

# **New politics, new stories, new history: the Chronicler<sup>1</sup> as historian for a new generation**

W Boshoff

(University of South Africa)

## **ABSTRACT**

### **New politics, new stories, new history: the Chronicler as historian for a new generation**

*The Chronistic History, consisting of I and II Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, constitutes a new history for the post-exilic Judaeen community. These people faced new social and political realities and had to make sense of their history and situation. Central features of the Chronistic History are (in I and II Chronicles) the review of king David's genealogies, the centrality of David's reign and cultic arrangements, which resulted in Solomon's building of the temple, and the history of the kingdom of Judah, with the reigns of Hezekiah and Josiah as focal points. In Ezra and Nehemiah the focal points are the Persian king Cyrus' decree, allowing the Judaeans to return to Jerusalem, the conflict with the people of the land, and the rebuilding of the city walls and temple. The Chronicler's use of history to constitute a new reality for its readers, helped them to visualise a new Judaeen community by inclusion and exclusion. This process was not only healing and reconciliatory, but also entailed conflict and animosity.*

## **1 INTRODUCTORY REMARKS**

Ezra and Nehemiah would normally not be the first two Old Testament books one would investigate to find pointers for a study of the theme “(re)conciliation”. The same can be said about 1 and 2 Chronicles. On the other hand, if the theme was “redefinition”, “reformation”, “radical reconceptualisation” or “restoration” it would be different (cf Johnstone 1997:20-21).

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1 For the purposes of this article, the term Chronicler refers to the Chronistic History, consisting of 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, as described by Eissfeldt (1964:719-720, 735).

Such is the variety of the Old Testament writings. In different epochs of a history of more than a thousand years, authors and individuals about whom they wrote approached different realities in different ways. Events in Judah during the Persian period (539-333 BCE) will form the background of this article. To understand anything about the literature from this period, it will be necessary to try to understand something of the history.

## **2 HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: AN EXILE COMES TO ITS END**

The books Ezra and Nehemiah deal with the history of the period after the Babylonian exile<sup>2</sup>. Judaeans were allowed to get together and to organise themselves to return to Jerusalem and Judah. The background to their return was a new political dispensation in Babylonia and the whole ancient Near East. The new rulers were the Persians under king Cyrus the Great, who conquered the Babylonians of Nabonidus in 539 BCE (Widengren 1977:495-499; Miller & Hayes 1986:438-440; Stern 2001:353-360). The capital, Babilon, was taken without a battle and Cyrus was welcomed by many in the city as a saviour (Miller & Hayes 1986:440-443). That was the end of an empire that seemed unconquerable only fifty years before.

During their rule the Babylonian style was to skim the cream off conquered nations by taking their leaders, intellectuals and artisans into exile to Babilon. One of the many peoples displaced and affected by the Babylonian actions, was the Judaeans. During slightly more than a decade from 598 to 586 BCE, Babylonian armies occupied parts of the small kingdom of Judah and took community leaders into exile (Herrmann 1981:274-280). Based upon the list given in Jeremiah 52:28-30, a large number of Judaeans, probably around 10 000, or ten per cent of a population of between 50 000 and 100 000 were taken into exile (although this figure may be somewhat exaggerated, Herrmann

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2 Grabbe (2004) distinguishes three periods: the early Persian Period during the regnal years of Cyrus the Great, Cambyses and Darius I, the fifth century, with Xerxes I, Artaxerxes I and Darius II Ochus at the helm, and the fourth century with reigns of Artaxerxes II Memnon, Artaxerxes III Ochus, Arses and Darius III Codummanus. He dates Nehemiah in the fifth century and the Ezra Tradition in the fourth century.

1981:280). One of these people later became well known as the prophet Ezekiel. The rest were left behind in difficult and impoverished conditions<sup>3</sup>. During 586 BCE the Judaeian capital, Jerusalem, was conquered by Nebuchadnezzar's army and the city was routed: the temple and palace, houses and public buildings were burnt down and the city walls were demolished (Herrmann 1981:284). First hand impressions of these events can be found in the five poems collected as the book of Lamentations in the Old Testament.

