walling and that's protecting your city, being able to withstand any threat. This concept of wall building, it could be seen and they threaten that. They say, we're going to write the king and say you are building a wall. You're trying to rebel. You're trying to usurp the Persian king and become your own king. Because wall building does mean, in some sense, this idea of kingship. This is where Nehemiah goes back and says, actually, the king told me to come do this so I'm okay. They've built their temple. They've got their God, their religion. They've got their law to help them guide and worship. Now they've got their community and their nation back with these walls completed. The city and the walls around it are the completion of this return. This antagonism is really showing we have overcome all these odds to bring ourselves back to where we need to be after all this time away, after everything we've lost. We've overcome that all and we are now building and have built our city.

Hank Smith: 29:15 Chapter six is a great place to do a little comparison, don't you think? With Lehonti and Amalickiah. Here, if I'm learning from Christina correctly, Nehemiah is building the walls of the city and they're like, come on down here so we can kill you. And he's like, no, I am doing a great work. I cannot come down. And they keep coming up. Four times. He says, nope, I'm not coming down. And he never does. John, I know you are famous for the story of Lehonti and Amalickiah. So if you wouldn't mind sharing that, let's compare that to this story.

John Bytheway: 29:54 Thank you. In the Book of Mormon, as you know, there's this guy, Amalickiah. They're in the middle of the reign of the judges, but he wants to be a king. Captain Moroni has to chase him out and Amalickiah goes among the Lamanites, persuades them, hey, let's go attack the Nephites and force them to make me king, because the election didn't work. He gathers this army, but partway there, just to shorten the story, a character named Lehonti says, we have no reason to go fight against the Nephites. He takes a bunch of followers, the more part of the Lamanite army and goes up on top of the Mount Antipas. All of a sudden, here's Amalickiah down there going, I can't overcome the Nephites with the small army. What do I do? So he sends messengers to go up the mountain and say, hey, Lehonti, come down and talk to Amalickiah. Lehonti says, no. So they go back down and they say, Amalickiah, he said he's not coming. And they say, well, go ask him again.

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| | 30:56 | Tell him to come down here. So they go all the way up to the Mount Antipas again and say, hi, Lehonti, it's us again. Amalickiah's boys. Listen, he just wants to talk to you. Come down from your mountain. And Lehonti says, no. So they come back down again and they say, Amalickiah, he's not coming down. And you've heard me joke. Amalickiah says, they'll be coming down the mountain when they come. I wish it said that, that would be funny. He says, go tell him to come down. Tell him I just want to talk to him. So they go up again. I mean, there's a phrase that Lehonti uses that sounds great. We are fixed in our mind with a determined resolution. We will not be subjected to go against the Nephites. They say, okay. So they come back down and Amalickiah says, it's not in the text, but he probably says, if you want something done right, you've got to do it yourself. He goes up, sends the embassy the fourth time, and they say, Amalickiah is just down the path. |
| | 31:55 | Give me that pine cone. I'll show you. Boom, right? And they pop. He's just right down there. I just love this idea of calm down just a little bit. The ways we can apply that is kind of fun. Lehonti comes down a little bit, sees Amalickiah who's called cunning and flattering and a murderer. And Amalickiah says, hey, I'm not your enemy. I'm your friend. Again, I'm assuming because he's flattering. He says, I just want to learn from you, Lehonti. You're such a great general. Here's my idea. Bring your larger army down in the nighttime. They'll surround my smaller army. When my smaller army sees you, they'll say, oh, let's surrender. Those guys are Lamanites. That's my brother in fact. Hi, Ted. Let's just be one big happy army again. Lehonti says, okay. And we're like, don't do this, Lehonti. He comes down in the nighttime, surrounds Amalickiah's army. |
| | 32:50 | Amalickiah's army wakes up, everything they planned happens. And Amalickiah says, I will surrender my army to you if you will make me second in command. The way the Book of Mormon says that he desired to be a second leader. I just want to learn from you. So what happens? Yeah, they all wake up. The Amalickiah's army surrenders to Lehonti. Now, Lehonti is in command. Amalickiah is second in command. And you both know if you're second in command and you really want to be first in command and you have no conscience whatsoever, what do you do? |
| Hank Smith: | 33:21 | You got to kill him. |
| John Bytheway: | 33:22 | And how does he kill him? Which is so... Thank you, Mormon, for abridging it like this. |

