

THESE ARE THE DAYS OF HAGGAI AND ZECHARIAH:  
THE LITERARY FUNCTION OF THE PROPHETS IN EZRA 1-6

by

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A thesis submitted to  
the Faculty of McMaster Divinity College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts in Christian Studies

McMaster Divinity College  
Hamilton, Ontario  
2008

Master of Arts in Christian Studies  
Hamilton, Ontario

McMASTER DIVINITY COLLEGE

TITLE:                                 These are the Days of Haggai and Zechariah:  
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NUMBER OF PAGES:                 vi + 131



**McMASTER DIVINITY COLLEGE**

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**is hereby accepted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of**

**Master of Arts in Christian Studies**

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**Date: December 10, 2007**

## ABSTRACT

These are the Days of Haggai and Zechariah:  
The Literary Function of the Prophets in Ezra 1–6

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The scholarly conversation concerning Ezra-Nehemiah has largely been focussed on diachronic methods. Tamara Eskenazi was the first to consider Ezra-Nehemiah synchronically. Her work was an exceptional as well as essential step forward. However, her focus on the unity of Ezra and Nehemiah causes her to overlook the plot structure of Ezra 1–6. In this study a plot structure is outlined for Ezra 1–6 based upon the *עלה* imperative and the *בנה* imperative which are given by Cyrus in Ezra 1:2–4. The Judean people are able to accomplish the *עלה* imperative without conflict, but the *בנה* imperative is not completed so easily as the temple rebuilding project reaches a standstill in Ezra 4:24. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah then intervene and become the catalyst for the resolution of the narrative (5:1). This study highlights the narrative role of the prophets in Ezra 1–6.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
BDB	Brown, Francis et al. <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1907. Sixth reprinting: New Haven: Hendrickson, 2001.
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
<i>BibSac</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBC	Cambridge Bible Commentary
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
DSB	<i>The Daily Study Bible Series</i>
HB/OTM	Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Monograph
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JHS</i>	<i>Journal of Hebrew Scriptures</i>
<i>JNSL</i>	<i>Journal for Northwest Semitic Languages</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary
NIB	New Interpreter's Bible
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIVAC	New International Version Application Commentary
OTG	Old Testament Guide
OTL	Old Testament Library
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue biblique</i>
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
<i>SJOT</i>	<i>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament</i>
TOTC	Tyndale Commentary of the Old Testament
<i>TWOT</i>	Harris, R. Laird et al. <i>Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament</i> . Chicago: Moody, 1980.
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Vetus Testamentum, Supplement Series
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell the story of the return of the Israelite people from exile in Babylon. The exile was an event which devastated the chosen people as they lost the land which was promised to their forefather Abraham.<sup>1</sup> To increase the frustration, the temple which was built by Solomon was also destroyed leaving no place of worship for the community. The exile from the land of promise and the destruction of the temple were punishments that Yhwh brought upon them because of their unfaithfulness to the covenant which was made between Yhwh and his people. This punishment from Yhwh was proclaimed by his prophets as they first warned Israel and then Judah that, if they did not repent of their sins, destruction would be brought against them. The people did not repent and Yhwh was forced to bring the punishment he promised. In the messages of destruction there was a persistent message of hope promising that Yhwh would not reject his people forever, but would bring them back to the land of promise from wherever they were scattered.<sup>2</sup>

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah recount the foundation and development of the post-captivity community. Ezra 1–6 reports the first stage in the restoration of the people of Israel. They are allowed to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the temple which was destroyed. This narrative tells an amazing story of Yhwh's sovereignty and faithfulness to his people. Ezra 7–10 and the book of Nehemiah also contribute to the overall narrative

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<sup>1</sup> Albertz (*Israel*, 4–38) explores the effect of the exile on the Judean community.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Isa 10:21, 22; 11:12; 27:13; 35:10; 44:22, 26; 45:3; 49:6, 8; 51:11; 61:4; Jer 15:19; 16:15; 27:22; 30:3; 31:8, 17, 18; 50:16; Ezek 11:18; Dan 9:25; Hos 6:2; Joel 3:1; Amos 9:11; Mic 4:8; Nah 2:2; Zeph 2:7.

concerning the exiles who returned from the captivity. The theme of return is prevalent throughout the books of both Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra 7–10 draws attention to the restoration of the people and the teaching of the law to the community. The book of Nehemiah is concerned with repairs being made to the city of Jerusalem as well as additional reforms which needed to be made in the Judean community. Both Ezra in Ezra 7–10 and Nehemiah in the book of Nehemiah are required to deal with the issue of intermarriage among the people. Together these works report the struggles which the people of God encountered after they left Babylon and returned home to Judah.

### *1. History of Research*

Research on the books of Ezra and Nehemiah has often been conducted using diachronic methods. This normally has involved either source, redaction or historical criticism to the exclusion of various synchronic methods.<sup>3</sup> Considerable energy has been expended on determining the source material which stood behind the final composition of the text. Source criticism has been used because the books of Ezra and Nehemiah have a number of obvious source documents that have been integrated into the text. The decree from Cyrus (Ezra 1:2–4), the lists of people and vessels (Ezra 1:9–10; 2:1–70; 8:1–14; 10:18–44; Neh 7:6–73; 10:1–29; 11:3–12–26), and letters to and from the Persian Court (Ezra 4:9–22; 5:7–17; 6:3–12; 7:12–26) all appear to be source documents which the author incorporated into the text.<sup>4</sup> There is also the Aramaic Source (Ezra 4:8–6:18) which has been considered by some to be a complete source that has been grafted entirely

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<sup>3</sup> See similar comments made by Nykolaishen, “Restoration,” forthcoming.

<sup>4</sup> Williamson, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 14–36.



into the narrative.<sup>5</sup> Additionally some have suggested that there are other sources that stand behind Ezra 1–6 which are not obvious to the reader.<sup>6</sup>

The Aramaic material in Ezra 1–6 includes four letters (4:11–16; 4:17–23; 5:7–17; 6:1–13).<sup>7</sup> Quoting the letters in Aramaic, not translating them into Hebrew, is not surprising as the letters probably would have been written in the Aramaic language, the language of official documents and diplomacy in the Persian empire. The Aramaic section does not only include letters written in Aramaic, but also narrative material written in Aramaic which surrounds the letters. Hugh Williamson suggests that the author, being fluent in both Hebrew and Aramaic, simply bridges letters from the time of Artaxerxes (4:8–23) and letters from the time of Darius (5:6–6:13) with a narrative piece in Aramaic.<sup>8</sup> This however does not fully explain why the material continues in Aramaic after the letters until 6:18. Another theory concerning the Aramaic sections in Ezra 1–6 is that there was a complete Aramaic source which was quoted entirely by the narrator. This was held by Charles Torrey who concluded that the author “incorporated this Aramaic writing in its entirety, and that we have it in substantially its original form.”<sup>9</sup> For the most part modern scholarship has not embraced this suggestion.<sup>10</sup> Recently Richard Steiner has drawn attention to a one source theory as he argues that “the source of the four Aramaic

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<sup>5</sup> Torrey, *Ezra Studies*, 140–207; Gunneweg, “Erzählung,” 299–302.

<sup>6</sup> Williamson, “Composition,” 1–30.

<sup>7</sup> Aramaic occurs in Ezra 4:6–6:18; 7:12–26; Dan 2:4–7:28 with a sentence in Jer 10:11 and two words in Gen 31:47.

<sup>8</sup> Williamson, “Composition,” 15–23.

<sup>9</sup> Torrey, *Ezra Studies*, 161.

<sup>10</sup> For one source arguments see Gunneweg, “Erzählung,” 299–302; Mallau, “Redaction,” 67–80; Matzal, “Structure,” 566–69.

letters in Ezra 4–6 was a report sent to Artaxerxes I by Bishlam, Mithredeth, and Tabeel giving the results of an archival search.”<sup>11</sup>

Historical criticism has also influenced much of the discussion surrounding the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. These books tell the history of the Judean community after the return from Babylon. The history is not necessarily straight forward as there are numerous issues which arise when reading the text. Ezra 1–6 lists the kings of Persia out of chronological order.<sup>12</sup> The size of the return from Babylon has been considered to be exaggerated<sup>13</sup> along with the benevolence the Judean community received from the Persian kings.<sup>14</sup> There is the difficult situation surrounding the figures of Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel who are sometimes considered to be one person with two names.<sup>15</sup> Another major issue is the order of the returns of Ezra and Nehemiah.<sup>16</sup> Despite these enduring controversies, when scholars reconstruct the history of the Jewish people after the

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<sup>11</sup> Steiner, “Archival,” 675. Another explanation for the Aramaic material which surrounds the Persian letters has been presented by Arnold (“Aramaic,” 1–16) who suggests that it is a narrative technique designed to shift the point of view. According to Arnold the narrator pulls the reader into the world of the Persian empire by quoting the letters in Aramaic language. This will be discussed further below.

<sup>12</sup> It is clear that the Persian kings are not introduced to the reader in correct chronological order. The Ezra narrative follows the order Cyrus, Xerxes, Artaxerxes, and then Darius and back to Artaxerxes. The correct order should have been Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes and then Artaxerxes. Brown (“Chronological,” 35, 37), Japhet (“Composition,” 202) and Williamson (*Ezra and Nehemiah*, 13) provide helpful, though not identical, tables. Grabbe (“Mind,” 90) concludes, “either the narrator has been dishonest, thinking his readers would not know the difference (as many modern readers do not), or he himself was very uncertain about the sequence and dating of the Achaemenid kings and thus put in the material at his disposal without noticing that it did not fit. Either way, great doubt is cast on the historicity of the narrative here.” Grabbe’s ‘either/or’ fails to consider that the narrator is concerned with narrative time over chronological time. The narrator was not trying to ‘pull a fast one’ on the reader, but trusts the reader to see the situation which occurred in the reigns of Xerxes and Artaxerxes as analogous to what occurred between the reigns of Cyrus and Darius. See also Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 56–58; Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 110–11; Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 76; Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 69–70; Steiner, “Archival,” 641–85; esp. 643–7; 679–83.

<sup>13</sup> See Becking, “Returned,” 3–18.

<sup>14</sup> Grabbe, “Ezra’s Mission,” 290–91.

<sup>15</sup> See Japhet “Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel,” 66–98; “Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel – two,” 218–29; Grabbe, *History*, 276–77.

<sup>16</sup> It is difficult to determine when Ezra returned to Jerusalem. There are three predominant understandings. The first is 458 which would correspond with the seventh year of Artaxerxes I; the second is 398 which would correspond to the seventh year of Artaxerxes II; and the third which suggests a textual emendation making the text read ‘thirty seventh’, and would suggest 428. See Emerton (“Ezra,” 1–19) for a good review of the argument.

captivity in Babylon, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are essential to the discussion. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were often considered to be trustworthy sources for the reconstruction of Persian period Judah. This is because the sources found in Ezra and Nehemiah have traditionally been considered to be authentic. However, recently there is an increasing trend to undermine the usefulness of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah for shedding light on the Persian Period.<sup>17</sup>

## 2. *Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah*

Another issue which has dominated research in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah concerns the supposed common authorship of Chronicles and Ezra and Nehemiah.<sup>18</sup>

Tamara Eskenazi sets out the historical understanding of the unity between Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah

The oldest extant manuscripts show Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah as separate books. In Codex Vaticanus, Ezra-Nehemiah (as Εσδρας β) is separated from Chronicles by 1 Esdras. Codex Sinaiticus has a large lacuna between these books but appears to follow the same order as Vaticanus at this point. In Codex Alexandrinus, Ezra-Nehemiah is separated from Chronicles by most of the prophets and by several ‘historical books.’ In the Vulgate, Ezra-Nehemiah precedes Chronicles. In the Aleppo Codex, Ezra closes the collection and is separated from Chronicles by the Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, and Daniel. There is no indication

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Grabbe, “Reconstructing,” 98–107. Grabbe (“Reconstructing,” 105) represents one who focuses mostly on historical criticism in his work and provides the conclusion “the supposed Persian documents in Ezra 1–7 is in urgent need of re-evaluation, and their authenticity should no longer be taken for granted as is currently the custom, at least in English-speaking scholarship.” Grabbe (“Reconstructing,” 98–107) makes his argument on three main points. First concerns the manner in which the documents were incorporated into the narrative. The documents “with the exception of 7.12-26 ... are not Aramaic entities imbedded in a Hebrew narrative, but sections of an Aramaic narrative.” Second, the documents demonstrate some editorial work that could result in a change of meaning. Third, the documents display a particular Jewish theology, which can be explained by the editorial work mentioned in point two. Grabbe points out there are only a limited number papyri from that period are available for uses. See also Grabbe, “Persian Documents,” 531–70; Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri*; Edelman, *Origins*, 180–208.

<sup>18</sup> The authorship of Ezra 1–6 is important for this study because if Ezra 1–6 is written by the same author as Chronicles then all the material of Chronicles must be taken into consideration.

in the early lists of biblical books that early collections counted these books as one. The church fathers kept them as distinct, and so did the rabbis.<sup>19</sup>

It was not until the nineteenth century when “L. Zunz suggested that many of the puzzling peculiarities of Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles could be resolved as soon as one recognized that Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah – in that order – constitute a single, continuous work, composed by a single author.”<sup>20</sup> There were four reasons for this view. First, the material at the end of Chronicles and the beginning of Ezra overlaps.<sup>21</sup> Second, 1 Esdras starts with 2 Chr 35 and continues to Ezra 6. Third, there are linguistic similarities. Fourth, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah share similar theological ideas with Chronicles.<sup>22</sup> This view dominated thought for the next century and it was almost taken for granted that Ezra and Nehemiah were part of the Chronicler’s History.<sup>23</sup> Sara Japhet and Hugh Williamson were the first to bring concrete challenges against the prevailing view that all three are connected.<sup>24</sup> Now common authorship is not the consensus view as there is very little agreement concerning how to divide the material. Some continue to affirm the unity of Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah as one complete work.<sup>25</sup> There have been others who have focussed attention on the separation of Ezra and Nehemiah from

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<sup>19</sup> Eskenazi, *Prose*, 14. A historical analysis is also given in Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, xxi–xxiii and Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 38–9. See also Graham, “Chronicler’s History,” 201–16.

<sup>20</sup> Eskenazi, *Prose*, 14. See also Williamson, *Israel*, 5.

<sup>21</sup> See Knoppers, *1 Chronicles 1–9*, 75–89.

<sup>22</sup> Japhet, “Supposed,” 331–2; Williamson, *Israel*, 5–6.

<sup>23</sup> The title *The Chronicler’s History* was given to the second section of the English translation of Noth’s *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien* which focuses on Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah.

<sup>24</sup> Williamson (*Israel*, 1–70) and Eskenazi (*Prose*, 11–36) provide good overviews of the discussion. Recently Redditt (“Dependence,” forthcoming) has drawn attention again to the four issues and opens debate concerning the overlapping of Ezra and Chronicles.

<sup>25</sup> Blenkinsopp (*Ezra-Nehemiah*), Clines (*Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*), and Fensham (*Ezra and Nehemiah*) all adopt common authorship of Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. Concerning Clines and Fensham Eskenazi, (*Prose*, 36) who is relying on separate authorship, comments, “Fortunately these fine commentaries avoid introjection of Chronicles’ ideology into Ezra-Nehemiah and rely in their interpretation primarily on Ezra-Nehemiah itself.” However, Blenkinsopp (*Ezra-Nehemiah*) relies on Chronicles for interpretation throughout his commentary.

Chronicles and have worked from that point of view.<sup>26</sup> As Paul Redditt has pointed out, “both sides have their advocates; scholarship has essentially come to a standoff on several issues.”<sup>27</sup> This is best reflected in the discussion concerning the linguistic analysis as both sides agree that linguistic analysis cannot be used to determine authorship.<sup>28</sup>

There has also been discussion concerning whether the books of Ezra and Nehemiah should be considered one continuous work. This has led to different theories concerning the composition of Ezra and Nehemiah.<sup>29</sup> In most cases when divisions are made between sections of Ezra and Nehemiah the text breaks down as Ezra 1–6, Ezra 7–10, and Nehemiah 1–13.<sup>30</sup> There has been some discussion concerning whether Ezra 1–6 should be more closely connected to the work of Chronicles than Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13.<sup>31</sup> Roddy Braun, although he argues for a complicated process of redaction for Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah to account for the present shape of the books, suggests, “that the contents of Ezra i–iii and vi 14–18 lie closest to the thought world of the Chronicler.”<sup>32</sup> He bases his conclusion on a comparison of the presentation of retribution, Samaritans and foreigners, the monarchy and the Temple in Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah.

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<sup>26</sup> Eskenazi, *Prose*, 36.

<sup>27</sup> Redditt, “Dependence,” forthcoming.

<sup>28</sup> Williamson (*Israel*, 37–59) and Japhet (“Supposed,” 330–71) have discredited the ability for those who hold to common authorship to rely on linguistic analysis as support. Likewise Talshir (“Reinvestigation,” 165–93) and Throntveit (“Linguistic,” 201–16) have drawn attention to the inability for linguistic analysis to support separate authorship.

<sup>29</sup> VanderKam, “Ezra-Nehemiah,” 55–75.

<sup>30</sup> Japhet (“Composition,” 190) comments, “on the basis of internal criteria such as contents, style, narrative technique and the like. And on the basis of formal criteria such as opening formulae, [Ezra-Nehemiah] comprises three well-defined units.”

<sup>31</sup> Williamson, “Composition,” 26–30, Braun, “Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah,” 52–64.

<sup>32</sup> Braun, “Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah,” 63. According to Braun (“Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah,” 61–2) Chronicles did not include the rebuilding of the temple because he lived before it was completed or it was not important to the argument. The original extent of Chronicles continued until Ezra 3:13 after Ezra 7–10 was added and then followed later by the Neh 1–13. After this Ezra 4:6–6:18 was included in the narrative, but the original ending can no longer be known.