The Persian approach to conquered nations differed radically from the approach followed by the Babylonians. The Persians allowed cultural and religious communities to reorganize themselves. They were allowed to return to their cities and countries of origin. They were even supported by the Persian government to reestablish temples, cultic customs and cultural practices (Knapp 1988:256-261).

### **3 A NEW SITUATION UNDER CYRUS, KING OF PERSIA, "ANOINTED OF THE LORD" (IS 45:1)**

The situation changed swiftly under Cyrus. In Babel he restored the ancient Babylonian religion of Marduk to its former status. During the last years of Nabonidus' reign the service of Marduk was neglected. Nabonidus actively promoted the religion of the moon-god Sin to the detriment of Marduk's worship. When Cyrus arrived in Babel and restored the religion of Marduk, he was welcomed as a saviour and religious reformer (Soggin 1993:275-278). This state of affairs is confirmed by both the Cyrus cylinders (Cogan, 2000:314-316), written to honour Cyrus.

In similar fashion Cyrus liberated other religious and cultural communities, of which the Judaeans was one (Miller & Hayes 1986:443-445). The Judaeans might even have had an advantage. In

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3 Archaeological information about Judah in the Babylonian Period is scarce, but it is clear that all cities were not treated uniformly. Jerusalem's conflagration is well represented in the archaeological record (Shiloh 1993:709), but it is interesting that rich burials in caves in the Hinnom Valley, south of the city, dating from the Late Iron Age and the Babylonian Period were found by G Barkay (Shiloh 1993:709; Mazar 1992:548). These finds indicate that not all people who were left behind in Judah were poor and impoverished.

official Persian documents the Jewish God, Yahweh, was always referred to as “the God of heaven”, as is also the case with many of Nehemiah’s references to God (e.g. Neh 1:4-5, 2:4). It seems that Yahweh was equated with the supreme god Ahura-Mazda, who was worshipped by the Persian kings. This creates an interesting situation where the ruling foreigner is depicted as a friend and not as an enemy (Hayes & Miller 1977:489-495). The situation is very different from the depiction of the Egyptian (Ex 1), Assyrian (Is 10), Babylonian (Is 13) and more implicitly the Hellenistic rulers (Dan 8:5-8; 11:3) in different epochs of Israelite history.

According to the Chronicler Cyrus issued a decree early during his reign that directly affected the Judaeans in exile. Shesbazzar, the appointed prince of Judah, was allowed to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem at Persian expense (Miller & Hayes 1986:448). This decree is recorded at three different places in the Bible: firstly as a formal memorandum for use by Persian officials in Ezra 6:3-5; secondly as a proclamation in Hebrew to be made public to the exiled Judaeans, and calling them to return to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:2-4) and lastly as the final words at the end of 2 Chronicles 36:22-23<sup>4</sup>.

The Judaeans who returned to Jerusalem found themselves in a totally new and awkward situation. They were allowed to rebuild the temple and the city walls, but no possibility of reestablishing the royal house existed. The throne of David would remain empty. The Persians were tolerant of religious and cultural differences, but political power was kept safely in their own hands. The Persian Empire was organized in provinces or satrapies. Each Persian governor took responsibility for regional leaders who reported to them. People who were entrusted with political power were carefully selected on the basis of proven loyalty to the Persian concern. A good example is Nehemiah, who was a cup-bearer for the Persian king, before he returned to Jerusalem with a second group of returnees (Neh 2:1-8), and whose historicity seems to be much more authentic than that of Ezra (Garbini 1988:154-155).

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4 Many problems surround the question of authenticity of these versions of Cyrus’ proclamation (cf Garbini 1988:153-155).

To re-establish the worship of Yahweh at his temple in Jerusalem, cultic personnel was needed. Temple staff, consisting of priests, Levites and other cultic officials, were reinstated. Their positions were hereditary and great care was taken to establish each incumbent's descent. For this exercise the Judaeans needed lists of lineages, family names and genealogical information (Japhet 1989:301).

The newly established Judaeans community needed guidance to orientate themselves in their new situation<sup>5</sup>. Nothing could answer this need better than a book on their history.

This brings us to the historical literature of the late Persian Period in the Bible.