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| Hank Smith: | 33:27 | He poisons him by degrees. |
| John Bytheway: | 33:31 | If I come at you with a sword, with a javelin, with a cimeter, you know my intent. But if I come at you with a refreshing beverage, you don't know my intent. That's Amalickiah. He poisoned him by degrees. His last heartbeat, he thought he was in command. But I think where you're going here is, isn't it interesting? Four times Lehonti was invited to come down. He finally did and went from being an example to a warning. But here, Nehemiah says, I'm doing a great work. I cannot come down. Why should the work cease? They sent unto me four times after this sort. You're right, Hank, in my margin, I've got Alma 46 and 47. |
| Hank Smith: | 34:13 | I think it's a great contrast. Look at the one difference. He was doing something. Lehonti was up there. He wasn't doing anything. But Nehemiah's like, no, I'm actually doing some pretty important stuff here. I'm too busy for you. I think that putting those two stories side by side can be really helpful. By the way, all this in Nehemiah is done in the plain of Ono. When he says, come down, you don't just say no. You say - |
| John Bytheway: | 34:40 | Oh no. Do you know what else? Think about Jesus on the pinnacle of the temple. How he's invited to come down and he never does it. Those are the examples we want to look to, I guess. Sadly, not Lehonti. |
| Hank Smith: | 34:56 | I try to make my teenage boys too busy to sin. I am doing a great work and cannot come down. Plus you want to kill me. That's kind of keeping me from coming down to you. |
| John Bytheway: | 35:07 | I think the lesson was named I'm Doing a Great Work because President Uchtdorf highlighted this story in a conference talk in General Conference in 2009. I think that's why they named it, I'm doing a great work. |
| Hank Smith: | 35:20 | That'd be a great one to follow with your youth. Give them the talk, get a highlighter out for each of them, and let them go through that talk. Thanks for letting us take that little detour, Christina. |
| Dr. Christina Olson: | 35:30 | I like the connection to think about the fact that he's working versus Lehonti who's not. And this idea that it's really easy to allow complacency being the thing that kind of drives us from God. It's really easy. We got a lot of easy aspects of our lives and our societies, especially compared to this ancient world. They kind of had to always be working. We have a lot more leisure time. Sometimes that's the most dangerous aspect of our lives. |

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| John Bytheway: | 35:56 | And distraction too, you might say. |
| Dr. Christina Olson: | 35:59 | Yeah. |
| John Bytheway: | 36:00 | One of the things I've heard Hank teach is be careful to discern who are your friends and who are your enemies because Nehemiah clearly knew what they were up to. Sounds like Lehonti was not quite sure. Is this a friend or an enemy? And especially a guy that offers you a beverage. |
| Hank Smith: | 36:18 | If you're doing something you swore, I would never do that. And now I'm doing that thing? You're being poisoned. And isn't it interesting that Lehonti thinks he's in control the entire time, but he lost control the moment he came down just a little bit. That's when he actually lost the control of this situation. Wow. Thanks, John. Thanks for doing that. Thanks, Christina. Let's keep going. What happens to Nehemiah next? |
| Dr. Christina Olson: | 36:43 | All right. Well, he finally finishes the wall. Got that in verse 15. The wall was finished in the 25th day of the month of Elul. The thing that you kind of expect to see in this story is, all right, we're happy. Our wall is built. But it continues. The story continues saying, and there was still opposition. And then we can get a full circle with chapter seven going back to, again, these books being together, going back to this idea. We've got our temple, we've got our law, we've got our city and our walls. Now we're bringing them together. Now we have Ezra returning. They probably never actually interacted. But we have the story of Ezra coming back and giving and teaching the law to the people, which is also a really interesting different aspect of the religion that they've never seen before. This idea that he is not only giving the law orally, so speaking it to them, but he's also having the other priests and scribes go and teach. |
| | 37:37 | So they're going to the people to teach them a law, to help them understand it. They're really making this more of a communal aspect of worship. You had never seen this before. They're giving them this control or this connection to God that you hadn't had before. The priests were doing that. The king was doing it. It was his job to be the mediator with God. We are a community now. We are a people. And now it's in all of our hands, the community's hands to do this individually. You learn the law, you follow it, and you worship God according to that. |
| Hank Smith: | 38:11 | Christina, they are now a community. The rebuild has, for all intents and purposes, has happened. What's the rest of the book about? |