Williamson has also contributed to the discussion concerning the composition of Ezra 1–6. Williamson argues “that a source- and redaction-critical approach to Ezra i-vi which does not start out with the presupposition that the Chronicler was their editor can be fruitful in supplying a simple and readily intelligible account of their composition.”<sup>33</sup>

Williamson progresses through the material on Ezra 1–6 starting with Ezra 2 and then working through Ezra 1; 4:6–6:22; and then lastly 3:1–4:5.<sup>34</sup> He establishes that Ezra 2 is dependent upon Neh 7, affirming that Ezra 2 was not composed before Neh 7.

Williamson demonstrates how the material that is found throughout Ezra 1–6 is not necessarily dependent on material from Chronicles but rather is drawn from other sources. These other sources consist of Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13, Haggai, Zechariah, Kings, and Exodus. Additionally, there are a number of Persian documents and some sources which are not readily detectable.<sup>35</sup> Williamson only leverages a connection to Chronicles in relation to Ezra 3:7 which relies upon 1 Chr 22:2–4 and 2 Chr 2:7–15.<sup>36</sup> There are other passages which connect to Chronicles, but are not dependent on it.<sup>37</sup>

This leads Williamson to conclude that the author of Ezra 1–6 must have composed his material at least one generation after the completion of both Chronicles and Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13 and the author “may be a member of the circle which had earlier

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<sup>33</sup> Williamson, “Composition,” 1.

<sup>34</sup> Williamson (“Composition,” 7–8) suggests “the implications of this conclusion for the composition of these books as a whole can hardly be overestimated” and if one does not approach Ezra 1–6 with the presuppositions “it will follow automatically that Ezra i-vi must be an independent composition from a date later than the combining of the Ezra and Nehemiah material.”

<sup>35</sup> Williamson, “Composition,” 1–30. Ezra 1 appears to be a mixture of source material and free composition; Ezra 2 is virtually a direct copy from Neh 8 with a couple minor variations; Ezra 3:1–4:5 does not have much clear source material but does reflect knowledge of Chronicles, Haggai, Zechariah and Exodus as well as other biblical traditions. Ezra 4:6–6:22 which consists mostly of the apparent Aramaic source should be understood as including sources surrounded by an author that could freely compose Aramaic as well as Hebrew. Cf. Edelman, *Origins*, 151–80.

<sup>36</sup> Williamson, “Composition,” 24.

<sup>37</sup> Williamson, “Composition,” 28–29.

subjected the Books of Chronicles to a pro-priestly redaction.”<sup>38</sup> Williamson also identifies Ezra 1–6 as originally composed as a separate unit to preface Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13 and in turn to serve as a link between the works of Chronicles and Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13.<sup>39</sup>

This proposal by Williamson does not answer questions concerning the relationship between Ezra 1–6 and Ezra 7–10 or the book of Nehemiah. Ezra 1–6 tells the story of the people’s return and the temple rebuilding project. Ezra 7–10 recounts Ezra’s return and reform, and the book of Nehemiah highlights Nehemiah’s return and reforms. At some redactional stage it is clear that an editor drew Ezra 1–6 together with Ezra 7–10 with the phrase “after these things” (וְאַחֵר הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה; Ezra 7:1). Williamson argues that these three words were only added at the final stages of the composition of the Ezra 7–10 narrative after the completion of Ezra 1–6.<sup>40</sup> The stage at which Ezra 1–6 came alongside Ezra 7–10 and at which point Ezra 7–10 was associated with Nehemiah 1–13 is unclear. However, the distinctiveness of the characters and the plot separates Ezra 1–6 from Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13.<sup>41</sup>

### 3. *Narrative Approach to Ezra*

Since there has been considerable focus on the sources and the history of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, sustained research on a narrative level has suffered.

Narrative criticism is concerned with interacting with a book as it stands without much

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<sup>38</sup> Williamson, “Composition,” 30. He also suggests that the motivation for writing this material largely to legitimize the Second temple and the cult as a successor to the previous Israelite community in the face of the Samaritan temple which was built on Mount Gerizim.

<sup>39</sup> Williamson, “Composition,” 28; Williamson, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 43–45.

<sup>40</sup> Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 91.

<sup>41</sup> Discussion concerning Ezra 1–6 as a unity is common. See Williamson, “Composition,” 1–30; Fried, “Desolate,” 21–54; Japhet “Periodization II,” 491–508.

focus on the sources behind the text, the development of the text or historiography.<sup>42</sup> This type of examination developed as scholars realized that the text needed to be treated as a work of literature. This development can be seen in the introductory paragraphs of Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative*.<sup>43</sup> In chapter one Alter focuses his attention on Genesis 38 and the apparent interruption of the Joseph story (Genesis 37–50). After being gracious to Speiser, Alter comments, "Speiser's failure to see [Genesis 38's] intimate connections through motif and theme with the Joseph story suggests the limitations of conventional biblical scholarship even at its best."<sup>44</sup> Alter had previously suggested that "literary art" plays a crucial role "in the shaping of biblical narrative."<sup>45</sup> A number of other scholars have also presented how a narrative approach can benefit the reading of the biblical text.<sup>46</sup> Despite this there have been few studies which have employed this method when studying the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.<sup>47</sup>

The first study that used narrative criticism to analyze Ezra-Nehemiah was written by Eskenazi. She evaluated the entire Ezra-Nehemiah corpus to determine the plot structure. Using insights drawn from narrative criticism, she viewed Ezra-Nehemiah as being divided into three phases: potentiality (Ezra 1:1–4), actualization (Ezra 1:5–Neh

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<sup>42</sup> This is not to suggest that if one employs literary criticism as a method then historiography can not be done. See Provan et al. (*History*, 75–97) who argue for a historical approach which includes narrative criticism as part of that method referring to the narrative work done by Fokkelman (*Reading*, esp. 208–9).

<sup>43</sup> Alter, *Narrative*.

<sup>44</sup> Alter, *Narrative*, 3–4. The lead into the quotation above is "[Genesis 38] is characterized by E.A. Speiser, in his superb Genesis volume in the Anchor Bible series, as 'a completely independent unit' having 'no connection with the drama of Joseph, which it interrupts at the conclusion of Act I.' The interpolation does, of course, as Speiser and others have recognized, build a sense of suspense about the fate of Joseph and a feeling of time elapsed until Joseph shows up in Egypt, but..."

<sup>45</sup> Alter, *Narrative*, 3. Cf. Ryken (*Literature*, 14) who comments, "any phenomenon has to be understood in terms appropriate to what it is ... a literary approach is necessary because it is the only approach that is genuinely concerned with the artistic beauty of the Bible ... to ignore this aspect of biblical literature is to distort the Bible as a written document."

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Berlin, *Poetics*; Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*; Sternberg, *Poetics*; Amit, *Reading*. A helpful reader that demonstrates the development of narrative criticism is House, *Beyond Form Criticism*.

<sup>47</sup> Some recent works are Nykolaishen, "Restoration," forthcoming; Wright, "Seeking, Finding and Writing," forthcoming; Boda, "Prayer as Rhetoric," forthcoming; Duggan, *Covenant Renewal*; Throntveit *Ezra, Nehemiah*; Davis, *Ezra and Nehemiah*; Grabbe, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 11–68.



7:72) and success (Neh 8:1–13:31).<sup>48</sup> She highlighted three key themes which she argued connects the narratives. The first theme is “the people” who are emphasized above the leadership. The narrative does not only focus on the actions of the leadership, but uses the leadership to direct attention to the entire community.<sup>49</sup> The second theme is “the house of God” which continues after the temple is built and extends to include the whole city.<sup>50</sup> The third theme is “the documents” as there is an emphasis on written material.<sup>51</sup> The documents serve to add structure to the narrative and reflect the hand of God. She understands these themes as being central to Ezra-Nehemiah. Her work is exceptional, especially when one takes into consideration that she was pioneering narrative criticism in relation to Ezra and Nehemiah.

The section in which Eskenazi excels is her work with the characters in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. She correctly argues that the people become the central characters in the narrative. This is abundantly clear in Ezra 1–6 as the collective people are emphasized and the individual is played down. Eskenazi argues that even when Ezra in Ezra 7–10 and Nehemiah in the book of Nehemiah lead the community their leadership is one that empowers the people, raising the people to the place of prominence.<sup>52</sup>

Despite her excellent work there are a few problems that arise which cause one to question her conclusions concerning Ezra and Nehemiah. The first deficiency stems from her understanding of the function of the lists of returnees in Ezra 2 and Neh 7. She understands this repetition as an inclusio of material which emphasizes the people named

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<sup>48</sup> Eskenazi, *Prose*, 38–41.

<sup>49</sup> Eskenazi, *Prose*, 48–53; 62–70; 79–83; 88–95; 97; 104; 117–19.

<sup>50</sup> Eskenazi, *Prose*, 53–57; 71–73; 83–87; 104–9; 119–21.

<sup>51</sup> Eskenazi, *Prose*, 58–60; 73–77; 87–88; 109–11; 122–23.

<sup>52</sup> It is easier for her to make this argument concerning Ezra, but is not as convincing for Nehemiah. See Eskenazi, *Prose*, 127–54.

and the community as a whole, bridging the past and present assemblies.<sup>53</sup> She places too much weight on the function of the lists in the plot of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. If, as she argues, the author intentionally reuses the list later in the narrative one would assume that it would be copied with no divergence in the text. However, when one compares Ezra 2 and Neh 7, clear differences are evident. Some of these divergences can be accounted for through scribal error, but Ezra 2:68–69 and Neh 7:70–72 are clearly at odds with each other.<sup>54</sup> Ezra 2:68–69 provides a shorter reading including what appears to be rounded figures for the gold, silver, and priestly garments which were brought to the temple. Additionally, Neh 7:70b is not included between Ezra 2:68 and 69.<sup>55</sup> These differences can be explained in one of three ways. First, Ezra 2 may be a summary of Neh 7 or, second, Neh 7 may be an expansion of Ezra 2 or, third, Ezra 2 and Neh 7 may be based upon the same source, but represent that source differently. Most often it has been argued that Ezra 2 is a summary of Neh 7 or a summary of the same source as Neh 7. Regardless it is hard to sustain an argument that Neh 7 was copied from Ezra 2. James VanderKam also points out that a mere inclusion of identical passage does not necessarily require the conclusion that the passages in question are part of one work.<sup>56</sup> This decreases

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<sup>53</sup> Eskenazi, *Prose*, 88–95.

<sup>54</sup> See Williamson “Composition,” and comments above pgs. 7–8. Eskenazi does not respond to Williamson’s work at this point in her analysis.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Ezra 2:68–69 “Some of the heads of fathers’ *households*, when they arrived at the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem, offered willingly for the house of God to restore it on its foundation. According to their ability they gave to the treasury for the work 61,000 gold drachmas and 5,000 silver minas and 100 priestly garments. Now the priests and the Levites, some of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers and the temple servants lived in their cities, and all Israel in their cities.” and Neh 7:70–71 “Some from among the heads of fathers’ *households* gave to the work. The governor gave to the treasury 1,000 gold drachmas, 50 basins, 530 priests’ garments. Some of the heads of fathers’ *households* gave into the treasury of the work 20,000 gold drachmas and 2,200 silver minas. That which the rest of the people gave was 20,000 gold drachmas and 2,000 silver minas and 67 priests’ garments.”

<sup>56</sup> See VanderKam (“Ezra-Nehemiah,” 69) where he comments, “the essential assumption behind interpreting the two appearances of the list as an *inclusio* is that Ezra and Nehemiah are one work. If Ezra and Nehemiah were originally separate books, then one would be left with the quotation of one document in

the effectiveness of her proposal concerning the overall plot strategy in Ezra and Nehemiah. One would expect an identical list if they were created for rhetorical effect.

The second deficiency in Eskenazi's work is her three phase structure. As mentioned above she views Ezra-Nehemiah as representing potentiality (Ezra 1:1–4), actualization (Ezra 1:5–Neh 7:72) and success (Neh 8:1–13:31). In her proposal Cyrus's decree in Ezra 1:2–4 presents the objective for the entire narrative. She also argues that "the house of God" is a term that has yet to be defined, but as the narrative progresses "the house of God" will come to represent the entire city. Therefore Cyrus's decree is not fulfilled at the end of Ezra 6.<sup>57</sup> This is simply not the case, as Ezra 7, though connected to the narrative, starts a new movement that is not associated with Cyrus's decree. Additionally Neh 2 initiates another separate movement not associated with Cyrus.<sup>58</sup>

The third deficiency in Eskenazi's proposal is her failure to interact with the plot of Ezra 1–6. Her focus is to connect this movement to the actions which follow and, as a result, she ignores or misconstrues important aspects of the plot of Ezra 1–6. This includes the role of the prophets. The narrative begins by making reference to the prophecy of Jeremiah.<sup>59</sup> Additionally, Haggai and Zechariah are introduced as Yhwh's representatives at the point of tension to initiate the resolution of the narrative of Ezra 1–6. Perhaps it was because the prophets are absent from the narrative after Ezra 6:14 that Eskenazi did not focus on their role. But it is precisely because of their disappearance,

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two compositions, as with the Decalogue in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 or the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6 and Luke 11. Surely those are not instances of *inclusion*." Cf. Grabbe, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 97.

<sup>57</sup> Eskenazi, *Prose*, 58–59.

<sup>58</sup> Eskenazi's influence can be seen in the work of Nykolaishen, "Restoration," forthcoming. He provides an analysis of three episodes (Ezra 1:1–11; 5:1:6:14; Neh 1:1–2:8) which demonstrates God's actions for the people. He connects these events through similarities of God's work, but also through the apparent linchpin of Ezra 6:14b as argued by Eskenazi.

<sup>59</sup> Eskenazi, *Prose*, 58–59; 95–122. The Jeremiah prophecy apparently reaches fulfillment in Neh 13, but not in Ezra 6:20, although the celebration in 6:20 is much more joyous and complete than in Neh 13 where the community has again heaped up sins against Yhwh.

after being essential to the resolution of Ezra 1–6, that one must focus on the theme of the prophets. The prophets are the ones who oversee the project as Yhwh's representatives and only leave the narrative once there is completion to the decree from Cyrus.

A new study must be done concerning the narrative of Ezra 1–6 which is not constrained by looking forward to events in Ezra 7–10 or the book of Nehemiah. If the expectations established in Ezra 1–6 are not ignored until Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13 and analyzed in their appropriate context, then the plot of Ezra 1–6 comes to life and the success of the people is celebrated appropriately.

#### *4. Method*

This study will focus on four main aspects of the narrative: setting, characterization, themes, and plot. The study will begin by interacting with the setting of the narrative both temporally and spatially. Then the characters of the narrative will be introduced. After this the different themes as they develop will be analyzed. After these three sections are complete the plot will be evaluated. The setting, characters and themes will be influential in determining the flow of the plot for the narrative. Additionally, other elements of the narrative will also be brought into the discussion concerning the plot of the narrative.

To discuss Ezra 1–6 it is immensely important to understand the role of the narrator. This is because the narrative sequence of Ezra 1–6 does not follow the actual order of the kings of Persia nor does the text always follow the correct sequence of events as represented in other sources. King Cyrus, who ruled over the ancient Near East from 539/8 to 529, begins the narrative of Ezra and remains the central royal figure until Ezra

4:5 when Darius is introduced into the narrative.<sup>60</sup> The next action in the narrative does not come from the time of Darius but from reign of Xerxes (485–465; Ezra 4:6) which is then followed by an action from the time of Artaxerxes (465–425; Ezra 4:7–24). The problem arises when the narrator returns to the time of Darius (4:24). Historically, the order of the kings in Ezra 1–6 does not reflect reality. The frustration which takes place because of the events in the reign of Artaxerxes (4:7–23) has no bearing on the frustration of the Judean community in the time of Darius (5:1–6:22).<sup>61</sup> However, concerns over the order of the Persian kings are not a problem for the narrator. The narrator controls the order by which the reader encounters the text and is free to present the material to achieve the appropriate narrative affect. As Shimon Bar-Efrat comments

the narrator is an apriori category, as it were, constituting the sole means by which we can understand the reality which exists within a narrative. The nature of this reality, and the essence of the narrative world, with its characters and events, and, above all, their significance, is entirely dependent on the narrator, through whom we apprehend.<sup>62</sup>

The narrator also chooses to represent certain circumstances in the Ezra 1–6 narrative differently from what is found in the book of Haggai. In Ezra 1–6 the reason why the Judean community is unable to build the temple is because of the opposition of surrounding people. This is not the case according to the message of Haggai where the reason appears to be the people's indifference to the temple rebuilding project. The people did not feel it was the time to build the temple as they had been preoccupied with their own houses (Hag. 1:2, 9). The narrator of Ezra 1–6 also allows the people to construe differently their efforts on the temple as they argue to Darius that they have been

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<sup>60</sup> The dates correspond to the ruling of the kings over Babylon. See Albertz (*Israel*, 45–131) for history of the exilic period and also Williamson (*Ezra and Nehemiah*, 13).

<sup>61</sup> Creative readings of Persian history have been constructed to account for the order of the kings outlined in Ezra 1–6. See the table in Japhet, "Composition," 202. See also fn. 12 above.

<sup>62</sup> Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*, 13–14.

working at the temple since Cyrus allowed them to return, while according to Haggai the people had not been working that entire time. The narrator is in control of the narrative and allows the flow to develop according to a specific purpose. Even though the narrative material in Ezra 1–6 may not always correspond with historical reality, to ignore the progression of the narrative is to ignore the rhetorical effect of the narrative.<sup>63</sup>

Setting helps one to determine the flow and structure of the narrative. There are generally two types of settings. The first is the temporal setting which identifies when the story took place. This can be expressed in terms of a king's reign or a period of history. This helps the reader to identify the passage of time or social-historical background. The book of Ruth clearly identifies the background of the narrative as the time of the Judges and so establishes the setting of the narrative (Ruth 1:1). There is also the spatial setting by which the narrator sets the story in a specific place. This location then will often become important in the telling of the story. Exodus 1:1 identifies the sons of Israel who went to Egypt. This identifies the location of the narrative as Egypt so clarifying that the Israelites are not in the land of promise, a fact that will become one of the main points of tension throughout the Exodus narrative.