#### **4 TRANSITION NECESSITATES A “NEW HISTORY”: THE CHRONICLER FILLS THE GAP**

The “Chronicler” is a name often used for the hypothetical author of the historical books 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah in the Old Testament (Eissfeldt 1964:719-720). These books, especially 1 and 2 Chronicles, are easily viewed as boring reading, because it consisted initially of hundreds of names in a series of genealogies (1 Chr 1-9), and then repeats the history of the United Kingdom and of the kingdom of Judah, with scant references to Israel (Japhet 1989:308-324). However, when one tries to understand the reason why the books were written, it emerges that there is much to be learnt from them. These historical books were written to help a new generation to make sense of their history, and to instill a sense of pride in who they were (Nel 1991:108).

The books of the Chronistic history were not written in chronological order. In fact, it is quite difficult to reconstruct the process behind the origins of these books (Ackroyd 1991:344-351). It seems clear that the books Ezra and Nehemiah were written first. At an early stage they became one “book”, written on one scroll. They were later separated into the two books we know today (Ackroyd 1991:348). Three narratives are recorded in Ezra and Nehemiah: the story of

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5 Jonker (2003:396-416) discusses Chronicles in terms of an endeavour to find a new identity in the multi-religious and multi-ethnic society of the Persian Province of Jehud.

Serubbabel (and the return of the first group of Judaeans to Jerusalem) (Ezra 1-6), the memories of Ezra (a scribe and court official in the Persian kingdom) (Ezr 7-10, Neh 8-10), and the memories of Nehemiah (a cup-bearer of the Persian king Artaxerxes) (Neh 1-7, 11-13). The narratives are frequently interrupted with the inclusion of complete documents, letters and lists, which give the account a very documentary feeling. However, it is not easy to follow the exact chronological order, because events were not recorded chronologically. What is clear is that Serubbabel lead a group of exiles back to Jerusalem after 538 BCE and that the final pronouncements of Nehemiah refer to events in 420 BCE. Where exactly Ezra fits in, is not clear. All three the main figures, Serubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah experienced many and difficult problems when they tried to fulfill their responsibilities (Garbini 1988:152). The books Ezra and Nehemiah as we know them today might have been completed towards the end of the Persian period.

1 and 2 Chronicles were written after the Jewish community was resettled in Jerusalem. The temple was rededicated and Yahweh was worshipped in the temple again. The walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt and once again it was a city populated by Yahweh's chosen people. This history was written for these people. They were the restored community of God, who had to be reminded that they could only truly live if they remained faithful to God. That means that they had to stay obedient to the Law and had to worship God in a spirit of sincere devotion. In a sense the books of Chronicles are theological books (Ackroyd 1991:273-289; Nel 1991:107-120).

The history in 1 and 2 Chronicles was not a history as we know histories today. In the first place the Chronicler was not a historian, but a theologian. He was not so much interested in exactly what happened in the past. His main interest was to convey a message about God to the faithful of his time (Ackroyd 1991:311-343, however, see also Høglund 1997:19-29 and Kalimi 1997:82-89)<sup>6</sup>. In modern terms we can say that the history of Judah was the text for his sermon. To formulate his message he used historical material from Genesis and Numbers, and

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6 Høglund (1997:29) concludes: "Chr is no evil fictionalizer trying to mislead his audience. Chr is, rather, an accomplished historiographer, writing in accord with the accepted practices of his time".

from Samuel and Kings. He focussed on issues that were important for his message. In the process he selected, edited, added and subtracted from the stories as he found them in his sources (cf Jonker 2002:381-397).

One can say that he told the story of Judah in four episodes.

The first episode is unusual. It covers history from the first man, Adam, to the last days of king Saul (1 Chr 1-10). It is not a narrative in any traditional sense of the word, but consists mainly of lists of names. For the initiated these names represented a whole history. Included in these names are brief reports of events, such as the prayer of Jabez in 1 Chronicles 4:9-10 (Jarick 2002:9-12). Chapter 10, in which the death of Saul is recounted, is a transition to the story of king David (cf Mosis 1973:17-43)

In the second episode (1 Chr 11-29) the Chronist depicted an almost perfect king David (Mosis 1973:44-124). In his case no story was included that could harm David's image. Neither Uriah and Bathseba (2 Sm 11), nor Nabal and Abigail (1 Sm 25) feature in the Chronist's history of David. Already during David's reign the temple was depicted as the centre of Judaeian worship. The temple personnel were designated to their responsibilities by king David himself. They did not only include priests and Levites, but also the inferior clergy, the gate keepers and cantors.