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| Dr. Christina Olson: | 38:20 | It's a little bit of this random conglomeration of stories in here. In chapter seven, it has the little indication. They finished the law. There's still the opposition. Chapter 12, as a community, they walk around the city and they end up at one of the gates of the temple in this procession. Chapter 8, they bring Ezra in, and it's the people asking Ezra. Ezra, you have the law, teaches the law, which is when he reads the law, shares aloud, teaches the people. We get that communal worship aspect. So that takes one day. One day they do the law, everybody's participating in the law. Verse 10, they have this idea of celebration going on. So the wall's built, they're learning the law. And he says unto them, go your way, eat the fat, drink. So celebrate, celebrate this idea that the walls are built. The last line of that verse is really nice too. |
| | 39:08 | It says, "For the joy of the Lord is your strength." The word that's used for joy there is not the common word that's used, this general idea of joy. That word is different. Simcha for this just general joy. The word they use in verse 10 is called is chedvah. And this is actually only used one other time in the Hebrew Bible in Chronicles, and it's used in the context of joy and strength. So there's this play on words that saying that the joy of the Lord is your strength. It's a different kind of joy than just a general idea of happiness or joy. |
| Hank Smith: | 39:40 | Only found in one other place. |
| Dr. Christina Olson: | 39:42 | Then the second day, this is when it gets more to the leaders, the priests, the heads of the families. And we get another, this reinstating of that Festival of Booths, the Sukkot tradition. Again, bringing back to connecting to our exodus full circle. Now we are celebrating the booth. We are telling all the people to build their own sukkot, their own booths, to celebrate it. It is a communal time of joy and aspect to celebrate this in a way that hadn't been done before. |
| Hank Smith: | 40:12 | That's tabernacles, correct? |
| Dr. Christina Olson: | 40:14 | Yes. Mostly just any type of indication of a non-secure building, a residence. And even in verse 17, when it talks about it, it talks about the people who are doing it are all the congregation of them that were come again out of the captivity made booths. Again, the people that came out of captivity from this current exile, but also referring back to those captivity in Egypt. Ending the connection, that story with Ezra and Nehemiah. We get into later chapters 11, 12, 13. They're finishing up the story with continuing to do reforms, set up the law. This is where we get another issue of actually the same issue of intermarriage, but all |

going into this idea of establishing our community and defining the people that we are. The ending of Ezra Nehemiah, it doesn't leave you in a happy place. You are happy, but you're also not.

41:07 We are exiled. We got the edict from Cyrus. So you want Ezra and Nehemiah to be this culmination of this all, right? We're good, we're happy, we're fulfilled, but they're not. Which is why now it is that bridge into the New Testament. They haven't completely got there yet. We're still in this period of return and rebuild. And that's the heritage of Judaism and how it develops. We're still in this. They're always looking forward to that hope for the future, remembering the past and the traditions, but there's still more to come.

Hank Smith: 41:38 Christina, this has been fantastic. I feel like I really understand these texts so much more. John, I've said this before, that part of worshiping God is worshiping God with your mind, might, mind and strength. So I feel like when I take the time to listen to someone who knows their stuff like Christina and really understand, I feel like that's a form of worship.