Characters are essential to the storytelling in biblical narratives. They are the means through which the narrator is able to articulate their message. As Bar-Efrat argues, "the decision [the characters] are called upon to make when confronted with different alternatives, and the results of these decisions, provide undisputable evidence of the narrative's ethical dimension."<sup>64</sup> Often a narrative will follow the life of one character and recount for the reader the particular actions of this character. In biblical narrative

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<sup>63</sup> For further discussion surrounding the narrator see Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*, 13–45; Amit, *Reading*, 93–102; Alter, *Narrative*, 23–46, 155–77; Fokkelman, *Reading*, 55–72.

<sup>64</sup> Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*, 47.

there are different levels of characters. The first level is the main character around whom most of the narrative is shaped. The second level includes characters at the periphery who play an important role in shaping the narrative, but are not the main focus.<sup>65</sup>

Biblical narratives create characters using a variety of methods. Only information which is central to the story line is provided. There are two methods of characterization: direct and indirect. Direct characterization occurs when the narrator informs the reader directly about the character. This includes comments concerning the appearance of a character. Direct characterization also involves the describing of a character's personality whether through description by the narrator or through speeches from the character.

More common than direct characterization is indirect characterization. Bar-Efrat writes concerning indirect characterization, "indirect ways of shaping the characters are to be found in all those external features, like speech or actions, which indicate something about the individual's inner state."<sup>66</sup> The speech or actions can be performed by the character who is being characterized but often another character is introduced to assist in the characterization process. The actions of the characters are what propel the story forward as the reader is able to see action from the beginning, through the tension, until the end. This study will look at the factors surrounding the characters in the Ezra 1–6 narrative and how the author both describes them and uses them to advance the purpose and plot of the story.

Certain themes and motifs run throughout the narrative. This is a form of repetition where the narrator continues to return to an idea and develops that idea as the

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<sup>65</sup> Berlin (*Poetics*, 32) suggests "one might think of [secondary characters] as points on a continuum: 1) the agent, about whom nothing is known except what is necessary for the plot; the agent is a function of the plot or part of the setting; 2) the type, who has a limited and stereotyped range of traits, and who represents the class of people with these traits; 3) the character, who has a broader range of traits (not all belonging to the same class of people), and about whom we know more than is necessary for the plot."

<sup>66</sup> Bar-Efrat, *Narrative*, 64.

narrative progresses. Alter defines themes as follows, “An idea which is part of the value-system of the narrative – it may be moral, moral-psychological, legal, political, historiosophical, theological – is made evident in some recurring pattern.”<sup>67</sup> The use of themes allows the narrator to draw attention to a central part of the story which they are telling. This helps the reader to decipher the argument which is being put forth by the narrator. Themes can be developed through the repetition of events, characters and circumstances in the narrative.

The structure of the narrative is defined by the plot outline. Plots run on two levels, the first is the overall plot which is characterized by the major crisis. There are different phases through which biblical stories progress toward resolution. As Bar-Efrat comments, “narratives which on the one hand can be considered as self-contained units may be regarded on the other hand as parts of larger wholes.”<sup>68</sup> Isolated narratives are brought together to create larger units.

A story is not just a group of documents collected together. A story must contain at least one character and a plot. As Yariah Amit comments, “the plot is a selection and organization of events in a particular order of time; it is a purposeful structure built around the conflict between the personae.”<sup>69</sup> The conflict of the story does not need to represent a struggle between two human characters, but can be an internal struggle which the character encounters. The author chooses the material and organizes it accordingly to

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<sup>67</sup> Alter (*Narrative*, 95) provides the examples of “the reversal of primogeniture in Genesis; obedience versus rebellion in the Wilderness stories; knowledge in the Joseph story; exile and promised land; the rejection and election of the monarch in Samuel and Kings.”

<sup>68</sup> Bar-Efrat, “Observations,” 156.

<sup>69</sup> Amit, *Reading*, 47. Bar-Efrat (*Narrative*, 93) comments, “the plot serves to organize events in such a way as to arouse the reader’s interest and emotional involvement, while at the same time imbuing the events with meaning.”



guide the reader to an intended conclusion. This involves a process by which the story is created.

The plot of a narrative consists of three sections: beginning, middle, and end.<sup>70</sup> As J.P. Fokkelman writes, “the full-grown story begins by establishing a problem or deficit; next, it can present an exposition before the action gets urgent; obstacles and conflicts may occur that attempt to frustrate the *dénouement*, and finally there is the winding up, which brings the solution of the problem or the cancellation of the deficit.”<sup>71</sup> The setting, characters, and themes of the narrative all influence the plot of the story. An important aspect for analyzing the plot of a narrative is deciphering the beginning and the end of a plot. The beginning of a narrative is outlined by establishing the problem or the expectation of the narratives. Then the tension in the narrative rises as the problem is fixed and the expectations met. At the point of climax in the narrative the problem is resolved and the tension begins to unwind as narrative moves toward a conclusion.

This study will analyze Ezra 1–6 as narrative, paying attention to ways the narrator uses the setting, characters and themes to frame the structure and the plot of the narrative. It will be proposed that the turning point of the narrative is the reference to Haggai and Zechariah prophesying to the Judean community (5:1). It is only after the prophets intervene in the narrative that the Judean community is able to fulfill their task.

### 5. Plan

The various sections in this chapter will provide the outline for the analysis of Ezra 1–6 which follows. First the text will be analyzed according to setting, characters,

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<sup>70</sup> Fokkelman, *Reading*, 76–78.

<sup>71</sup> Fokkelman, *Reading*, 77. See also Amit, *Reading*, 47.

and themes. Then under the plot section, how the setting, characters, and themes help develop the plot of Ezra 1–6 will be presented. Discussion concerning Ezra 1–6 will be divided in two parts. Ezra 1:1–4:24 will be considered as it sets the stage for the prophet's appearance in the narrative. Then the focus will shift to the prophet's role in the narrative in Ezra 5:1–6:22.

## CHAPTER 2

### FROM BABYLON TO JERUSALEM BUT NOT TO FULFILLMENT

#### 1. Introduction

The focus of this study is on the narrative role of the prophet in Ezra 1–6, but before this analysis can take place the foundation and subsequent build up of the narrative must be presented. For this purpose the text will be divided into three sections: Ezra 1:1–4; Ezra 1:5–3:1; and Ezra 2:68–4:24.<sup>72</sup> The boundaries of these sections are based upon the fulfillment of the imperatives which are given by Cyrus in the first section (Ezra 1:1–4). The first imperative is the עלה (*‘ālāh; go up*) imperative and the second imperative is the בנה (*bānāh; build*) imperative. The second section of the chapter will deal with Ezra 1:5–3:1. The reason for this division is the fact that the עלה imperative is completed at the end of this section (3:1). The third section will be Ezra 2:68–4:24. This division is made because Ezra 2:68 marks the beginning of the בנה imperative. Thus Ezra 2:68–3:1 represent transitional verses as the focus of the narrative changes from the עלה imperative to the בנה imperative. The struggle which ensues while the people are working to fulfill this imperative becomes the central plot line of Ezra 1–6.

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<sup>72</sup> Similar divisions are made by Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, xi–xii; Bob Becking, “Continuity and Community,” 256–75. Becking (“Continuity,” 260) divides the Ezra narrative into three sections; “1. Ezra 1-2 relates the movement of a group of people from ‘being in Babylonia’ to ‘living in Jerusalem and vicinity’. 2. Ezra 3-6 is to be seen as a coherent narrative the main narrative programme of which can be labeled as the abolition of the non-celebration of the Passover. The (re)building of the temple, the change from ‘altar’ to ‘temple’ is an embedded narrative programme, apparently necessarily for the celebration of Passover.” The final division is Ezra 7–10.

## 2. *Expectation/Problem: Ezra 1:1–4*

The first section of the narrative is Ezra 1:1–4 which records the decree by Cyrus given to the people. Employing the narrative method outlined in the introduction this section will highlight the first action in the narrative of Ezra 1–6.

### *i. Setting*

Ezra 1:1–4 begins in Babylon with Cyrus establishing the decree which allows any of the Judean people to return and build the temple of God. The narrator outlines the temporal and spatial setting for the narrative. The temporal setting is in the first year of Cyrus the king of Persia.<sup>73</sup> Cyrus, after successfully subduing the Babylonian empire begins immediately governing over his new subjects. The reference to Jeremiah, though, reminds the reader that Cyrus's actions are rooted in the earlier promise through Jeremiah. Ezra 1:1 identifies that Cyrus was raised up by Yhwh to fulfill the task of allowing the people to return and to build the temple. The fact that Cyrus's first response, immediately after successfully capturing Babylon, is to complete the task assigned to him by Yhwh emphasizes the need for immediate fulfillment by the people.

Additionally, by dating the narrative according to the reign of a Persian ruler and not an Israelite king reveals to the reader that circumstances for the Judean people have changed drastically.<sup>74</sup> The world which the reader has entered is not the same world as in the book of Kings or Chronicles as it is a foreign monarch who is used to establish the time period of the story. The narrator could have dated the story by referencing, as in

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<sup>73</sup> Blenkinsopp (*Ezra-Nehemiah*, 74) points out that “the first regnal year of Cyrus was 559/8 but his first year as ruler of Babylon was 538/7.” The author of Ezra 1 is marking the actions of Cyrus as corresponding to Cyrus's first year after defeating Babylon. Cf. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 8–9.

<sup>74</sup> Conrad (*Zechariah*, 45) uses this type of technique in providing a background for the prophetic message of Zechariah. He argues that by dating Zechariah by Darius it allows the prophetic message of the nine previous minor prophets to be understood as true prophets. In the case of Ezra 1:1 it sets the background of the narrative as being under the rule of the Persian kings.

Ezek 40:1, the time which had elapsed since the fall of Jerusalem.<sup>75</sup> The Judean people, even though Cyrus will allow them to return, remain under the authority of the Persian court.

The spatial setting is Persia as the decree comes from the mouth of King Cyrus. The fact that the narrative has started away from the land of promise identifies one of the problems for the story. The people of God are not in the land which God had given to them. The situation facing the Judean people is established by the narrator identifying the temporal and spatial setting as the narrative begins.

### *ii. Characters*

The opening verses also introduce to the reader three of the characters for the narrative, Cyrus, Yhwh and the people. Cyrus and Yhwh are fully round characters in this section. Cyrus takes action in this section, and pronounces a decree to the people. Yhwh, even though he does not speak in this section is described as performing numerous actions and being the one who is motivating Cyrus. The people are peripheral characters, but nevertheless are important in Ezra 1:1–4.<sup>76</sup>

There are four different aspects to Cyrus's characterization. The first aspect is that he is moved by Yhwh to take action. The motivation for him to build the temple is not to increase his fame, but is to fulfill the will of Yhwh. The narrator ensures that the actions of Cyrus are seen as fulfilling God's will and that his actions are completing a prophecy which was spoken long before by the prophet Jeremiah. The shock that a foreign king was instructed to build the sacred house of Yhwh is dramatically lessened by assuring the

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<sup>75</sup> Ezekiel 40:1a reads, "In the twenty-fifth year of our exile, at the beginning of the year, on the tenth of the month, in the fourteenth year after the fall of the city." The narrator, later in the Ezra 1-6 narrative, dates the events corresponding the years since they arrive at the house of God in Jerusalem (3:8).

<sup>76</sup> Berlin (*Poetics*, 23–42) provides an excellent discussion concerning the importance of secondary characters.

reader that this action is entirely motivated by Jeremiah's word.<sup>77</sup> Jeremiah provides the seal of approval for Cyrus as he takes actions to bring about the return of God's people to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the temple. The narrator is demonstrating that the action of Cyrus was pronounced long ago through the prophet Jeremiah. Yhwh foreknew that he was going to rouse Cyrus's heart to build the temple. Cyrus does not act merely on his own volition, but as an agent of Yhwh.

The second aspect of Cyrus's characterization is the second way Cyrus responds to the will of Yhwh. The text reads "Yhwh aroused the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia" (הָעִיר יְהוָה אֶת־רוּחַ כְּרֶשׁ מְלֶכֶד־פָּרְס; 1:1). The use of עוֹר (*rouse*) in the *hiphil* stem with Yhwh as the subject demonstrates that it was Yhwh who was behind Cyrus's actions.<sup>78</sup> When the verb is in the *hiphil* and Yhwh is the subject the concept is an arousal for a purpose by which the object, in this case Cyrus, must complete a certain task.<sup>79</sup> This task would be allowing the Judean community to return and build the temple. The decree makes clear that Cyrus is fulfilling his task which characterizes Cyrus as a faithful instrument of Yhwh. This assures the reader that the actions which will follow are in

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<sup>77</sup> As noted in fn. 79 below Yhwh used foreign rulers throughout the history of Israel to achieve his purposes, but as Throntveit (*Ezra-Nehemiah*, 13–14) identifies, these purposes were often for destruction. In this case Yhwh is using a foreign ruler to bring about a positive action for the community. Bickerman ("Edict of Cyrus," 266–8) argues that Second Isaiah had hoped that Cyrus would follow Yhwh, but since he did not construction was stopped until someone from David's line, Zerubbabel, could take up the building of the temple.

<sup>78</sup> See Waltke and O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 433–46, for a discussion concerning the *Hiphil* stem.

<sup>79</sup> See *TWOT*, 656, "By far the most significant use of this word is in the causative with God as its subject. Here one sees the active involvement of God in history. He is not aloof or passive. He is not simply a spectator. He is in complete charge, manipulating his plan. All his actions are purposeful. Events do not happen by chance. This emphasis is clearly discernible in the OT passages which use this verb in the causative with God as subject. Tilgath-pilneser, king of Assyria, was stirred up by the Lord against the tribes in the Transjordan area (I Chr 5:26). He aroused the Babylonians against Jerusalem (Ezk 23:22). Then he stirred up the Medes against Babylon (Isa 13:17; Jer 50:9, 11; 51:11). Again it was the Lord who incited Cyrus to allow the Jewish exiles to return to Judah (II Chr 36:22; Ezr 1:1) and who in turn urged the exiles to return (Joel 3:7 [H 4:7]). When apathy had overtaken the returned exiles, the Lord agitated Zerubbabel and Joshua through the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to carry the construction of the second temple to its completion (Hag 1:14)."

accordance with the will of Yhwh and are not derived from any other intention. The narrator has provided the reader with clear background information concerning Cyrus and his action before the narrative moves into the decree where Cyrus speaks for himself.

The third aspect of characterization for Cyrus is found in his decree. Cyrus affirms Yhwh as his motivation for building the temple in the decree which he gives to the people. The decree is recorded in the first person as Cyrus dictates the decree.<sup>80</sup> It is also put into writing, an action which will prove to be important later in the narrative. Cyrus understands that he is performing the actions of God. In the decree itself Cyrus attributes his successful victories to יהוה אֱלֹהֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם (Yhwh God of heaven; 1:2). The term “god of heaven” is not that surprising since this form of the divine name is common in the vernacular of foreign rulers and attested in other documents.<sup>81</sup> The use of the divine name by Cyrus does appear to be a little odd, but this only serves to provide a closer association between Cyrus and Yhwh.<sup>82</sup> Cyrus continues by expressing “and he appointed for me to build for him a house in Jerusalem which is in Judah” (וְהוֹאֲפָקֵד עָלַי לְבָנוֹת-לוֹ בַּיִת בְּיְרוּשָׁלַם ) (אֲשֶׁר בְּיְהוּדָה; 1:2). Some have sought to delineate the motivation for Cyrus to build the temple in Jerusalem. James Trotter suggests that the reason Cyrus allowed the temple to

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<sup>80</sup> As highlighted in the introduction this decree is normally discussed in the context of its authenticity. Bickerman (“Edict of Cyrus,” 249–75) has often been the foundation by which one affirmed that this decree was authentic as he writes, “Ezra 1 preserves a genuine edict of Cyrus, which had the same formula and the same modes of promulgation by herald and through poster, as the Roman *edictum*.” Grabbe has been a major critic of the apparent general consensus that there are authentic Persian documents suggesting limited dialogue about their authenticity has occurred in English writing. See Grabbe, “Reconstructing,” 98–106; Grabbe, “Mind,” 83–104; Grabbe, “Documents,” 531–70. Grabbe (“Documents,” 563) rates this decree as having the least probability of being authentic.

<sup>81</sup> Fensham (*Ezra and Nehemiah*, 43–44) comments, “It is important to note that the expression ‘God of heaven,’ occurs frequently in the Elephantine Papyri. It is thus acceptable to think that their decree was transmitted orally, in Hebrew as it was remembered by the Jews. It is also important to note that the Lord could have been acknowledged by Cyrus as being one of the many gods who assisted him in becoming a world monarch.” This can also be inferred by Fried, “Desolate,” 21–54. See also Bickerman “Edict,” 256–7.

<sup>82</sup> Williamson (*Ezra, Nehemiah*, 6–7) accounts for this oddity by suggesting that the decree would have been written by Jewish scribes.

be built was to ensure a firm place in Judah for the Persian court and not because of any religious desire of the people.<sup>83</sup> The narrator however does not present such as the case. Cyrus recognizes that Yhwh is sovereign, even in his military accomplishments (1:2), responds in thanksgiving by building a temple for the God who allowed him to succeed.<sup>84</sup> He also understands this action as an assigned task from God to complete the temple. Cyrus takes on the requirement of the actions. He is responsible for ensuring that the temple is completed.<sup>85</sup>

The fourth aspect of characterization for Cyrus is also found in his decree. Cyrus instructs the people who remain to support the ones from the area to rebuild the temple.<sup>86</sup> The people who remain are supposed to provide silver, gold, goods, livestock, and freewill offerings. This allows all the Jewish people who were exiled to Babylon to participate in the rebuilding of the temple even if they did not want to or could not go to Jerusalem. This also demonstrates that Cyrus is helping to provide the people who are going to build the temple in Jerusalem with support for their work.

The narrator has portrayed the character of Cyrus as a benevolent king who understands his purpose as part of God's plan to ensure that the temple in Jerusalem is rebuilt. The character of Cyrus, although his actions are limited, develops as the narrative

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<sup>83</sup> Trotter, "Second Jerusalem Temple," 276–94. Part of Trotter's argument is that no action on the temple was taken until 520 (287) and he questions whether or not Cyrus issued such a decree even though "the attribution of temple construction to the emperor should be expected in this socio-historical context." (292) Trotter lists six reasons why the temple in Jerusalem would have been advantageous for the Persian Court (291–2). They surround economic gain and political loyalty from the people.