The third episode (2 Chr 1-9) tells the story of the reign of king David's son and successor. Solomon was the builder of the temple (Mosis 1973:125-163). Once again an almost perfect and ideal king is depicted. Almost nothing is said about Solomon's many wives and his neglect of Yahweh (1 Ki 11). However, the beautiful narrative of the visit of the legendary Queen of Sheba is repeated almost verbatim (1 Ki 10; 2 Chr 9). Her breathless adoration of Solomon and his wisdom, fits the picture that the Chronicler wants to draw like a glove (cf Boshoff 2004:35-46).

The fourth episode (2 Chr 10-35) deals with the rest of the history of Judah. The Northern Kingdom is almost completely left out of the story, except where they had a direct impact on Judah (Japhet 1989:308-324). The great heroes of Judaeian history were the faithful kings Hezekiah and Josiah, whose histories were told in a similar

manner to those of David and Solomon (Jonker 2002:385-391; 2003:402-412). They were very significant for the Chronicler, because they reformed Judah's religion. Most importantly they restored the temple and temple service to its former glory.

Viewed very superficially, it may seem that the Chronicler simply repeated Judah's history. In actual fact he wrote a new account of this history for people living under new conditions. His purpose was to show the people of Jerusalem, how they should conduct themselves before Yahweh, their God. The long lists of names at the beginning show how far the relationship between Yahweh and his people stretches back into history. The relationship goes back to creation (Jarick 2002:7-76).

The books of Chronicles were completed right at the end of the Persian period or early in the Hellenistic Period, around 330 BCE or even later (Fohrer 1972:239).

## **5 THE CHRONICLER'S POSITION IN THE BIBLE**

Following the Septuagint, the Christian canon of the Bible placed the books of the Chronistic history after the books of Samuel and Kings. In this position 1 and 2 Chronicles actually repeats the history already recorded from Genesis to 2 Kings (Rendtorff 1983:298).

In the Hebrew Bible the position is very different: Ezra and Nehemiah precede 1 and 2 Chronicles right at the end of the Writings (Rendtorff 1983:291-302; Gottwald 1985:514). The Writings is the third large collection of books in the Hebrew canon. The other two are the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) and the Prophets (the historical books from Joshua to 2 Kings, and all the prophets). This means that 1 and 2 Chronicles conclude the Hebrew Bible and that they are grouped with books like Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah (Rendtorff 1983:258-302).

In this context it is clear that the Chronistic History is something with a different purpose. It is not simply more of the same kind of history telling after Samuel and Kings, as the order in the early Greek translation and modern Christian Bibles may suggest. The Chronistic History is an instrument in the reconstitution of the religious community in Jerusalem after the exile (Johnstone 1997:20-21). This



period was the beginning of Judaism, with an emphasis on the importance of the Law, the exclusivity of the faith community and the importance of keeping the Sabbath.

## **6 THE CHRONISTIC HISTORY AS EARLY DOCUMENT OF EMERGING JUDAISM**

There is no doubt in the Chronicler's mind that the Babylonian exile was the result of a break in the relationships between Yahweh and Israel, the chosen people of God. Similarly, the Chronist had no doubt that reconciliation between God and his people was possible. The potential was demonstrated when Yahweh designated the Persian king Cyrus as his anointed one, who was responsible to let his people return to their land. With this action history has completed a full circle for Israel. The Chronicler idealizes the whole Israel, consisting of twelve tribes. He refrains from mentioning the break in relationships between Israel and Judah too often and largely ignores the Northern Kingdom in his account of history. For the Chronicler the perfect example that the newly reestablished Israel needed to strive for, was the Davidic theocracy (Nel 1991:84-91). That is depicted as a time when king David ruled, under direct leadership and guidance of Yahweh. The Chronist's David was primarily used by Yahweh to organize the complete cultic sphere (Nel 1991:95-100). He conceptualized and planned the temple and made preparations for the building project. He also designated people to each and every possible responsibility that could be related to the temple and its cultic functions. According to the Chronicler many more functionaries were appointed by David than only the priests and the Levites (Nel 1991:100).