John Bytheway: 42:02 I love that we don't check our brains at the door when we come to church. It's like, no, learn about it. I'm reading in Nehemiah eight when Ezra stood up to read and I'm thinking, how exciting if you had lost the book of the law, how exciting to read it. Do you mind if I read Nehemiah 8:3? He read therein before the street that was before the water gate from the morning until midday before the men and the women and those that could understand and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law. Skip over to verse 8. So they read in the book of the law of God distinctly and gave the sense. And the footnote says gave the sense means gave a commentary by the power of the Holy Ghost and caused them to understand the reading. Then comes that verse you highlighted, Christina, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. Imagine you haven't heard this for years or decades, they're reading this and how they would sit there all day and listen to it.

Dr. Christina Olson: 43:10 You might have heard parts of it, but to actually have it, to listen to it and then be taught it, to learn and to be saying, okay, now let's actually tell you to understand it rather than just hearing it. It's giving them a chance to be participating in it.

Hank Smith: 43:24 It's exactly what you did today for us, Christina. You gave the sense. You explained it to us.

John Bytheway: 43:30 Gave us some backstory and...

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| Hank Smith: | 43:32 | It's really fun, to understand these things. Christina, let me ask you as a biblical scholar, you might think, oh, you'll lose your faith. You study biblical scholarship, you'll lose your faith, yet you and so many others like you that we've had on this year, it increases their faith. What's that experience been like? |
| Dr. Christina Olson: | 43:51 | Maybe just changes my faith. One of the things that draws me to Ezra Nehemiah is that idea of community or figuring out your place or your identity. I'm not a super emotional person. I don't always connect on the emotional level, I guess, for me. And you talked about this idea too, that the glory of God is intelligence, but that's part of worshiping God is learning about him and learning the facts and the stories and the traditions. And that's to me what really gets me. That's how I practice my spirituality, my faith is when I learn better and when I know it, then I can say, yes, I really do know it. When I'm telling you this, that's my testimony. That is me saying this happened. There's these awesome things in the book. I love the writers of these biblical texts. They were brilliant. The way they drew in different traditions and stories and played with words, they must have been inspired somehow. You see that in the text. And so I love getting into that text, the scripture to see these are the workings of God in a way that's very tangible and yes, complicated because we're complicated. And learning that nitty-gritty of the issues of that really helps in my way find my path to God, how I live my religion. |
| Hank Smith: | 45:05 | Wow. That's so well said. |
| John Bytheway: | 45:07 | Well, I want to be a ready scribe one of these days. That's my goal. |
| Hank Smith: | 45:13 | I really enjoyed the human part of this, which is, yeah, these are great people and they're inspired and they're making mistakes. The Lord is helping them deal with those mistakes and yet still have wonderful experiences. That's my life. That's my experience. |
| Dr. Christina Olson: | 45:30 | These are kind of forgotten books and maybe we feel that in our life sometimes, right? |
| Hank Smith: | 45:35 | We talked about this before. A lot of people are going through rebuilds in their life. You want them to be glorious and perfect, but they're not. And that's okay. |
| John Bytheway: | 45:45 | Some ideas I never knew before that they took their bones. Just be in the proximity of your ancestors. I think I take that for |

granted. When I go down 33rd South, sometimes I'll salute mom and dad because that's where that Wasatch Lawn is where they're buried. Imagine having to leave that where I could never do that. And that's really an interesting thing you brought up, especially in our tradition, our families, our ancestors being so important. This was important for them to go back to Jerusalem. I love it.

Hank Smith: 46:21 Christina, a big part of this was Ezra studying and explaining scripture. We could almost insert your name in there. Christina, who studies and explains scripture. Why do you enjoy that so much? I do it too. I'm not to the scholarship that you are, but I... And John loves it too. We love reading, understanding, and then explaining scripture. I can tell you love it. So I just want to know why you love it.

Dr. Christina Olson: 46:49 Back to that idea of knowledge is spiritual power. Opens the door for a lot of people. Sometimes I feel like all of us have some degree of, I don't feel the same as this person. I'm not worshiping the same, or I must not be doing something right to be part of this church or, you know, this community or this ward that I'm in. I'm not the same. So then when I can teach scripture and show there are different paths or journeys to finding this community of God. When I teach scripture and show that here's the complexity, here's the beauty of just being an imperfect person and God works through everybody like that. Sometimes it's really just fun to show the imperfection of people in the text, even though there's good parts too. So teaching the good part. But I really like teaching the parts that you don't always think about or doing the stories that you don't always want to read because they're not nice and happy all the time. Because that's our life. So it's the reality of our life.