<sup>84</sup> See Fried ("Desolate," 35) as she highlights that temple building inscriptions "state the god whose temple it is, and most importantly they state that the impetus for the temple building came by divine command for the god of the king."

<sup>85</sup> Boda (*Haggai, Zechariah*, 23–6) has drawn attention to the manner in which kings prescribed the build/rebuilding of temple as divinely ordained action. He cites the dream of Nabonidus which resulted in his desire to rebuild E-hul-hul providing a place for Sin to dwell. Similar to the actions taken by Cyrus in Ezra 1:1–4; as Cyrus resettled the gods which were taken by the Babylonian rulers before him. The idea of Cyrus being the one chosen to rebuild the temple of Yhwh is also reflected in Second Isaiah. See Isa 44:18.

<sup>86</sup> Williamson (*Ezra, Nehemiah*, 14) comments, "the meaning of the passage is clear: not all Jews by any means wanted to return. They were therefore encouraged to assist those who did."



progresses. In the next section he helps the people set off on the return and as the narrative builds he is continually referred to as the one who granted permission for them to rebuild the temple.

Throughout the characterization of Cyrus it has become clear that Yhwh is an influential character in the narrative of Ezra 1–6. Numerous comments have been made concerning Yhwh's role in the context of Cyrus's characterization, however the material bears repeating in the context of Yhwh and his character. The first two comments concerning Yhwh are made by the narrator; the other comments are made through Cyrus's point of view and outlined in his speech.

Before the narrator quotes the decree which was given by Cyrus, Yhwh's actions are outlined. This identifies Yhwh as the one controlling the events of the narrative. Yhwh takes action by raising Cyrus to fulfill the word which he had already spoken through his prophet. Yhwh is not compelled to act because Cyrus allows the people to build the temple, but is the one who motivates Cyrus to act. Cyrus is Yhwh's agent in bringing about the temple rebuilding project.

The narrator and Cyrus agree concerning Yhwh's role in the narrative as Cyrus's portrayal of Yhwh in 1:2 coincides with the opening statements of 1:1. It is Yhwh, the God of heaven, who both gave him success in his military endeavors and subsequently appointed him to build a temple. Through Cyrus's speech Yhwh is seen as a God who accomplishes his will by working through the king. Cyrus makes it clear that he did not implore Yhwh to build a temple in his honour, but was appointed by Yhwh to fulfill this action. The motivation is not from Cyrus, but from Yhwh. It is a reflection of Yhwh's power and sovereign strength.

Cyrus continues his decree and provides further characterization concerning Yhwh. Cyrus outlines the people who consider Yhwh to be their God as he declares to build “the house of Yhwh the God of Israel, that is, the God which is in Jerusalem” (אֶת־בַּיִת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר בִּירוּשָׁלַם; 1:3). Yhwh is named the God of Israel and the God who dwells in Jerusalem. This classification provides an expanded characterization of Yhwh, while focussing in on the people in whom Yhwh has taken special interest. Yhwh, who is the God of heaven, is also the particular God of the Israelite people. The Israelites are the ones for whom Yhwh raised up Cyrus to build the temple. Yhwh has not forsaken his people, but is bringing them back to once again dwell in the promise land. The decree reminds the reader that Yhwh is the God of Israel, the God who had previously saved them from Egypt and has now acted again on their behalf.

Yhwh is additionally called the God who is in Jerusalem. This draws attention to the place where Yhwh dwelled with his people. The temple was the place in which Yhwh’s presence dwelled. Here there is a glimpse of the future as it appears that Yhwh will once again take up his place in the temple.

Yhwh has raised up Cyrus to accomplish a specific task for his people. The people are silent characters in the first section, but they already are provided with indirect characterization as Cyrus highlights the type of people who will respond. Cyrus proclaimed that God had established him to build Yhwh’s temple. As a result Cyrus allows “whoever among you from all his people” (מִי־בְכֶם מִכָּל־עַמּוֹ) to go up and build the temple (1:3). While this sentence is awkward in Hebrew, the meaning is not difficult to decipher. The decree of Cyrus was to go out in all his territory so the “you” in “whoever among you” should be understood to refer to the vast kingdom over which Cyrus was

now ruling.<sup>87</sup> The decree is narrowed by the next clause as the specific people who are in view are the ones “from all his people.”<sup>88</sup> This suggests that those who are supposed to respond to Cyrus’s decree should be from among those who are Yhwh worshippers.<sup>89</sup> It is important to note that no single individual is mentioned as the leader to whom Cyrus is transferring power. The people are all those who call Yhwh their God. As Gordon Davies points out, “the mass of the people is not defined by its leading citizens only.”<sup>90</sup>

The next clause in the decree from Cyrus implores Yhwh to be with those people who are going up. The text reads, “may his God be with him” (יְהוָה אֱלֹהָיו עִמּוֹ; 1:3).<sup>91</sup> Cyrus believes that Yhwh will support the people who decided to go up and fulfill the decree. This suggests that if the people are faithful in responding to Yhwh, by following Cyrus’s decree, then Yhwh will be with them. The reader does not yet know who specifically is going to respond to the decree, but understands that these people will be going with Yhwh’s support. This highlights that establishing a place for the presence of God to dwell is the goal of the project and at the same time identifies that the presence of God goes with the people enabling the project.

### *iii. Themes*

Two themes consistently arise throughout the Ezra 1–6 narrative. The first is the sovereignty of God and the second is the continuity between the past and present communities of Israel. Both themes are introduced in this first section. The decree that introduces the narrative is recorded as being proclaimed by Cyrus. However, it is only

<sup>87</sup> Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 75.

<sup>88</sup> Eskenazi (*Prose*, 43) suggests “the question ‘who are the people of God?’ reverberates from beginning to end and is intimately linked to building the house of God.”

<sup>89</sup> Williamson (*Ezra, Nehemiah*, 13) notes that “all” in Ezra 1:3 “is unnecessary in the present context, and yet which imparts an allusion to such heavily ideological phrases elsewhere in the OT as ‘all Israel.’”

<sup>90</sup> Davies, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 7.

<sup>91</sup> Eskenazi (*Prose*, 43) identifies a word play between עִמּוֹ (his people) and עִמּוֹ (with him) suggesting this is an early clue that the people are going to be at the forefront of the narrative.

through the sovereign actions of Yhwh, that is, the word of Yhwh's prophet Jeremiah and because of Yhwh's stirring up of Cyrus's spirit that the decree was given (1:1). In this case the Persian Court and Yhwh are working together. As was discussed in Cyrus's characterization, Cyrus's motivation is derived from his thankfulness that the God of heaven had given him victory (1:2). Through Cyrus's action the Persian court is the one which is empowering the Judean community as they complete the task assigned to them, both returning and building. Cyrus even asks for Yhwh to be with his people as they make their journey (1:3). Another part of this theme is the request from the court to have others support the project by giving their resources. Cyrus requests that the ones who are remaining support those who are going up with resources required for the return and the building project in Jerusalem (1:4). Cyrus acts as an effective instrument of God by which the people can return and build the temple.

The second theme is one where the narrator draws attention to the past community of Israel. The beginning of this theme is seen in the introduction of the prophet Jeremiah. The action that Yhwh accomplishes through Cyrus allowing the people to return is not done for a new people, but was promised to the Israelite community of old through Jeremiah's prophecy. The people who are allowed to return are doing so through the fulfillment of a message spoken to their forefathers.

The initiation of the return and the temple rebuilding project was in accordance with the prophetic words spoken by Jeremiah and not Cyrus's unique thoughts. Many scholars have attempted to determine the specific prophetic passage in view in Ezra 1. Often it has been suggested that Jeremiah should be understood in association with

Second Isaiah.<sup>92</sup> Even though many agree that Second Isaiah (41:2, 25; 44:28; 45:1)

should be included in the discussion, seldom are the passages from Jeremiah agreed upon.

The proposals range from Jeremiah 29:4–9;<sup>93</sup> 29:10–14 [25:11–14];<sup>94</sup> chapter 31<sup>95</sup> and

chapter 51.<sup>96</sup> In the end no matter what passage scholars identify as the connection point

<sup>92</sup> Batten (*Ezra and Nehemiah*, 56–57) argues that since there is no mention of a temple rebuilding project in the prophetic message one must appeal to Second Isaiah (41:2, 25; 44:28; 45:1). He also suggests that Isaiah 40–66 was an anonymous collection which circulated independently and wrongly attributed to Jeremiah by the author of Ezra 1:1. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 9–10; Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 43.

<sup>93</sup> Cf. Frolov, “Prophecy of Jeremiah,” 596. Frolov has proposed, based upon a translation issue from Ezra 1:1 that Jer 29:4–9 should be seen as the reference to Jeremiah. He argues that כלה in Ezra 1:1 should not be translated as “fulfill” as it normally is, but as “cancel.” Frolov is correct in noting that כלה is not normally used to mark the fulfillment of prophecy. In Ezek 5:13 and Dan 11:36, the other two references mentioned in *BDB* in the same category as Ezra 1:1, are both cases where כלה is used to mark the end of God’s anger and not in bring a prophetic word to fruition. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, to mark the fulfillment of a prophetic word normally מלא is used. In other cases בוא, קום, or שלם are used to express the idea of a word or action coming to fulfillment. This would suggest the use of כלה in Ezra 1.1 and 2 Chron 36:22 is an anomaly and perhaps the usual translation of ‘fulfil,’ coinciding with 2 Chron 36:21, must be called into question as Frolov has done. According to Frolov, in Ezra 1:1 the narrator is claiming that the exile has been brought to a premature end thus “cancelling” Jer 29:4–9.

<sup>94</sup> Blenkinsopp (*Ezra-Nehemiah*, 74) argues the author “account of the exile as the sabbatical rest of the land interpreting Jer. 29:10-14 [cf. 25:11-14] in light of Lev. 26:34-35, marked the conclusion of the history of the First Temple,” preparing the stage for the new beginning of the post-captivity community. Blenkinsopp (*Ezra-Nehemiah*, 75) also comments, “Jeremian text predicted judgment on Babylon, return after seventy years, and the renewal of religious life.” The mention of judgment on Babylon in Jeremiah probably stems from Jer 51, the passage Williamson presents as the main allusion; see below. Throntveit (*Ezra-Nehemiah*, 14); Fensham (*Ezra and Nehemiah*, 42); Grabbe (*Ezra-Nehemiah*, 11) agree that Jer 29:10 is the foundation of the Jeremiah reference.

<sup>95</sup> McConville, “Ezra-Nehemiah,” 205–24.

<sup>96</sup> Williamson (*Ezra, Nehemiah*, 10) suggests the Jer 51 “should also be drawn into the discussion. Jer 51 is a highly poetical prediction of the fall of Babylon which has a number of close links with the Isaianic tradition.” This passage is significant because the verb עור is used. Jeremiah 51:1 has Yhwh proclaim that he will עור a ‘destroyer’ against Babylon and then in verse 11 where the king of Medes will be aroused against Babylon. Verse 11 is also interesting because the last clause mentions the ‘the vengeance Yhwh has for his temple,’ because the temple appears to be the purpose of the Cyrus decree. Even though the rebuilding of the temple is not specifically mentioned in Jer 51, the vision of restoration and return is underlining the text in the first part of the chapter along with the judgement that will be poured out against Babylon for what they have done to Israel. In verse 6 the people are instructed to ‘flee’ and in verse 10 are encouraged to “tell in Zion what the Lord our God has done.” This verses display a desire for the people to move out of Babylon and presumably return to Jerusalem. Williamson (*Ezra, Nehemiah*, 10) also writes that the author, “would have expected the readers to interpret the negative prophecy of Jer 51 in light of the positive statements of Isa 41, 44 and 45: God’s whole purpose in raising Cyrus to destroy Babylon was to assure that the temple in Jerusalem might be rebuilt and the exiles returned to their homeland.” The problem with using Jer 51 in the context of Ezra 1 and Cyrus is that the destruction that is promised against Babylon hardly seems to be poured out at this point. Cyrus’s own words suggested that he was embraced by the people as their saviour when he arrived to take over possession of Babylon. It was not until later where Babylon was punished severely because of numerous revolts, but these punishments were not accomplished by Cyrus, but by Darius. See Boda, “Terrifying the Horns,” 22–41; esp. 34–39; Boda, “*Hoy, Hoy*,” forthcoming. Cf. Albertz, “Darius,” 371–83; Vanderhooft, “Cyrus II,” 351–71.

for Jeremiah, it remains clear that the narrator is linking the actions taken by Cyrus and the imperatives given to the people with a message previously prophesied by Jeremiah.<sup>97</sup>

#### iv. Plot

Ezra 1:1–4 is important for establishing the plot of Ezra 1–6. It sets out for the reader the problem of the narrative and the expectation that must be fulfilled to reach a conclusion to the narrative. This is represented in the two imperatives of Cyrus’s decree. These imperatives are given in Ezra 1:3b as the text reads, “and let him **go up** to Jerusalem which is in Judah and let him **build** the house of Yhwh God of Israel, that is, the God which is in Jerusalem” ( וַיַּעַל לִירוּשָׁלַם אֲשֶׁר בִּיהוּדָה וַיְבִן אֶת־בַּיִת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הוּא (הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר בִּירוּשָׁלַם).<sup>98</sup> The first instruction is to “go up.” This is what will be called the *עלה* (*‘ālāh; go up*) imperative.<sup>99</sup> The second instruction is to “build” which will be called the *בנה* (*bānāh; build*) imperative. These two imperatives create the basic expectations of the narrative. They also represent the problem as it is clear at the beginning of the narrative that the people of God are not in their own land, the land which was promised to the patriarch Abraham. Also, the temple in which the glory of God was supposed to dwell is at best not built or at worst lying in ruins. Cyrus’s decree that allows the people to rectify these problems forms the expectation of the narrative. The people are now able to

<sup>97</sup> Possible passages from Jeremiah which have not been previously considered are Jer 16:14, 15 and 23:7, 8 which both promise restoration. When the Israelites left Egypt they celebrated Yhwh’s deliverance on a yearly basis by celebrating the Passover meal (Exod 12:14–28). Part of the celebration was remembering the actions of Yhwh to bring Israel up out of Egypt. In Jeremiah’s prophecy the promise is that they will no longer look to Yhwh’s decisive action in Egypt, but to his action redeeming them from the land of the north and anywhere Israelites had been exiled. This is precisely what Cyrus allows to happen and coincides with Cyrus proclaiming that any from any place where they are now living may return to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:4). The celebration of the Passover is delayed until the temple is completed. The final section of the text (Ezra 6:14–22) reports the Judean community celebrating the Passover as the redeemed people. This prophecy fits well into the overall theme of connection to the past of Israel and coincides with the conclusion to the narrative of Ezra 1–6. See Becking, “Continuity and Community,” 260.

<sup>98</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>99</sup> In both cases the verbs are given in the jussive form and not the imperative, but their force is one of command. See Waltke and O’Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 568–70.

return, fixing the problem of being away from the land of promise, and they are instructed to build, fixing the problem of the destroyed temple. The people are not just able to do so, but are expected to follow through until completion.

The *עלה* imperative is the instruction that the Israelite people who are in Babylon can return to their former land. Because of this decree the reader expects that the people will take advantage of this opportunity and return to Jerusalem.

Cyrus initiates the *בנה* imperative by instructing the people “to build for him [Yhwh] the house of God which is in Judah” (לְבָנוֹת־לֹ בַיִת בִּירוּשָׁלַם אֲשֶׁר בְּיְהוּדָה; 1:2). The Hebrew word *בית* can have a wide range of meaning. Its dominant sense is that of a “house” as a family dwelling. Nevertheless, *בית* can also mean “dynasty,” “family,” or “temple.”<sup>100</sup> The single word *בית* can be expanded as it is often used to refer to “the house of God” or “the house of Yhwh,” that is, the temple. Eskenazi provides an interpretation which she believes explains how “house” serves as one of the major themes which binds the Ezra 1–Nehemiah 13 narrative together. She suggests that “being the people of God and building the house of God are to some extent unknown entities, not fully defined at the beginning of the book.”<sup>101</sup> The apparently undefined nature allows Eskenazi to argue that as the narrative of Ezra-Nehemiah unfolds, the house of God does not just refer to the temple, but extends to encompass the entire city.<sup>102</sup> For Eskenazi, because of her understanding of what the house of God represents, the decree is not fulfilled until the

<sup>100</sup> The range of meaning for *בית* is overtly apparent in 2 Sam 7 where David, dwelling himself in a newly built house, wants to build God a *בית* (house, temple), but God instead says his will build a *בית* (dynasty) for David.

<sup>101</sup> Eskenazi, *Prose*, 43.

<sup>102</sup> See Eskenazi, *Prose*, 188. One can trace her argument through by reviewing pages 53–57; 71–73; 83–87; 104–9; 119–21. See also a critic of Eskenazi in VanderKam “Ezra-Nehemiah,” 68–75; Grabbe, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 96–107. Cf. Marinkovic (“Second Temple,” 88–103) supports Eskenazi’s interpretation while working with the message of Zech 1–8.

events of Nehemiah 8:1–13:31, where “the community celebrates the completion of the house of God according to Torah,”<sup>103</sup> and not in the completion of the literal house of God in Ezra 6:15. Eskenazi’s understanding that the house of God encompasses the entire city ignores the focus of the Ezra 1–6 narrative.<sup>104</sup> Cyrus’s decree is not concerned with the development of the city, rather the particular building of the temple. This is especially clear when Darius finds Cyrus’s decree which outlines the parameters for the temple’s construction (6:3–5). She is correct that the decree does represent an “objective defined” for the Ezra narrative, but that decree reaches its fulfillment in the completion of the temple in Ezra 6:15. New restoration initiatives, in Ezra 7, Nehemiah 2 and Nehemiah 7, continue the establishment of the post-captivity community, but Cyrus’s decree has been fulfilled prior to these events (6:15).<sup>105</sup>

It would appear that if the people did not participate in the *עלה* imperative of returning to Jerusalem, then participation in the *בנה* imperative would be impossible. This is not the case. Part of the proclamation for the rebuilding project given by Cyrus is that the Judean people who decided not to return to Jerusalem could assist by providing various goods to those who were returning (1:4). The decree does not only include the Jews who were living in Babylon, but any throughout the ancient Near East so that “each ‘colony’ of Jews should support any from their own group who might be undertaking the return.”<sup>106</sup> The last clause of the decree includes an instruction to send a “free will offering” with those who chose to go up to rebuild (1:4). Even those who did not take

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<sup>103</sup> Eskenazi, *Prose*, 38.