If one tries to imagine the situation in the post exilic community of Jerusalem, it seems clear that the Chronicler had reconciliation in mind. Various concerns were present in the cultic fraternity. The Chronicler's description of the various cultic officials responsible for a wide variety of tasks in and around the temple, and even wider in Jerusalem, vouches for a situation where not only the Zadokite priests were recognized as important for the temple service. Also the Levites, as well as many other officials, like gate-keepers and cantors were designated to their posts. Importantly, all these positions were designated by king David, under the guidance of Yahweh.

Every detail of the intricate family relations of Levitic families responsible for various religious tasks hint at a reconciliatory motive behind the genealogies and task descriptions. The period in exile completely disrupted the official religious program related to the temple in Jerusalem. But the temple was not only the religious centre, it was also the centre of cultural and economic activity. As long as the temple was in ruins, it was impossible to even think of the restoration of the faith community to its former glory of the period before the exile.

## **7 FORMATIVE MOMENTS FOR A NEW COMMUNITY: REBUILDING THE TEMPLE AND JERUSALEM'S WALLS IN EZRA-NEHEMIAH**

A change in the international political scene was the key to Jerusalem's changed fate after 538 BCE. Before the Persians wrangled the political power from the Babylonians, there was no hope for any return to or restoration of Jerusalem. Rebuilding the temple was unthinkable, out of the question.

When Cyrus became ruler over the Babylonian subjects, everything changed almost over night. Suddenly there was a king in power who was not interested in controlling every aspect of the lives of subjected peoples. He had sympathy and respect for national pride and religion and he was prepared to spend money on the restoration of temples, cities and cultic responsibilities. Cyrus did not wish to see ruins, but was quite prepared to celebrate the religious and cultural diversity in his empire. The reason for Cyrus' conduct might have been wisdom or political opportunism. What is clear from history is that his approach worked in Babel, with the followers of Marduk.

For the Judaeans it was as if Yahweh was using this Persian king directly for their benefit.

The first action resulting from Cyrus' policy was an official decree that set the Judaeans who wanted to return to Jerusalem free to do so (Grabbe 1998:125-132). That decree must have caused great joy, but it was also the beginning of new problems. Many Judaeans have settled well in their new environment, participating in trade, banking and farming, with some even appointed to positions at the royal court. Many were simply not interested in the opportunity to return to Jerusalem or Judah.

Under the leadership of Sheshbazzar, a significant group of people set out to return to Jerusalem with the specific ideal to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. A large number of articles belonging to the temple was brought to Babel by Nebuchadnezzar when Jerusalem was conquered in 586 BCE. All these articles were returned to the Judaeans to be used in the temple when it was functional again. The returnees settled in Jerusalem and the towns of Judah, but the land was not empty. Since 586 BCE there were Judaeans who were left behind and who continued to live in Judah (Grabbe 1998:136-153). Although they were impoverished and had to survive without any help from the central authorities, they continued with their lives. In the meantime, due to many factors, sections of Judah were occupied by Edomites from the south, Ammonites and Moabites from the east and Samaritans from the north (Stern 2001:319-326).

When the returning Judaeans arrived back at Jerusalem and in the towns of Judah, everybody was not particularly excited. They were fearful themselves of what the reception would be (Ezr 3:3), and they soon ran into conflict (Grabbe 1998:161-166).

The building of the temple caused the spark that ignited animosity. When it became known that building activities have commenced, people from Samaria offered their assistance. They did this on the basis of their religious allegiance to Yahweh and the fact that they have been sacrificing to him for many years (Ezr 4:1-2). At this point the Judaeans refused and without any diplomacy they distanced themselves even from the possibility to accept any help from the Samaritans (Ezr 4:3-4). This became the standard style of conduct and continuous conflict was the result (Ezr 4:5). Eventually the relationships between the Judaeans and the Samaritans deteriorated to direct aggressive conduct, much to the detriment of the whole project of restoration. When Nehemiah engaged in the restoration of the city walls, he was actively opposed by the Samaritan leaders and the builders had to defend themselves constantly against possible attacks (Neh 4).