Hank Smith: 47:45 In speaking to the messiness of scripture and the messiness of life, sometimes we get in our head that righteousness looks a certain way. You're supposed to have ups, do a little better and do a little better and do a little better. What happens if you take a step backwards or sideways? I've noticed that as you've taught us today, you're saying, hey, that's okay. That's part of this. It's definitely not perfect. It's quite messy.

Dr. Christina Olson: 48:12 That's really why I love reading some of these texts like this and these stories. We go all directions when it comes to worship and to life and to how we live it and how we connect to God. If you look at the Psalms, they kind of run the whole gamut of worship of feelings. We also have an Old Testament to show us it can be really chaotic. And I am definitely part of that chaos. My life is very much chaos. We're not where we thought we'd be in life.

There's a talk someone gave and in my ward a couple years ago who talks about seasons of life. And I really liked her comparison, this idea that we're all in different seasons. And then each season, our worship and our connection with God might look a little different. Maybe we backpedal a little bit. Now I'm in the midst of kids struggling to make sure they get to church.

48:58 My husband plays the organ, so I sit with them in sacrament meeting. I have no idea what's being said. My focus is to get them to sit in the chair and that's my worship maybe to make sure they learn these traditions or practices of just going to church and being part of the community. Whereas at some point, they'll be older, they'll sit better, I'll start listening more, and then I'll do something a little different. It just looks different for us all. And that's okay because that's that promise of God in the text that he's always there. He's always going to fulfill his promises either when we're ready or when he's ready and the way it should be, even if it's not in the way that we expect it to be. And that's really the beauty of, especially the Old Testament and the things we learn from there.

Hank Smith: 49:40 So well said. Thank you for that. John, what a great day.

John Bytheway: 49:45 We did have a great time.

Hank Smith: 49:46 I've been really touched. I'm really going to think through the non-linear worship. I think that's beautiful. It's okay for life to be messy. You're making great decisions. You're making poor decisions. There is great joy and there's also tears. Sometimes you can't tell the difference between the two. I love it. Christina, you've been just fantastic today. Thank you for your time.

Dr. Christina Olson: 50:09 Thank you. It's been fun to go through the scriptures and do that.

Hank Smith: 50:12 Yeah, this is our idea of a good time. With that, we want to thank Dr. Christina Olson for spending her time with us today. We want to thank our executive producer, Shannon Sorensen, our sponsors, David and Verla Sorensen. And every episode we remember our founder, Steve Sorensen. We hope you'll join us next week. We're going to keep going through the Old Testament on followHIM. As a thank you to our wonderful listeners, we'd love to gift you the digital version of our book, Finding Jesus Christ in the Old Testament. It offers short, meaningful insights drawn from our past Old Testament episodes. Visit followhim.co, that's followhim.co to download your free copy today and you'll also find the link to purchase the

print edition. Thank you for being part of our followHIM family. Of course, none of this could happen without our incredible production crew. David Perry, Lisa Spice, Will Stoughton, Krystal Roberts, Ariel Cuadra, Heather Barlow, Amelia Kabwika, Sydney Smith, and Annabelle Sorensen.

Pres. Russell M. Nelson: 51:14

Whatever questions or problems you have, the answer is always found in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Turn to him. Follow him.

Hank Smith: 00:03 Welcome to followHIM Favorites. This is where John and I share a single story to go with each week's Come, Follow Me lesson. John, we are in Ezra and Nehemiah this week. Tell me what story you have ready.

John Bytheway: 00:15 Well, I was thinking about the miraculous turn of events that King Cyrus would let those in exile in Babylon just go back to Jerusalem. Nehemiah starts to rebuild the wall. Seems pretty unlikely. I just found this story. I just thought, I was like, oh, sure. It's one of those. This is Richard Craycroft on a mission, 1958. He says, "We're walking along a gravel road on a hillside above Baden, Switzerland. I was suddenly laid low by a speck of dust in my right eye. I learned as one who had worn brand new contact lenses for only five days that a moat feels like a beam. I quickly extracted the lens, cleaned and re-wetted it and prepared to reinsert it, but as I held my finger at the ready, a gust of wind suddenly swept the lens from my fingertips. My lens was gone with the wind.