<sup>104</sup> See also Becking, “Continuity,” 269; esp fn. 38.

<sup>105</sup> Both Ezra 7 and Neh 2 offer to the reader new projects that need to be completed. Ezra 7:10 gives to the reader the purpose of Ezra 7–10 as Ezra is determined to teach the law in Israel. The court also gives Ezra an imperative as Artaxerxes’ letter is quoted by the narrator (Ezra 7:12–24). Similarly, Nehemiah, after the king sees him down cast, informs the king about his desire to return to his homeland and reconstruct the parts of Jerusalem that have been ruined. The king obliges and a new imperative and project begins.

<sup>106</sup> Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 15.



advantage of Cyrus's decree to return (עלה imperative) could still participate in the fulfillment of the בנה imperative. This is designed to show that all of Israel is involved in the restoration of the Judean community.

The reader knows that Yhwh is behind the עלה imperative and the בנה imperative, since he stirred up Cyrus's heart. Yhwh has been introduced both directly through the narrator (1:1) and indirectly through Cyrus's decree (1:2–4) is demonstrating how Yhwh is working in the narrative. Cyrus has been identified as a king who responded to the direction of Yhwh and is working to aid the people in their temple rebuilding project. At this point the Persian court is supporting the project through the characterization of Cyrus. The role of the prophet has also been introduced as Jeremiah's prophecy is highlighted by the narrator. The Persian Court with the affirmation of the prophet is working with Yhwh to support the people. This leads into the next sections of Ezra 1–6 as the people begin to fulfill these imperatives starting with the עלה imperative (1:5–3:1) and then the בנה imperative (2:68–6:22).

#### *iv. Conclusion*

The introduction to the Ezra narrative is comprised of only four verses, but provides the foundation for the narrative. In this section, the setting, both temporally and spatially, is established. The narrator also provides the reader with important characterization. The king speaks in the first person and this helps the reader to understand some of the king's characteristics. The characterization of Cyrus the king is vital to the narrative development concerning the office of king because there are other kings who play an influential role in the narrative of Ezra 1–6. Cyrus is the first that the

reader encounters and will be set up as an ideal king. This allows the reader to compare Xerxes, Artaxerxes and Darius to Cyrus.

The reference to Jeremiah is also important as it is the first connection point between the Judean community and the previous Israelite communities, one of the key themes of the narrative. Jeremiah also provides a connection to Yhwh as Jeremiah is used to speak for Yhwh (1:1). Throughout the narrative the author leverages actions and events from the past Israelite community to legitimate this post-captivity community as the people of God.

Another key theme in the narrative is the interaction between the Persian court and Yhwh. This interaction begins immediately as the decree is not simply cited from the words of Cyrus, but is also associated with the earlier words of Jeremiah. This represents how the Persian Court and Yhwh are working together for the people of God.<sup>107</sup> Additionally, it is Yhwh who is said to be orchestrating Cyrus's benevolence to the people of God who are situated in Judah.

In these verses the narrator sets out for the reader the main problems of the narrative. The first problem is that the people are not living in their own land and the second problem is that the temple is in ruins. The decree establishes the expectations for the people to fix both of these problems. They are to return to Judah and then rebuild the temple. These actions are the two imperatives given by Cyrus, in accordance with the word of Jeremiah. The first imperative is the *עלה* imperative which instructs the people to

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<sup>107</sup> Throntveit (*Ezra-Nehemiah*, 13–14) comments, “In the past, God had frequently made use of foreign nations through the agency of their kings, but God’s purpose had always been to chastise Israel ... But now, when he ‘stirred up the spirit of Cyrus of Persia’ (1:1) with the positive intention of redemption that Israel might return to the land, God’s use of the nations encompassed a new purpose.” Throntveit is also careful to point out that the decree in Ezra 1:1-4 might seem to represent Cyrus’s benevolence was directed only toward the Israelite community, but as represented by the Cyrus Cylinder he allowed “*all* the exiled communities in Babylon without distinction and covered the initial costs of the rebuilding of their sanctuaries.”

return to Jerusalem in Judah from their present residence in Babylon. The second imperative is the *בנה* imperative which instructs the people to build the temple. These two imperatives are interrelated as the reason for going up is to build the temple. The next stage is for the people to respond.

### *3. Fulfillment 1: Go up!: Ezra 1:5–3:1*

After the decree from Cyrus the attention of the narrative shifts to the response from the people. The first response is found in Ezra 1:5–3:1 as the people attempt to fulfill the *עלה* imperative. The analysis below will proceed as the former with attention to the setting, characters, themes and plot.

#### *i. Setting*

The temporal setting for Ezra 1:5–3:1 begins in the same period as in Ezra 1:1–4. The people respond to Cyrus’s decree without hesitation and make preparations to go to Jerusalem (1:5) and then succeed in the journey (1:11). Ezra 1:11 serves as summary verse connecting the preparations made in Babylon to the journey made to Jerusalem. However, the narrator includes the list of the people who returned from Ezra 2:1–70 which prolongs the journey made by the people, drawing emphasis to the community and presenting the process by which the people fulfilled the *עלה* imperative.

The spatial setting of Ezra 1:5 begins in Babylon, but by the end of the section the people have arrived at appear the temple completing the *עלה* imperative (3:1).<sup>108</sup> The “heads of families” do go right to the temple (2:68), but are not joined by the rest of Israel

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<sup>108</sup> Historically Ezra 1:11 represents the first return with Sheshbazzar and Ezra 2:1–70 represents a second return with Zerubbabel, Jeshua and their associates. However, the narrator of Ezra 1–6 arranges the material so that it appears that there was only one return with Ezra 1:11 being a proleptic summary for the return which is completed in 3:1. See Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 15.

immediately as people stop at their own town (2:70) before gathering as one to build in Jerusalem (3:1).

## *ii. Characters*

It is in this section that the people begin to take their position as the central characters in the narrative of Ezra 1–6 even though specific leaders and groups are mentioned. Cyrus and Yhwh are still influential in the narrative, but it is the people who the narrator now draws to the foreground.

Cyrus continues to support the Judean people as they set out to leave Babylon and return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple of Yhwh.<sup>109</sup> His action in this section echoes the word which he gave in the decree previously. Cyrus brings out the treasures which were taken by Nebuchadnezzar when Jerusalem was overthrown (1:7). Cyrus does not only give permission for the Judean people to return, but actively participates in their departure. In both Ezra 1:7 and 1:8 Cyrus is the subject of the verb *יצא* (*go out*) in the *hiphil* stem demonstrating that Cyrus was the one who caused this action to take place. The narrator presents Cyrus as being actively involved in the process and highlights the Persian court's continued interest in ensuring that the people succeed in completing the return and temple rebuilding project.

Cyrus is not the only king mentioned in this section as the military success of Nebuchadnezzar is brought to the attention of the reader by highlighting the vessels which the people were to take to the house of God (1:7). However, Nebuchadnezzar should be seen as a foil who contrasts the actions of Cyrus. Nebuchadnezzar was the one

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<sup>109</sup> Allen and Laniak (*Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 20) point out how the actions by the Persian court immediately following draws attention to the purpose of the decree being the rebuilding of the temple. They comment, "This purpose comes correspondingly to the fore in Cyrus's restitution of the temple vessels plundered from the first temple."

who destroyed the temple and exiled the people to Babylon (2 Kgs 24/ 2 Chr 36). In Ezra 1:7 and 2:1 the narrator is drawing attention to the reversal of Nebuchadnezzar's actions. Ezra 1:7 recounts how the vessels which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem were returned to Jerusalem in a reversal of 2 Chr 36:18. Additionally, Ezra 2:1 initiates the list of the people who returned to Jerusalem by noting that it was Nebuchadnezzar who had brought the Judean people from Jerusalem in the first place. Thus Ezra 2:1 marks the reversal of 2 Chr 36:20.<sup>110</sup> These two verses (Ezra 1:7; 2:1) characterize Nebuchadnezzar as the one who is responsible for the problems which Cyrus addresses.<sup>111</sup> Nebuchadnezzar is set up as a king who does not work to support the Judean people. Cyrus is thus elevated all the more as a good king for the Judean community.

Sheshbazzar is the man who is given the temple vessels when Cyrus brings them out. Not a lot of information is provided about Sheshbazzar. There is no family lineage provided by the narrator.<sup>112</sup> Ezra 5:14 reports that Sheshbazzar was appointed governor (פְּהָרָה) over the Judean people by Cyrus, but in Ezra 1 he is called הַנְּשִׂיא לַיהוּדָה (prince of Judah). Often it has been suggested that נְשִׂיא must be understood as a royal title and related to the Davidic house. Williamson is careful to point out that נְשִׂיא does not necessarily connote royalty and proposes that instead the author is making a connection to the Exodus community. In the book of Numbers נְשִׂיא is often used to represent the head

<sup>110</sup> Passages such as Jer 25 always anticipated a reversal of the work of Nebuchadnezzar even though Nebuchadnezzar was working under the direction of Yhwh.

<sup>111</sup> Fensham (*Ezra and Nehemiah*, 45) notes an interesting connection with the verb נָצַח (נָצַח; go out) in the *Hiphil* stem. He comments, "the first usage of with Cyrus as subject means 'set free' something that had been in captivity. It refers to the release of the vessels from the temples of the gods of Babylon. The second *hōsî* [נָצַח] with Nebuchadnezzar as subject refers to the forceful carrying away of the vessels from the temple of the Lord." The first נָצַח is the reversal of the second.

<sup>112</sup> The name Sheshbazzar has often been identified with Shenazzar the son of Jehoiachin (1 Chr 3:18) suggesting he was in the line of David. Japhet ("Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel," 95) suggests that since, in her opinion, the anti-eschatological bias of Ezra and Nehemiah, the lineage of Sheshbazzar might not be hidden. She also suggests that it is possible that the information concerning his lineage was simply lost over time and unavailable to the author.

of a particular tribe. Williamson draws special attention to Num 7:84–86 where the term *נשיא* is “associated with a number gold and silver vessels given for the dedication of the altar, which may well have attracted our author’s attention in the context of his own comparable source.”<sup>113</sup> The reference to Sheshbazzar being the *לִיהוּדָה הַנְּשִׂיא* suggests more so that he was a tribal leader returning the vessels which were taken from the temple back to the temple as instructed by Cyrus.<sup>114</sup> The narrator was not trying to covertly suggest that Sheshbazzar was a Davidic figure set to become the king of Judah. It is more likely that Sheshbazzar was the governor of Judah and the narrator is using this expression to draw connections to the Exodus community.<sup>115</sup>

Sheshbazzar is faithful in his task in this section as the narrator informs the reader that he brought all the articles that were given him from Babylon to Jerusalem (1:11). The ambiguity concerning Sheshbazzar’s responsibility draws focus to the people as they return.<sup>116</sup> Although Sheshbazzar takes a leadership role in the community the people are the ones who are in the forefront of the return. It is not the people following a designated leader as was the case when the people left Egypt under Moses’ leadership. The people are the ones whom Yhwh calls to leave. He does not call Sheshbazzar to lead the people out, but Sheshbazzar is simply the one who is given the temple vessels which are to be returned to the temple in Jerusalem.

<sup>113</sup> Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 18.

<sup>114</sup> Brockington (*Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 15) comments that Sheshbazzar “is called the prince of Judah (Ezr. 1.8), but, beyond being the term used by Ezekiel, in anticipation, for the civil head of the post exilic community, the term itself tells us nothing specific. The Hebrew word does not mean royal prince but is a word that should be applied to anyone who has been raised to authority over his fellows. It could be use of Sheshbazzar, whatever he was, whether Babylonian or Jew, whether of the royal line or not.” Japhet (“Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel,” 98) suggests that “it may well be that in this title we have a unique attempt to find a Hebrew equivalent for the Aramaic ‘pehā’ (governor), an attempt which does not recur.”

<sup>115</sup> See also: Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 46; Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 41; Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 77–78.

<sup>116</sup> Eskenazi, *Prose*, 49–53.

The people are the ones who take centre stage in the return. They immediately respond by arising (קום; 1:5). The people who return to Jerusalem are important to the characterization of the new community. The ones who decide to go up are “all the ones whose heart God had aroused” (לְכָל הָעִיר הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת־רוּחוֹ; 1:5). This is the same “arousing of the heart” which Cyrus experienced in Ezra 1:1, forging a strong connection between Cyrus’s actions and the people’s response. As Eskenazi comments, “the parallel confirms that the response by the community to the decree is prompted by the same divine power responsible for the decree itself, reiterating the connection between decree and fulfillment.”<sup>117</sup> It is only through the movement of Yhwh that the people decided to go up. This also suggests that these people are going to be a community that responds in concert with the voice of Yhwh, his prophets and the leadership. This immediate response demonstrates the intentions the people have to fulfil the decree of Cyrus. The anticipation that they will succeed is brought out by the characterization provided by the narrator.

Ezra 1:5 also guides the reader in the direction of the narrative as it reflects how the people understand the decree of Cyrus.<sup>118</sup> The decree in Ezra 1:2–4 represents Cyrus’s intentions and, as 1:5 almost reiterates that decree, it becomes clear what the people are going up to accomplish: “in order to go up to build the house of Yhwh which is in Jerusalem” (אֶת־בַּיִת יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר בִּירוּשָׁלַם לְעֹלֹת לְבָנוֹת).<sup>119</sup> The preposition *lamed* introduces the dual purposes of the people’s response, in this case both לְעֹלֹת and לְבָנוֹת are verbal

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<sup>117</sup> Eskenazi, *Prose*, 46.

<sup>118</sup> Williamson (*Ezra, Nehemiah*, 15) makes this point in the context of whether the immediate action can be verified historically. He argues that the importance of Ezra 1:5, 6 “lies in their interpretation of the events rather than in the narrative detail ... what mattered to the author was that, in response to God’s prompting, a number did return.”

<sup>119</sup> Williamson (*Ezra, Nehemiah*, 15) comments, “the language of [v.5] and the following verse is so close to that of vv 2-4 that the can be no doubt that the narrator, knowing from his source in chap. 2 that a number of Jews did return, simply wrote up their response on the basis of the decree itself.”

complements of וַיִּקְוּמוּ (and they arose) which began the sentence.<sup>120</sup> The people have understood the עלה imperative and the בנה imperative which were given by Cyrus. What the people set out to do helps identify when the narrative purpose is complete. Ezra 1:5 makes clear that in order for the plot of the narrative to reach fulfillment the community must succeed at going up (עלה) to Judah and rebuilding (בנה) the temple.

As the narrative progresses the people are in the forefront for the reader as there is no great figure who is raised up to lead the return. The leaders of the community are mentioned at the beginning of the list, but the narrator downplays their importance as the text highlights these figures are merely “with” (עם) the people as they return (2:1–2). Instead the focus is on the great amount of people who respond to the opportunity to return to Jerusalem.<sup>121</sup> This is represented in the list of people. Ezra 2:64 provides the number 42,360.<sup>122</sup> If servants and singers are included the number would be 49,897.<sup>123</sup> The people are characterized as a faithful community focused on returning to Judah and then rebuilding the temple of Yhwh. They assemble without an epic leader, but with the support of the foreign ruler. They successfully complete the first aspect of Cyrus’s decree (עלה imperative) and the reader expects that they will also complete the בנה imperative.

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<sup>120</sup> Cf. Waltke and O’Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 606. In this case לָבְנוּ is a verbal complement of וַיִּקְוּמוּ (and they arose) which begins the sentence. Thus the purpose of arising is to build the house of Yhwh. It is interesting, as noted earlier, that קום can be used to mark the fulfillment of an event. While the usage in this sentence is far more common perhaps the author is exploiting the range of meaning possible for קום.

<sup>121</sup> Eskenazi, *Prose*, 48–53.

<sup>122</sup> Cf. Becking (“Returned,” 3–18) although critical of the exaggerated numbers believes that idea that the exilic community returned as one large group helps establish themselves with pre-exilic Israel and help them through the difficult period after leaving Babylon. For historical and archaeological reconstruction see also: Grabbe, *History*, 199–202. Carter, “Province of Yehud,” 106–45; Lipschits, “Demographic Changes,” 323–76; “Achaemenid Imperial Policy,” 19–52.

<sup>123</sup> Williamson (*Ezra, Nehemiah*, 37) comments, “the total given is some 11,000 higher than the sum of the preceding numbers, the exact figure of which varies between the different recensions.”



The question of who is included in “the people” is important to the narrative of Ezra 1–6. In Ezra 1:5–2:68 the people are called “the exiles” (1:11), “the sons of the province,” and “the ones who came up” (2:1). The three titles provided by the narrator in this section help to identify the boundary markers of the people. By calling the people “the exiles” (הַגּוֹלָלִים) the narrator highlights that these people have experienced the exile away from Israel. They or their ancestors suffered the effects of deportation. This sets them apart from those who were left in the land. Additionally, being called the “sons of the province” also indicates that they are not autonomous, but are subjects of the Persian empire.<sup>124</sup> Despite the return to the land the people are still under Cyrus’s authority. This leads to the last title for the people in this first section as they are called “the ones who came up.” They are the ones who experienced the exile and are now the ones who are allowed to return and rebuild the temple. Boundary markers are being established, identifying who should be allowed to build the temple, even at this early stage of the restoration project.