Only by 515 BCE, after the interference of Persian officials, the temple was restored and could be rededicated to Yahweh. It is very obvious that the people who celebrated this event, were exclusively returned exiles. It is reported that the Israelites: the priests, the Levites

and the remainder of the exiles, celebrated the dedication of the temple (Ezr 6:13-18).

## **8 ESTABLISHING A NEW FAITH COMMUNITY BY EXCLUSION**

The pitiable state of affairs regarding the building of the temple and the city walls resulted not only in growing animosity between Judah and her neighbours, even those who claimed to be co-believers. The problems also extended internally into the Judaeian community (cf Janzen 2002:84-115). When Ezra, the scribe, arrived with an additional group of exiles who returned to Judah, he soon had to deal with a significant problem. It was found that many Judaeian community leaders, including priests, have married women who were not Judaeian (Ezr 9-10; Neh 13:1-3). Ezra was extremely disturbed by the news and did not immediately know what to do. As he was mourning the state of affairs, members of the community gathered around him and acknowledged that they have trespassed the commandments of God, with reference to Leviticus 18:24-30 and Deuteronomy 7:3. This resulted in a massive divorce procedure, where officials were appointed to each family to officiate over the dissolving of the marriages. It is worthwhile to note that in ancient Israel marriages with foreign women were not forbidden (see e.g. Gn 41:45; Nm 12:1; Rt 1:4). Later such marriages were forbidden in Deuteronomic thinking in order to combat idolatry. It was seen as a problem that gentile women tended to bring with them into their marriages and homes (see Dt 7:1-4). After the exile the problem increased. This was probably the result of the fact that most of the returning exiles were men. When Ezra demanded these Judaeians to separate from their wives, the reason was still religious (Ezr 9:1, 11). However, a second reason, racial purity, also emerges in this process (Ezr 9:2).

A further reason, which is more cultural in nature, emerges from the narrative of Nehemiah's purging of foreign women (Grabbe 1998:177-182). A similar problem as that handled by Ezra is reported in the time of Nehemiah. However, he is reported to have handled it much more harshly than Ezra, although the result of both actions might have been similar (Neh 13:25-31). It was found that some Jews had married wives from Ashdod, Ammon and Moab and that their children could not speak Judaeian properly. Nehemiah was infuriated and in the

first person he reports: “I reprimanded them, I cursed them, I struck several of them and tore out their hair and adjured them by God, ‘You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons or let their daughters marry your sons, or marry them yourselves!... And so I purged them from every foreign...’ (The New Jerusalem Bible).

## **9 CONCLUSION**

The books of the Chronistic history are not simply historical books in the modern sense of the word. They convey theology and use the history of Israel to talk to people of the late Persian period, after the Babylonian exile has ended.

1 and 2 Chronicles deal with history long passed, but emphasize the centrality of the temple, the temple personnel and the man who initiated it all, king David of Jerusalem. The focus of the narrated history is strongly, almost exclusively on the Southern Kingdom, but constantly it is clear that all Israel, consisting of twelve tribes, is actually included in the idealized history. These books were written to instill a pride in being Jewish during a period when it was easy to be overwhelmed by the cultural richness of the Persian and later the Greek world. The Chronicler believed an understanding of history had the potential to convince Jews of the value of their own heritage.

Ezra and Nehemiah deal with history closer at hand. In terms of history writing in the Bible this is the latest period to be described in some detail. A very positive picture is drawn of the Persian rulers and their conduct towards subjected peoples. A less positive picture is drawn in terms of human interaction, of the two major Judaeans leaders, Ezra and Nehemiah. Their activities can be understood against the background of the emergence of a new generation who had to reestablish their own identity. Part of this identity were the factors of religion, culture and race. Striving for purity in their community and religious life, they ignored the hands of friendship extended to them by the Samaritans. It is impossible to know what the value could have been if there was reconciliation between those two closely related religious groups hundreds of years ago.

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