01:07 I stood aghast and virtually blind, being pledged into 2,600 vision in one eye, which had been miraculously corrected to 20/20 a week earlier. Elder Neil Redding and I began to search on hands and knees on the wet gravel sweeping an eight-foot radius for my supposed point of loss. We searched futilely for 20 minutes. Then half blind and half despairing, I suggested to my companion that while we were already in that position, we should pray. I reasoned with the Lord, told him about my need to see about our need to meet our three investigator families that evening about my feeling that there was more to be gained from finding the lens than by my learning whatever I was to learn from the loss. As I concluded the prayer, I stood up. I received one of those Joseph Smith flashes of intelligence." Remember how Joseph Smith described revelation could be a flash of intelligence.

02:02 "It surprised me. I reacted at once, explaining the revealed plan to my startled companion." Hank, you're going to love this. "I stood on my feet in the same place I'd stood earlier, squeezed

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| | | out of my left contact lens and was instantly plunged into the distorted visual blindness of 2600 vision. I had begun my step into the dark." So he took out his other contact lens, Hank. |
| Hank Smith: | 02:26 | The key to finding the contact |
| John Bytheway: | 02:28 | Was to lose both of them. "Assured that my companion was on his knees at the ready. I put my left lens in my mouth, extracted it, mounted it on my finger six inches away from my face. I waited, but not for long. A slight breeze caught the lens and it was gone. My step into the dark was now complete. I stood still heart in throat until Elder Redding said, 'I see it. It's still in the air.' 'Don't lose it,' I pled, and held my breath. 'It's still up,' he whispered. 'Now 10 feet away.' Then from even further away, he exclaimed 'it's starting to fall.' 'Keep your eye on it,' I pled again, ringing my hands in apprehension. 'I see it. I see it,' he said. Then there was a long pause, three or four seconds, and then, 'Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh.' I braced. 'Oh my gosh,' he repeated. 'It landed and almost right on top of the other lens.' |
| | 03:21 | 'You see the other lens?' I shouted. 'Yeah, it's right here.' The darkness was flooded with light. Unable to see a thing. I crawled over to him on hands and knees slowly. He planted in my palm in order my left and right lenses, my seer stones, he called them. I wet the lenses and with my back to the wind and sheltered by my companion's hovering frame, I implanted them. And there was light and it was good. We knelt full of gratitude and thanked our God for tender and tangible mercies. We passed on to the next house filled with wonder at a God who knows each sparrow's fall and the exact whereabouts in Baden, Switzerland of Elder Craycroft's right contact lens." |
| Hank Smith: | 04:02 | Wow. |
| John Bytheway: | 04:03 | Can you believe that? It fell on top of the other one. Just as miraculous. That's my way of connecting these two stories. I'm going to let you go back to Jerusalem and rebuild. God knows where lost things are and he even knows where lost people are. Just one of the reasons we love him. |
| Hank Smith: | 04:21 | Yeah. And it would have to be a shock to find out that you've been in captivity for decades. You can go home now. |
| John Bytheway: | 04:29 | Wait, what? Yeah. |
| Hank Smith: | 04:30 | Yeah. It would be just as shocking as finding your... |

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| John Bytheway: | 04:33 | Well, take out your other one and let the wind blow it and it'll be in the same spot. |
| Hank Smith: | 04:40 | That is two kinds of crazy. It is miraculous crazy and just crazy crazy. |
| John Bytheway: | 04:45 | Yeah. |
| Hank Smith: | 04:45 | But I love it. We hope you'll join us on our full podcast. It's called followHIM. You can get it wherever you get a podcast. We are in the book of Ezra and Nehemiah with Dr. Christina Olson this week. She's going to bring, books that I didn't really know much about, she highlights things that I hadn't seen before. Then come back here next week. We'll do another followHIM favorites. |