The inclusion of the list of those who returned from Babylon because of the decree from Cyrus allows the reader to become acquainted with the people (2:1–70). The list also includes brief narrative episodes which contribute to the narrative of Ezra 1–6. The volume of the number of people who returned presents an image of a large return to Jerusalem. The narrator, though, does not simply provide a number in the narrative, but outlines the list for the reader to discover the identity of the people who returned. The people are not only the people, but are the two thousand descendants of Parosh (2:3) and the three hundred and seventy two descendants of Shephatiah (2:4) and so on throughout

<sup>124</sup> The term *קְדִינָה* specifically identifies provinces most often foreign empires. See *BDB*, 193.2. See 1 Kgs 20:14, 15, 17, 19; Ezek 19:8; Dan 8:2; Lam 1:1; Est 1:1; Neh 1:3. The two ambiguous references are Eccl 2:8; 5:7.

the list. Eskenazi has correctly noted that this list in Ezra 1–6, “emphasizes the centrality of the community as a whole by introducing the entirety of the returning people with a great specificity and length.”<sup>125</sup> The names of the people allow the reader to identify closely with the Judean community. The divisions of the list into eight categories: men of Israel (2:2b–35), priests (2:36–39), Levites (2:40), singers (2:41), gatekeepers (2:42), temple servants (2:43–54), descendants of the servants of Solomon (2:55–58) and those that could not prove they were descendants of Israel (2:59–63) identifies the community.<sup>126</sup> It is interesting to note that the divisions in the list draw attention to positions connected to the temple and the *בנה* imperative.

The inclusion of the people from the eighth category continues the emphasis on the boundary markers of the community being important. These priests that could not prove their lineage were excluded from eating the sacred foods (2:62–63). Even though these families returned to Judah with the Judean population they needed to be able to prove that they were in fact part of the Israelite population before the exile to be full members.<sup>127</sup> This occurrence in the Judean community as part of their return foreshadows the questions of identity throughout the Ezra 1–6 narrative.

Throughout this process Yhwh has been a guiding influence, but is mentioned sparingly by the narrator in this section. The only action taken by Yhwh is in Ezra 1:5. This action though is the catalyst of all the subsequent events in the people completing the *עלה* imperative.

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<sup>125</sup> Eskenazi, *Prose*, 48. Eskenazi has the both the book of Ezra and the book of Nehemiah in view, but her comments are focussed on Ezra 1–6 specifically in this section.

<sup>126</sup> See Eskenazi, *Prose*, 49.

<sup>127</sup> Eskenazi (*Prose*, 49) comments, “Communal identity constitutes the first problem as the people confront the necessity of ascertaining who belongs (Ezra 2:59-62). One learns quickly that criteria for membership do exist but also that the exact boundaries of this community of returnees are not yet determined with finality. Temporary measures postpone permanent resolution, at least with respect to the priests (Ezra 2:62-63).”

### iii. Themes

The two themes which were highlighted in Ezra 1:1–4 can also be discerned in 1:5–3:1. The sovereignty of God is again highlighted by the narrator and the narrator identifies further continuity between the past and present communities of Israel.

Cyrus and Yhwh are still working together to bring about the return of the Judean population and the rebuilding of the temple. Cyrus actively participates in the narrative as he brings out the articles from the temple and gives them to the Jewish representative (1:7–8). The situation has not changed as the court is still supporting the project. Also, as noted above, the people responded to Cyrus's decree because Yhwh had moved their hearts in the same manner that Yhwh had moved Cyrus's heart (1:5). This highlights that Yhwh is working with both the people and the court to achieve his purpose. In the same way that Yhwh directed Cyrus, the decision that these people made to return is initiated by a movement of the heart.<sup>128</sup> Even though Cyrus is the one who issued the decree, the narrator reiterates that the return is because of Yhwh's action and not only because of Cyrus.<sup>129</sup> This is important to the narrative because the narrator is careful to highlight that the success of the new community is accomplished through Yhwh. All the other characters in the narrative are agents whom Yhwh moves to accomplish his divine will. The people now take centre stage in the return. The list in Ezra 1:5 begins with the ראשי הָאֲבוֹת [chiefs of the households]. Williamson points out that ראשי הָאֲבוֹת is a “shortened form of ‘the heads of the father’s houses’ (ראשי בית האבות). This is the regular

<sup>128</sup> Eskenazi, *Prose*, 46.

<sup>129</sup> Note Williamson (*Ezra, Nehemiah*, 15) who concludes that “the language of this [1:5] and the following verse is so close to that of vv 2-4 that there can be no doubt that the narrator, knowing his source in chap.2 that a number of Jews did return, simply wrote up their response on the basis of the decree itself.” This is a perfectly reasonable deduction based upon the material, but it is important to perceive that the narrator is careful to not present that return of the people to be derived from Cyrus's decree but from God, even if the narrator chooses to reiterate it.

sociological division of the people in the Persian period, the ‘father’s house’ being an extended family standing between the larger tribe and the smaller family grouping, equivalent to the משפחה (‘family’) of the pre-exilic period.”<sup>130</sup> These leaders help the rest of the people prepare for the return. The ראשי האבות are limited to only the tribes of Judah and Benjamin with the Levites and represent the post-captivity community.

The connection to the earlier community of Israel increases in this section. In the characterization of Sheshbazzar it has been noted that his title (הַקִּנְיָא לַיהוּדָה) is an allusion to the wilderness tradition.<sup>131</sup> There are two other allusions to a wilderness motif in this section. The first is the idea of despoiling the foreigners and the second is the presentation of the free-will offering. The depiction of the Judean people leaving Babylon and taking goods from their neighbours parallels the description of Israel exiting Egypt and receiving goods from the Egyptians.<sup>132</sup> The narrator is making clear that the people did not return empty handed and benefited from their neighbour’s property just like in the previous journey to Israel after the Exodus. Mark Throntveit has pointed out a second allusion to the Exodus through the bringing of a freewill offering (Ezra 1:6b). He writes,

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<sup>130</sup> Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 15. Cf. Blenkinsopp (*Ezra-Nehemiah*, 77–78) comments, “the same term (*bêt ’ābôt*) could also be applied to priests and Levites ... the heads of these kinship units continued to play an important role in community affairs after the return.” Albertz (“Thwarted Restoration,” 13) comments, “it seems that the first of them [בית אבות] were founded in the Babylonian exile in order to save the identity of the Judean minority and that they were introduced by the remigrants into the organization of the post-exilic community in Judah.”

<sup>131</sup> The wilderness tradition refers to time after the Exodus (Exod 16) until the possession of the land (Josh 1).

<sup>132</sup> Throntveit (*Ezra-Nehemiah*, 16) notes, “One of the way in which the text recalls the exodus is found in the summons to their now-conquered Babylonian neighbours to provide the returnees with silver, gold, and other gifts (vv. 4, 6). This strongly echoes the Exodus theme of ‘despoiling the Egyptians,’ which is foreshadowed in Moses’ original commission (Exod 3:21f.) reintroduced in the announcement of the final plague (Exod 11:2), and fulfilled in the report of Israel’s garnering of silver and gold from Egyptians due to God’s gracious provision (Exod 12:35f.). In both instances their past captors generously met the needs of the people of God, whether for the hazardous journey or for the reestablishment of worship.” Cf. Knowles, “Pilgrimage,” 57–74, esp. 58–59. Knowles has suggested that this section does not authentically reflect the Exodus tradition because the Judean people were not the ones who defeated the Babylonians and also because the neighbours could be identified as fellow Jews and are not the people who were just defeated.

“Exodus 35:21–29 records a similar freewill offering of the people to contribute to the erection of the Tent of Meeting in response to the request of Exodus 25:2–9.”<sup>133</sup>

Another connection which reminds the reader of the past community of Israel is that the vessels which were taken by Nebuchadnezzar when he destroyed the temple are returned to them (Ezra 1:7–10). Becking comments that the returning of these vessels “is not only a fine gesture by a ruling king, but also an important feature in the belief system of the Book of Ezra, since it presents the, then in the narrative still forthcoming, worship in the second temple as a continuation of worship in the first temple.”<sup>134</sup> These episodes suggest that the narrator is attempting to leverage the actions of the previous Israelite community to demonstrate that the community described in Ezra 1–6 is an authentic community as they encounter events similar to past Israelite communities.

#### *iv. Plot*

The plot of the story moves forward as the people respond immediately to the decree that was given to them by Cyrus. The people are characterized as faithful respondents and appear to be ready, willing, and able to complete the imperatives which they were given. The Persian court remains behind the project.

The development of the plot can be seen by tracing the use of the verb עלה (“go up”) through the narrative. In Ezra 1:5 the people fulfill the decree given by Cyrus and they arise (וַיִּקְוּמוּ) with the purpose of going up (עלה) and building (בנה). The people respond to Cyrus’s imperatives and set out to fulfill the decree. From Ezra 1:5–3:1 the narrator describes how the people fulfilled the עלה imperative.

<sup>133</sup> Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 17.

<sup>134</sup> Becking, “Continuity and Community,” 263.

The first occurrence of the verb עלה in this section is Ezra 1:11 where the narrator records that Sheshbazzar brought up (עלה) the temple vessels when the exiles went up (עלה). This verse is a proleptic summary as it highlights the actions which are going to be developed through the list which follows (2:1–70).<sup>135</sup> Ezra 1:11 does draw attention to the success of the עלה imperative as already the narrator comments that the people went from Jerusalem.

The next verse in the narrative which has the verb עלה is an introduction to the list of the “ones who went up” (הַעֲלִים; 2:1). This emphasizes the return of the people as being part of the עלה imperative from Cyrus. The narrator incorporates this by demonstrating that the people are faithful to complete what has been expected of them. The final occurrence of עלה in this section is Ezra 2:59. At this point in the list a different section is introduced. There are “ones who came up” (הַעֲלִים) fulfilling Cyrus’s decree that were not able to prove that they were ancestors of the Judean people. When the עלה imperative is completed the narrator no longer uses this verb to refer to the movement of the people.

The first group of the Judean community to reach Jerusalem is the “heads of the families.” They proceed immediately to the temple to distribute the free will offerings. This is not the fulfillment of the עלה imperative as the entire community is not with them. When the people gather (אסף) together they do so “like one man to Jerusalem” (כְּאִישׁ אֶחָד) (אֶל־יְרוּשָׁלַם) which demonstrates the community united in their tasks (3:1).

This first stage of completion also helps to interlock the two imperatives. The עלה imperative was not entirely completed until the people settled in Jerusalem as per the

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<sup>135</sup> See fn. 108 above.

decree from Cyrus (1:3). The *עלה* imperative was at the foreground of the narrative for most of 1:5–3:1, but 2:68–69 draws attention to the *בנה* imperative moments before the *עלה* imperative is completed by highlighting the freewill offerings which were designated for the temple rebuilding project being brought by the “head of families” (2:68). This overlapping emphasizes the interconnectedness of the two imperatives as it is clear that the reason for going up to Jerusalem is to rebuild the temple and the decree is not complete until the temple is finished.

There has yet to be considerable narrative tension though one episode does introduce some tension into the story. Ezra 2:59–63 describes the situation of three families who were not able to show they were from Israel. There were a number of priests that were also unable to prove that they had status in Israel. The priests that were unable to provide their family record were excluded from the priesthood (2:63) and ordered by the governor not to eat any of the sacred foods which would have been ordained for those who practiced as priests (2:64). There is no major reform needed as in Ezra 9–10 or Nehemiah 10–13. However, this episode does lay the foundation of the exclusion of the ones who are not part of the previous Israelite community (4:1–5; 6:21). Even at this early stage the Judean community is careful to make sure that they remain separate from those that can not prove they descended from Israel. This occurrence foreshadows the conflict the Judean community will have with those around them who are not part of the people.

#### *iv. Conclusion*

Ezra 1:5–3:1 reported the initiation and completion of the *עלה* imperative. The people leave Babylon and travel to Judah and then delivered the freewill offering (2:68).

Then after proceeding to their houses the people return to Jerusalem to start the temple rebuilding project (3:1). The return was the first element of Cyrus's decree to the people. The narrator uses different methods to describe the fulfillment of the *עלה* imperative. First the people are roused (*עורר*; 1:5) using the same verb which described Cyrus's arousal (*עורר*; 1:1). Then the narrator highlights the actions which take place to allow for the people of God to return. Then two different lists are used to account for the return. The first lists articles which are to be returned to the temple (1:9–10) and the second identifies the people who returned to Judah (2:1–70).

With the *עלה* imperative completed the narrator now focuses attention on the *בנה* imperative. The fact that the *עלה* imperative was completed with such ease and little tension places rhetorical emphasis on the *בנה* imperative.<sup>136</sup> The people are settled and now can begin the second phase of the decree which was issued by Cyrus. The people have successfully returned and one anticipates that the swiftness with which the people embarked and fulfilled the task of going up will also be present in the temple rebuilding project.

#### 4. *Fulfillment 2: Beginning to Frustration: Ezra 2:68–4:24*

The people have settled in Jerusalem and are now prepared to fulfill the second of the two imperatives from Cyrus. This section will trace the development of the narrative in Ezra 2:68–4:24, focusing on the setting, characters, themes and plot.

##### *i. Setting*

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<sup>136</sup> Grabbe (*Ezra-Nehemiah*, 16) makes the helpful comment, “the stage is now set for taking up the task for which they had come – the rebuilding of the temple.”



Ezra 2:68 marks the arrival of the “heads of families” to Jerusalem followed by the people assembling as one group in Jerusalem ready to fulfill the *בנה* imperative given by Cyrus (3:1). The temporal setting of the narrative continues from that which was established in Ezra 1:1, that is, the first year of Cyrus’s reign in Babylon. It appears that the people respond immediately to Cyrus’s decree as they go up to Jerusalem without delay. When the people reach Jerusalem, assembled as one, the narrator sets the temple rebuilding project in the seventh month. As Williamson points out, the seventh “was the sacred month *par excellence* for the Jews, and it included several of their most important festivals.”<sup>137</sup> The people assemble together and then establish the altar for sacrifice (3:2–3; 6) in the month where it would have been of primary importance. The narrator does not provide a year at this point in the narrative, but allows the time to be limited to the month.<sup>138</sup>

However, Ezra 3:8 provides a year, but one dated according to their return from Babylon and not according to a ruling figure, reading “Now in the second year of going up to the house of God in Jerusalem in the second month” ( *וּבְשָׁנָה הַשֵּׁנִית לְבוֹאָם אֶל־בַּיִת* ) ( *הָאֵלֹהִים לִירוּשָׁלַם בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשֵּׁנִי* ). The second month is also an important month for the people of Israel, especially in the context of temple building projects. The second month is the month in which Solomon began his work on the first temple (2 Chr 3:2).<sup>139</sup>

<sup>137</sup> Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 46. Cf. Lev 23:23–36. See also Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 64.

<sup>138</sup> The historical time would have been about 18 years since they left Babylon under Cyrus’s decree based upon the dates provided in the book of Haggai (Hag. 1:1; 1:15; 2:10). It does not appear that Jeshua and Zerubbabel took any action until the second year of Darius which would be 520. This would leave a gap between Cyrus’s decree (1:1–4) in either 539 or 538 and the people settling in Jerusalem to build in 520 of either 18 or 19 years. Nevertheless the narrator provides no such information for the reader and suggests a swift movement to Judah and then to Jerusalem with the temple rebuilding taking place immediately following their arrival.

<sup>139</sup> See Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 47.

After the people lay the foundation of the temple, opposition arises against them that will lead to the frustration of the temple rebuilding project (4:1–5). The narrator highlights that the frustration which the Judean community experienced lasted from the time of Cyrus until the time of Darius (4:5). It appears that this verse provides a temporal transition from the time of Cyrus to the time of Darius. However, the narrative shifts forward first into the reign of Xerxes (4:6) and then again into the reign of Artaxerxes (4:7). On a historical time line the shift from 4:5 to 4:7 represents over forty years. The narrative however reports these events as if they occurred immediately after the narrative of Ezra 3:1–4:5. After the correspondence between Artaxerxes and the Persian officials is recorded in the text the narrative returns to the time of Darius first mentioned in Ezra 4:5, highlighting that the temple came to a standstill until the second year of his reign (4:24).

### *ii. Characters*

Jeshua son of Jozadak and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel are the ones who are leading the people as they begin setting up the altar of God. Nevertheless, the role of the leadership is planned out as there are many different people who are mentioned in the community's effort to rebuild the temple. Another category is introduced and developed in this section which can be called the "opposition." There are several narrative episodes that build the tension in the narrative as different groups oppose the temple rebuilding project and eventually succeed in frustrating the work on the temple. The reader is also introduced to the new king, but unlike Cyrus, Artaxerxes works against the Judean community and stops the temple from being built.

Sheshbazzar is no longer leading the people as they begin to fulfill the *בנה* imperative. It is unclear why he is no longer present in the narrative, however, his

disappearance places rhetorical emphasis on to the people, minimizing the need for a prestigious leader to guide the post-captivity community. The success of the people is not dependent upon the leader of the community as Jeshua and Zerubbabel seamlessly take the place of Sheshbazzar.<sup>140</sup>

Jeshua and Zerubbabel are named in the list that highlights the people who returned from Babylon (2:2).<sup>141</sup> In Ezra 2:68–4:24 they set up the altar (3:2), begin the work on the temple by appointing priests to supervise the temple rebuilding project (3:8), and reject the assistance from the enemies of Judah and Benjamin (4:1–4). Their role appears to be leading the community through the time of restoration. Jeshua is a priest that watches over the building of the temple. He is called the son of Jozadak (or Jehozadak) who was the high priest at the time of the exile (1 Chr 6:15).<sup>142</sup> Jeshua assumes this role when the community returns. He is instrumental in the leadership of the community as other priests and Levites are assigned to various roles to work on the temple. Zerubbabel is the other leader of the people with his associate Jeshua. As Clines points out, “Zerubbabel was the grandson of the exiled king of Judah, Jehoiachin (Jeconiah) (1 Chr. 3:17ff), and thus in Jewish eyes the legitimate secular ruler.”<sup>143</sup> However the royal identity of Zerubbabel is not mentioned in the Ezra narrative. He is one leader, but not elevated into a role where one would consider him a king or a governor. He is seen as one who helps the Judean community follow through on the imperatives given them.

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<sup>140</sup> Eskenazi, *Prose*, 49–50.

<sup>141</sup> The characterization of Jeshua and Zerubbabel only taking into consideration the Ezra narrative is somewhat difficult because of their centrality to the books of Haggai and Zechariah.

<sup>142</sup> Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 64; Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 33.

<sup>143</sup> Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 64.

The people are made up of a number of figures. Jeshua and Zerubbabel appear to be the leaders, but they are surrounded by a number of others (2:1–2). Both Jeshua and Zerubbabel have associates (חא) supporting them. There are also other priests: Kadmiel, a descendant of Hodaviah, the sons of Jenadad and all the Levities, who worked on the house of God together (3:9).

The importance of starting immediately is the same as the importance of returning immediately after the decree was given (1:5). It demonstrates the people's willingness to follow through on the directions given to them by Cyrus and reinforces the characterization of the people as a faithful community. Just as the *עלה* imperative begins with the people arising (קום; 1:5), the process of completing the *בנה* imperative is drawn to the forefront with Jeshua, Zerubbabel and associates arising (קום; 3:2). This highlights the people's responsive attitude to the imperatives which were set before them by Cyrus. In the same manner they set to working on the temple rebuilding project. This contrasts the book of Haggai which suggests that indifference to the temple's construction results in a lengthy delay before the building began (Hag 1:1–11). The narrator of Ezra 1–6 presents this differently.<sup>144</sup> The people begin fulfilling the word of Cyrus at the earliest possible moment. The narrator also points out that the people of the land caused them to be fearful as they worked on the altar (3:3). This helps to characterize the people as being determined to complete the temple as was decreed by Cyrus.

Throughout Ezra 3:1–11 the narrator demonstrates that the people have been working together. Zerubbabel and Jeshua are both supported by associates (חא; 3:1, 8).

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<sup>144</sup> The tension between Haggai and Ezra 1–6 is even more striking if one concludes with Williamson ("Composition," 1–30) that Haggai is one of the source documents for the writer of Ezra 1–6. This would clearly identify that the author of Ezra reinterpreted the material in shaping his narrative.

Additionally all the priests are supporting each other (3:9). All the people are working together to successfully complete the בנה imperative, but in 3:12–13 there appears to be some frustration on the part of the older priests when they see the work on the new temple being built. While there does not appear to be dissension among the people, the older priests are unsatisfied with the new building.<sup>145</sup> What specifically frustrates them enough to weep at the dedication of the temple foundation is unclear.<sup>146</sup> This reveals to the reader that even though the בנה imperative is moving forward, everything is not perfect.

The people also continue to clearly define the boundaries of the community. When “the enemies of Judah and Benjamin” ask to assist in rebuilding the temple Zerubbabel, Jeshua and the family heads reject their offer of help because they are not part of the community (4:3). In the Judean community’s response they claim that they alone are authorized by Cyrus to build the temple. They were the ones to whom Cyrus spoke in Ezra 1:1 and are uniquely qualified to work on the temple. Since “the enemies” were not included in Cyrus’s decree and did not come back from the exile in Babylon they are excluded.

This section also introduces the enemies who work against the Judean community. The opposition against the temple being rebuilt begins small (3:3), but then rises to the point where the Judean population is forced to stop their work on the temple (4:5). The opposition is brought about by groups with different titles (“people of the land,” “enemies of Judah and Benjamin,” and “people around them”) even though they all fill the same role of opposing the people who are rebuilding the temple.<sup>147</sup> On a historical

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<sup>145</sup> Cf. Zech 4:6b–10a which appears to be combating the disappointment which the elders had concerning the appearance of the temple throughout the rebuilding project.

<sup>146</sup> Cf. Hag 2:1–9.

<sup>147</sup> Halpern, “Historiographic,” 109–10.

level it would be hard to argue that all the people groups who worked to frustrate the temple rebuilding project operated as one group, but for the narrator of the Ezra 1–6 story these groups fill the category of opposition against the Judean population.<sup>148</sup> Two opposition groups can be identified in this section.<sup>149</sup> The first comprises the people who oppose the rebuilding project and the second the Persian officials who help the first group.

The first mention concerns the “people of the land” (עַמֵּי הָאֶרֶץ; 3:3).<sup>150</sup> There are not any specific actions described by the narrator, but whatever the “people of the land” did it caused the Judean community to be fearful as the altar was being laid. This first appearance by the opposition is minor as the Judean community presses forward in their work on the temple. The Judean community continued to work and offer sacrifices on the altar which was just established. By including an episode of mild confrontation the narrator is setting the stage for the problems that will escalate as the opposition grows. The reader is prepared for the fact that not everyone supported the project.

The next group that causes problems for the Judean community is clearly identified as an opposition. The narrator calls them the “enemies of Judah and Benjamin” (4:1). This group is firmly set against the actions of the Judean community and shapes the reader’s evaluation of the question they ask of the Judean community. When the “enemies” ask the Judean people to assist in the temple rebuilding project because the “enemies” had been making sacrifices to their God, the reader must suspect the

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<sup>148</sup> The narrator does allow the opposition to maintain some of their own identity as each group retains a different name.

<sup>149</sup> It could be suggested that the priests who are weeping in Ezra 3:13 form an additional opposition group working against the temple rebuilding project. While the priests do not interfere with the temple rebuilding project their lack of support could have contributed to the frustration. Cf. Hag 2:1–9.

<sup>150</sup> Fried (“am hā’āreṣ,” 123–45) provides a detailed historical analysis.

motivation of the “enemies.” The true colours of the “enemies” are seen after the Judean community rejects their offer of assistance.<sup>151</sup> The “enemies of Judah and Benjamin” hire others to try to frustrate the temple rebuilding project (4:6). The narrator also informs the reader that the efforts of these enemies were successful as work on the temple was frustrated throughout the entire reign of Cyrus until the reign of Darius (4:5).

The “enemies” are not satisfied with the response which they receive and increase the opposition by hiring counselors to work against the temple rebuilding project (4:5) and lodge accusations against the Judean community (4:6). The tension rises against them and they are no longer able to withstand the opposition. The letter is written without the community having a voice to describe their motivation and justification for rebuilding the city. Ezra 4:4 records that the people who can be identified as the “enemies” set out to discourage the Judean community from rebuilding. The opposition began with the people around the Judean community causing fear as the altar was laid (3:3). Now the “enemies” are aiming to create such a level of fear among the Judean community that they are not able to keep on building. In the comment by the narrator (4:5) it appears that the “enemies” were successful in their work against the people by discouraging them to continue until the reign of Darius. The narrator then describes to the reader how intensely the “enemies” worked against the Judean community’s efforts to rebuild the temple.

The persecution that the Judean community experiences from the people of the land is left vague by the narrator. In the book of Nehemiah the narrator provides examples of the way in which the Judean community experienced persecution. Sanballat

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<sup>151</sup> As Williamson (*Ezra, Nehemiah*, 49) comments, “‘the enemies of Judah and Benjamin’ is our writer’s own description of this group, based upon a long period of confrontation during which attitudes had hardened considerably. Part of the reason for his inclusion of the remainder of chap. 4 is his desire to justify this description. At the time, they did not necessarily appear to be so.”

and Tobiah ridiculed Nehemiah and the people (Neh 4:2–3) and apparently the others joined Sanballat and Tobiah and planned to make war against the people who were rebuilding (Neh 4:7–8, 11). Nehemiah was also personally threatened as Sanballat was intent on harming him even after the city walls were completed (Neh 6:1–14). In contrast the narrator of Ezra 1–6 does not provide the reader with specific information. The text informs the reader that counsellors were hired and appear to be the ones who lodge the accusation concerning the Judean community to Xerxes (4:6). Definitive action is taken when the Persian authorities are involved in the process as they, unaware of the decree that was given by Cyrus, write to the king to investigate the city of Jerusalem which is being rebuilt (Ezra 4:8–16). The report that comes from the king does not rule in the favour of the Judean people and the rebuilding process is stopped immediately (4:17–23).

Rehum and Shimshai are the agents of the Persian court, but they are also influenced by the people who oppose the rebuilding process. They write to Artaxerxes and lodge accusations against the Judean community (4:5–11). The manner in which they write the letter to Artaxerxes demonstrates that they are against the Jewish people rebuilding the temple. Rehum and Shimshai suggest to the king that an investigation should be made concerning Jerusalem because it was told to them that Jerusalem was a “rebellious city.” The concern of Rehum and Shimshai is that taxes and tribute will not be paid to the king if the city is rebuilt (4:12–13).

Cyrus and Darius do not take action in the narrative of Ezra 3:1–4:24, but both are referred to by the narrator. Cyrus is mentioned three times in this section (3:7; 4:3, 5), each time focusing on the decree which the people must fulfill. Ezra 3:7 highlights how the people retrieved logs from Lebanon “according to permission of Cyrus king of Persia to them” (כְּרִשְׁיוֹן כּוֹרֵשׁ מֶלֶךְ-פָּרְסַם עֲלֵיהֶם). The narrator is reminding the reader that the



people have worked in accordance with the decree that initiated the narrative (1:2–4). It is true that Cyrus’s proclamation in Ezra 1:2–4 and the archival record in Ezra 6:3–5 do not contain specific instructions to retrieve logs from Lebanon.<sup>152</sup> The reference to Cyrus’s permission is not intended as a comment concerning the right of the people to collect timber, but as a reflection on the people’s intention to follow Cyrus’s instruction.

Although Cyrus is not active, the decree which was issued endures in the work which the people are doing on the temple. The second reference to Cyrus serves a similar purpose (4:3). The Judean people leverage Cyrus’s proclamation pronounced to those who returned as a way to exclude anyone else from participating in the temple rebuilding project.

The final reference to Cyrus in Ezra 1:1–4:24 is also the first mention of Darius (4:5). The narrator provides a summary notation in 4:5 which introduces the opposition which follows. A summary notation in 4:24 represents the second mention of Darius. Ezra 4:5 outlines how the opposition is successful at frustrating the work on the temple from the time of Cyrus until the time of Darius. This reference functions as a bridge from the time of Cyrus to the time of Darius. Although Cyrus’s proclamation remains important to the narrative, authority is transferred to Darius. The reader must wait to see if Darius will behave in the same manner as Cyrus.

Before the reader enters the time of Darius (4:24), the narrator includes a future episode of frustration which affected the Judean community (4:8–23), but relates the narrative as if this frustration influenced the temple rebuilding project. The king who is

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<sup>152</sup> Blenkinsopp (*Ezra-Nehemiah*, 100) provides this comment, “The reference to the rescript is to be taken in general terms; it included no grant for timber, though 1 Esd. 4:48 alludes to such a grant from Darius to Zerubbabel, an allusion enlarged by Josephus (*Ant.* 11.60). An anonymous seer of the early Persian period views the adornment of the temple with wood from Lebanon as divinely preordained (Isa. 60:8-14).”

ruling in this section is Artaxerxes.<sup>153</sup> His role in the narrative is similar to Cyrus and Darius, but he does not aid the people in their temple rebuilding project. Artaxerxes receives a letter from his officials in Beyond the River. In this letter accusations are made against the Judean community (4:13–16). Artaxerxes investigates the claims which were made by his officials and comes to the conclusion that the accusations are correct and stops the temple rebuilding project unless he so orders its resumption at a later point. In this case the Persian court is working as an advocate for the opposition and not for the Judean community. This reversal of situation shows Artaxerxes as part of the opposition and not in the same position as Cyrus and signals a key shift in the characterization of the Persian crown.

#### *iv. Themes*

The sovereignty of God and the connection to past Israelite communities continue as themes in Ezra 3:1–4:24. However, in this section the sovereignty of God becomes a question mark for the community as the Persian court appears to withdraw support of the temple rebuilding project (4:24). In Ezra 3:1–13 the temple rebuilding project moved ahead without problems from outside influence except for a brief episode of fear brought about by the people of the land (3:3). The narrator reminds the reader that the people are completing the decree by following what Cyrus ordered (3:7). The people are still working under the sanction of the Persian court. It is also clear that they want to remain under the authority of the king as they declare to the opposition that comes against them that they will finish the temple according to the decree of Cyrus (4:5). The decree from Cyrus has empowered the work of the people until the opposition causes the Persian officials to rule against the people. No mention is made of Yhwh after the opposition

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<sup>153</sup> Ezra 4:6 does report there were accusations lodged against the Judean community in the reign of Xerxes.

hires counselors to work against the temple rebuilding project and the people are no longer able to work on the temple. As the situation shifts into the time of Artaxerxes the people are unable to speak for themselves and it seems as if Yhwh is not protecting them as they attempt to bring the בנה imperative to completion (4:8–23).

The narrator's desire to connect this post-captivity community with the Israelite communities of the past is apparent in the community's action after gathering in Jerusalem. The first part of the temple that is rebuilt is the altar (3:2–3). They do this in order to offer sacrifices and celebrate the festivals. Fried has pointed out that the construction and dedication of the altar at this earlier point does not fit the normal model of temple reconstruction. She comments, "altars are routinely built during later stages of construction, not before the foundations are laid."<sup>154</sup> However, the people do not wait for the latter stages but proceed immediately to set up the altar.<sup>155</sup> Blenkinsopp points out, "the altar was at once set up to permit the resumption without delay of legitimate worship, essential for the community's well being."<sup>156</sup> Blenkinsopp also suggests that "the narrative is designed to highlight the golah community's zeal in restoring the sacrificial system even before beginning the rebuilding. In so doing, they followed the example of David, who, according to 1 Chr 21:28–22:1, averted disaster by building an altar and offering sacrifice before the temple was built."<sup>157</sup> The narrator aims to connect the people's actions to an event in the past and to depict this community as concerned with fervently seeking Yhwh rather than being constrained by Mesopotamian temple

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<sup>154</sup> Fried, "Desolate," 46–47. This causes Fried to question whether the order that is found in Ezra can be trusted historically attempts to reconcile this apparent divergence from historical practices There is nothing to suggest that the Judean temple rebuilding project must conform to the other temple project which Fried interacts with.

<sup>155</sup> Cf. Hag 2:10–19 where it is clear the people are offering sacrifices, in the second year of Darius, even though the temple is not completed.

<sup>156</sup> Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 96.

<sup>157</sup> Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 97.

practices. The dedication of the people to pursue the project immediately helps to characterize this community as both faithful to Yhwh and faithful to the Persian Court. The people appear resolved to dedicate their attention to the rebuilding project. Even though they are afraid of the people around them they set up the altar of God (3:3).

Further connections to the earlier Israelite community are developed in this section. In the initial actions of the rebuilding project the Judean community makes sure to follow the prescriptions from the past. The narrator makes clear that the altar was rebuilt and the offerings sacrificed “according to what was written in the law of Moses the man of God” (בְּכַתוּב בְּתוֹרַת מֹשֶׁה אִישׁ־הָאֱלֹהִים; 3:2). This is the first time the law is mentioned in Ezra 1–6. The importance of the reference to Moses and the law is that these people are conforming their actions to those of the people of God from the past. Joseph Blenkinsopp suggests, “allusions to this law in [the Chronicler]’s work can generally, but by no means invariably, be traced to Deuteronomy.”<sup>158</sup> He proposes Deut 27:6–7 as the passage most likely in the mind of the narrator as it outlines the necessity to build an altar after entering the land.<sup>159</sup> Another possible passage is Deut 12 which identifies that when the people settle in Israel they will all come to one central place of worship. Whether or not the narrator had a specific passage in view it remains clear that the narrator demonstrates that the people of God are fulfilling the tasks that Moses set out for the people of God when they left Egypt. The post-captivity community, through the work of the narrator, is now connected to the Exodus community by completing the same actions that were prescribed by the law of Moses.

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<sup>158</sup> Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 97.

<sup>159</sup> Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 97.

As mentioned in the section concerning the setting of Ezra 2:68–4:24, the second month is the month of important festivals for the Judean community and also is the month in which Solomon started building the temple. Additionally the manner in which they act bears resemblance to action taken previously in Israel. The narrator’s description of the building of the altar also suggests a strategy to connect this present community with the previous temple. Williamson argues that in Ezra 3:2 עָלָיו “must be the equivalent of מְכוֹנָו ‘on its original site,’ 2:68. If the [plural] of MT is to be taken seriously (though it is not particularly well attested), it will mean on its (previous) foundations.”<sup>160</sup> While it would seemingly make sense that if one was going to rebuild the temple that it would in fact be on the same site, the narrator’s attention to outline that detail suggests that it links to the past are important to the direction of the narrative.<sup>161</sup> There are also considerable verbal allusions to the preparation work taken by the people before building the temple (3:7). Williamson writes

the gathering of the necessary material remind us at once of 1 Chr 22:2-4; 2 Chr 2:7-15 (8-16). While it is undoubtedly true that the general similarities would have been dictated by historical necessity, the verbal parallels (the shipment by sea to Joppa; the payment for food, drink, and oil; the bracketing of the Sidonians and the Tyrians) are sufficiently striking to demonstrate that this is a conscious allusion to the earlier description.<sup>162</sup>

The narrator is linking the work of this community to the previous Israelite community.

#### *iv. Plot*

The plot of Ezra 1–6 develops considerably in 2:68–4:24. The hope of success associated with the completion of the עָלָה imperative (3:1), the setting up of the altar (3:3)

<sup>160</sup> Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 41.

<sup>161</sup> Blenkinsopp (*Ezra-Nehemiah*, 97) writes, “the language used here implies the altar was built on the foundations (*m<sup>2</sup>kōnōt*; cf. masc. form at 2:68 and Ps. 104:5 and the similar *matkōnet* at 2 Chron. 24:13) of the previous one, another indication of the author’s interest in the vital theme of continuity (and therefore legitimacy).” See also Boda “Dystopia to Myopia,” 211–49.

<sup>162</sup> Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 47.

and the laying of the temple foundation (3:10–13) has turned to the despair of frustration as the temple rebuilding project has been halted by Artaxerxes because of the opposition (4:1–24). The second part of the decree, the בנה imperative, becomes the central problem in the narrative. The people intended to complete the בנה imperative as soon as they arrived in Jerusalem to work on the temple. The first action of the people is to build the altar (בנה; 3:2). The building of the altar is so that they can sacrifice burnt offerings to Yhwh. After the people have finished the altar they make preparation for the temple (3:7). Priests and Levites are then appointed to supervise the temple rebuilding project (Ezra 3:8–9). The people systematically work at making sure that the בנה imperative is completed. All their actions concern the rebuilding of the temple. Then the builders (בנה) lay the foundation and the people celebrate the completion of this stage in the בנה imperative although some are not satisfied by this temple as they reflect on the previous temple (3:10–13).

The opposition comes against the people when they are building (בנה) the temple (4:1). When the people reject the offer from the “enemies” to help them rebuild the temple the Judean community places emphasis on their exclusive responsibility to build the temple. In their response בנה is used two times. The people argue that they will build the temple for their God because Cyrus instructed them to do so (4:3).

Rehum and Shimshai write a letter to Artaxerxes (4:8–16). At the beginning of the letter the narrative switches into the Aramaic language as the narrator draws the reader into the narrative, as the letter is being sent to Babylon, by quoting the document in the Aramaic language (4:8). The letters would have been written in Aramaic because Aramaic was the official language of court documents written throughout the Persian

empire. This switch forces the reader to travel into a new world and it highlights the influence that the Persian court has over the situation.<sup>163</sup>

The reader might expect that the letter would be quoted in the language in which it was written, but interestingly the narrator continues writing in the Aramaic language even after the letter has finished. The text continues in Aramaic until 6:18 when Hebrew resumes.<sup>164</sup> Plenty of reasons have been advanced to explain the inclusion of the Aramaic section in the narrative of Ezra. Most helpful for a narrative reading of the text is the proposal of Bill Arnold.<sup>165</sup> Arnold's focus is on the ideological and phraseological level of the text in Ezra and Daniel, drawing attention to the function of bilingualism in these books. The shift to Aramaic at 4:8 highlights the point of view moving from an internal to an external perspective.<sup>166</sup> This continues until after the rebuilding is completed as Arnold comments, "for after the author stopped using original Achaemenid documents, he was nonetheless committed to the external point of view endemic to those sources and so continued the use of Aramaic until the completion of the section on rebuilding."<sup>167</sup> The point of view has dramatically shifted. The narrator has drawn attention to the fact that although the Judean people were always under the rule of the Persian king now they are unable to function without the king's permission.

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<sup>163</sup> This change is hardly noticed by English readers as Ezra 4:7 appears to be an offline comment and not a change of setting. This type of action can be seen through out question period in the House of Commons. For Members of Parliament who are fluent in both official languages English and French, if a member has asked a question in French then the one answering will address that question in French or vice versa.

<sup>164</sup> Reason for the resuming the Hebrew language in 6:18 will be discussed below in chapter 3.

<sup>165</sup> Arnold, "Aramaic," 1–16, esp. 1–9. His proposal for the use of Aramaic for Ezra 4:8–6:18; 7:12–26 are convincing, but not as much with his argument in the book of Daniel. His argument is based upon Uspensky's work concerning "point of view" which comprises four different planes: ideological, phraseological, spatial/temporal and psychological. Arnold's focus is on the first two and how they can shed light on the discussion of bilingualism in Ezra and Daniel.

<sup>166</sup> Arnold, "Aramaic," 6–7, suggests the use of "far away" (3:1); how the people are titled, and the titles of God all prepare the reader for the point of view shift brought on by the switch to Aramaic and also for the narrative to remain in Aramaic until the crisis surrounding the temple is complete.

<sup>167</sup> Arnold, "Aramaic," 7.

Rehum and Shimshai inform the king that the Judean community is building (בנה) after they returned (4:12) and if the city is built (בנה; 4:13) there will be problems for Artaxerxes as the people will not pay taxes. As the letter closes, Rehum and Shimshai make clear that the city is being rebuilt (בנה) so the king needs to take action (4:16). In his reply, Artaxerxes takes the caution of Rehum and Shimshai to heart and stops any building (בנה) until he so orders.

With Ezra 4:4 the struggle of the people builds through a distinguishable progression. Then the opposition set out to make the people discouraged and afraid (4:5) and through the aid of the Persian court frustrate (פרר) the temple project until the time of Darius (4:5). Then the people are compelled by force to stop building the temple (4:23) which results in the בנה imperative coming to a standstill (4:24).

#### *iv. Conclusion*

The third section in Ezra 1–6 (2:68–4:24) reports the initial stage of the בנה imperative and runs until the point where the Judean community is forced to stop their work on the temple (4:24). The setting changes as letters are sent from Jerusalem to Babylon and back (4:8–24). With the inclusion of the letter there is a language switch as Aramaic becomes the language of the narrative. Jeshua and Zerubbabel take a more prominent role in the narrative, but can not be considered the heroes of the narrative. It remains clear that Judean community is the focal point as emphasis is drawn toward the people's work on the temple rebuilding project. It is in 2:68–4:24 that the enemies rise up against the community. While different groups have different names they all fill the same role in the narrative of Ezra 1–6, that is, they work against the effort of the Judean community to complete the temple rebuilding project (3:3; 4:1, 4, 5). The enemies then



involve the Persian court, who side with the enemies and stall the temple rebuilding project (4:6). Cyrus initiated and supported the project, but Artaxerxes forces the people to stop working on the temple (4:8–23). Yhwh does not act in Ezra 2:68–4:24. The people praise him, but he plays no role in the development of the narrative. When the opposition comes against the Judean community Yhwh appears not to support them through this time which calls into question his sovereignty. As the Judean community sets to work on the temple rebuilding project the narrator is careful to point out that their actions are in accordance with the previous Israelite communities. The plot of the narrative develops considerably in Ezra 2:68–4:24. The work of the people first appears to be progressing toward success as the altar is laid and preparations are made for the temple. However, the people experience confrontation from opposition. First the people are made fearful (3:3), then discouraged (4:4) and then frustrated (4:5) until they are compelled by force (4:23) and the project reaches a standstill (4:24).

### *5. Conclusion*

The foundation for the narrative of Ezra 5–6 has now been laid. The decree from Cyrus outlined two imperatives for the people, the first being the *עלה* imperative instructing them to go up to Jerusalem and the second, the *בנה* imperative instructing them to build the temple. The narrative begins in Babylon, but moves to Judah as the setting changes with the people's return from Babylon to Judah completing the *עלה* imperative.

There are several main characters in the narrative of Ezra 1–6. The people are the central figures. Even though the narrator acknowledges the leadership of Sheshbazzar,

Jeshua and Zerubbabel in the Judean community the emphasis is on the group and not one individual. The people work diligently to complete the decree of Cyrus (1:5–4:5). The narrator connects their work to the past community of Israel. Despite the people’s best efforts they are compelled to stop work on the temple because of outside influences (4:8–24). The Persian ruler also plays a key role in the narrative. Cyrus initiates the return and the building project, but Artaxerxes causes the project to come to a standstill. The narrator also introduces Darius briefly, but it is unclear whether he will act like Cyrus or like Artaxerxes.<sup>168</sup> Opposition in the form of enemies has worked against the temple rebuilding project and succeeded in bring it to a standstill. Yhwh is a central figure in Ezra 1:1–3:1 as he raises up Cyrus to initiate the restoration and also moves the heart of the people to respond. However, as problems face the community his sovereignty is called into question as the temple rebuilding project reaches a standstill (4:24).

The people accomplish the *עלה* imperative without much of a struggle as they arrive in Jerusalem (3:1). In contrast the *בנה* imperative has proved to be much more difficult. The opposition, those who live around the Judean community, work against the people and attempt to frustrate the temple rebuilding project. The opposition against the Judean community is successful in convincing the Persian authorities and then the Persian king that the temple must not be rebuilt (4:6–24). It is at this point in the narrative, when the tension has reached its climax, that one expects the introduction of an action or character which will instigate a change in the narrative and bring about some resolution.

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<sup>168</sup> Allen and Laniak (*Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 40) identify hope in the wording of Ezra 4:24 as they comment that “the redeeming word **until**, both here and in verse 21, invites readers to look beyond frustrating setback to satisfying resolution.”

## CHAPTER 3

### PROPHETIC FULFILLMENT AND COMMUNAL CELEBRATION

#### *1. Introduction*

Ezra 5:1–6:22 marks the resumption of the fulfillment of the second of Cyrus's imperatives to the Judean community from his decree in Ezra 1:2–4. The first imperative was the *עלה* imperative which instructs the people to return to Jerusalem in Judah. The *עלה* imperative was completed when the people successfully settled in Judah (Ezra 3:1). The people were forced to stop working on the second imperative, which is the *בנה* imperative, because of the opposition against them. A decree from Artaxerxes marks the climax of the narrative (4:17–23). A ray of hope appears in 4:24 as the text suggests that in the reign of Darius the people return to work. But at the end of chapter 4 the reader would most likely wonder whether the *בנה* imperative issued by Cyrus will ever be fulfilled. This chapter will survey the material which follows the halting of the temple reconstruction. The material from Ezra 5:1 to 6:22 is often taken as one section. To make the discussion manageable the narrative will be divided into three sections: 5:1–5; 5:6–6:13; 6:14–22.

#### *2. Fulfillment 3: Frustration to Prophetic: Ezra 5:1–5*

In Ezra 4:24 the narrator notes that the temple rebuilding project had been stopped. Ezra 5:1–5 introduces the prophets to the narrative which will result in the people returning to the temple rebuilding project. This section will analyze the setting, characters, themes and plot of Ezra 5:1–5.

### *i. Setting*

As chapter 5 begins the people are still in Jerusalem even though the Persian court has forced the temple rebuilding project to reach a standstill. Haggai and Zechariah prophesy to the people in Judah and Jerusalem. Additionally, Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai must travel to Jerusalem to meet the people. The narrative, taking its cue from Ezra 4:24, has returned temporally to the time of Darius after a stint in the time of Artaxerxes (4:8–23).

### *ii. Characters*

This section involves several new characters. The prophets enter the narrative and bring about a change to the situation of the Judean community. The ones who respond to the message of the prophets are the ones who were the leaders in Ezra 3:1–4:24, Jeshua and Zerubbabel, although this is their final appearance in the narrative. A new opposition appears to arise in the narrative as Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai, Persian officials, investigate the work the Judean community is doing on the temple.

The prophets begin to prophesy to the community in the name of the God of Israel over them (יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְשַׁעְנוּ; 5:1). Even though Jeremiah is mentioned at the beginning of Ezra 1–6 (1:1), the role of the Jeremiah reference is quite different in nature. Jeremiah is not said to be giving a direct message to the people. The prophetic works of Jeremiah function on a literary level to legitimate Cyrus's actions, but Jeremiah is not a character in the narrative. In contrast, Haggai and Zechariah assume roles as characters who speak to the people a message which brings about an action.

A call narrative is not provided for the prophets. The prophets simply appear and prophesy to the people, presumably to resume the rebuilding the temple. There is not

much known about the prophetic figure of Haggai. No information is given concerning the lineage of Haggai. His name is derived from the Hebrew word for feast (אָגַד).<sup>169</sup>

Slightly more is known about Zechariah as he is referred to as a descendant of Iddo. In the list of priests and Levites who returned with Zerubbabel and Jeshua, Iddo's name is included (Neh 12:4) and it appears that Zechariah assumed leadership of the priestly family of Iddo at a later point (Neh 12:16).

The narrator also does not provide for the reader the words that were spoken by the prophets to the people. It is possible that although the author was familiar with the prophetic material in the Haggai and Zechariah corpus, he felt it unnecessary to include any highlights in the text.<sup>170</sup>

The prophets are said to be “prophesying” (וְהִתְנַבְּאִי) to the people. The Aramaic root נבא, which is a cognate of the same root in Hebrew, can be translated with different nuances. BDB notes the apparent progression of the word, “in oldest forms, of religious ecstasy with or without song and music; later, essentially religious instruction, with occasional predictions.”<sup>171</sup> The lack of information in the book of Ezra makes classifying the actions of Haggai and Zechariah difficult, but it is clear they are the catalyst for the people to return to the temple rebuilding project.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> As Boda (*Haggai, Zechariah*, 32–33) points out, “an appropriate name for a prophet focused on rebuilding the temple, the context for the main feasts in the Jewish calendar. Moreover, each of his messages is delivered on a day associated with a festal or liturgical event.”

<sup>170</sup> Prophets take on many different roles in the history of Israel. Blenkinsopp (“Prophets,” 50) comments, “one aspect of the process by which the prophetic and Levitical roles were eventually conflated, as a reading of Chronicles suggests (see especially 1 Chron. 25.1-6; 2 Chron. 20.13-17). To the transition from small nation state to small province of a world empire corresponded the transition from demagogue and pamphleteer to preacher.” This can be reflected in the prophetic material of Haggai and Zechariah as the arrangement of certain passages seems to reflect an early stage of preaching much different from the pre-exilic prophetic material. See also Van Rooy, “Prophets and Society,” 163–79.

<sup>171</sup> BDB, 612.1.

<sup>172</sup> The book of Haggai represents the reason for the delay differently than does the author of Ezra 1–6. Concerning the phrase ‘helping them,’ Clines (*Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 84) comments, “presumably by

One of the important aspects of the characterization of the prophets is the authority they have to speak the message to the people from Yhwh.<sup>173</sup> Haggai and Zechariah are clearly prophets from Yhwh because the narrator provides the reader with the information that they worked “in the name of the God of Israel over them” (בְּשֵׁם אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עָלֵיהֶן; 5:1). While the first three words (בְּשֵׁם אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל) are quite clear, the last word of the phrase (עָלֵיהֶן) is slightly ambiguous as to its referent.<sup>174</sup> It could be referring to God being over the Judean community generally or over the prophets specifically. Either way the characterization by the narrator makes clear that the prophets’ actions are not derived from any other source than Yhwh their God. This assures the reader that the prophets’ actions are going to help bring about the will of Yhwh and the best for the Judean community. It also gives the reader hope because, as was seen in Ezra 1:1–4, the decree to start building the temple was given in accordance with the prophet Jeremiah from Cyrus. According to the narrator, at the outset of the story the change in Israel’s situation, from the people being away from the land of Israel and the temple of Yhwh being in ruin to the people being allowed to return to the land and rebuild the temple, was a fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophetic message through the Persian court despite the fact Cyrus was unaware of this fulfillment. Now with the prophets Haggai and Zechariah

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impressing on the people that neglect of the temple was a token of neglect of God ... but also to assure them of God’s protective presence (Hag. 1:13) as the rebuilt and of the future splendour of the temple in God’s purpose.” The problem here is that the material that Clines is using to support the prophets is taken from their own prophetic material.

<sup>173</sup> Boda “Haggai Master Rhetorician,” 295–304. See also Tollington’s (*Tradition and Innovation*, 48–77) presentation of Haggai and Zechariah as legitimate prophets from Haggai and Zechariah 1-8. Neh 6:7 highlights an occurrence with prophets later in the Persian period and offers insight into the importance of being designated a prophet from Yhwh. Sanballat suggests that he has heard reports that Nehemiah has appointed prophets to give a prophetic message that Nehemiah should be the king in Judah. And then in Neh 6:14, Nehemiah asks that Yhwh not forget “Noadiah and the rest of the prophets” who were trying to deter him through intimidation from rebuilding the walls. The prophets referred to in Neh 6:7 are not to be considered legitimate prophets.

<sup>174</sup> See Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 79.

helping the people, there is renewed hope that once again the Persian court would support the people of Yhwh.

In addition to the description of Haggai and Zechariah prophesying to the people, Ezra 5:2 reads “and with them were the prophets of God helping them” ( וְעִמָּהֶֹן נְבִיאֵי־אֱלֹהִים (לְהוֹן דִּי־אַלְהָא מְסַעְדִּין). The narrator has not described what specifically this help entailed. Charles Fensham comments that this help “means quite probably assisting them by the fervor of their pronouncement.”<sup>175</sup> It is also possible that the prophets are doing more in the community than just speaking the word of Yhwh to the people.

When the elders of the Jews become the voice of the people, the prophets fade into the background of the narrative as the people work to follow through on the message given by the prophets. When the construction of the temple nears completion, the work of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah will be mentioned another time (6:14).

The magnitude of the prophets’ influence is immediately seen as the people respond to their prophetic message, but the reader has been disappointed before as Cyrus’s decree raised expectations which were not met. Work on the temple is taken up again by Jeshua and Zerubbabel (5:2), the two leadership figures of Ezra 3:1–4:5. In the first action where the success of Jeshua and Zerubbabel was limited to the rebuilding of the altar, the setting of the foundation, and the installation of the priests, the prophets were not with them to help them. This time the prophets are the ones who provide them with the motivation to act and restart the building of the temple. It is clear from the text that the actions of Jeshua and Zerubbabel are derived solely from the prophets’ message to the people. The narrator provides the transitional phrase וְאַתָּה (then) that demonstrates

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<sup>175</sup> Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 79.

how Jeshua and Zerubbabel respond to the message.<sup>176</sup> This is the last reference to Jeshua and Zerubbabel that is found in the narrative. After this point they disappear from the narrative. The narrator does not present Zerubbabel and Jeshua playing any further role in the governance of the community or in the successful completion and celebration of temple.<sup>177</sup>

The fact is that it is not possible to concretely state what has happened except for that they are not mentioned by the narrator again. The lack of account given by the narrator suggests that the reason for their disappearance may be unknown to the author as the narrative explaining the events is not provided. Another option would be that the narrator did not believe that it was important for the progression of the narrative. In any case the narrative focus remains on the people rather than on specific leaders.

Tattenai is the governor of the area Beyond the River and he is joined by Shethar-Bozenai and other associates (5:3). The reader may initially be tempted to place them in the “enemies of Judah” category, raising immediate concern about their involvement. Since the people arrived from Babylon and settled in Judah they have been handicapped by several non-Israelite people groups. The people surrounding them made the Judean community afraid in Ezra 3:3 and then the enemies of Judah and Benjamin discourage the community by hiring counsellors to frustrate the temple rebuilding project (4:4, 5). Then Rehum and Shimshai sent a letter to Artaxerxes outlining how Jerusalem was a wicked and rebellious city (4:6). The persecution against the Judean people had been escalating

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<sup>176</sup> *BDB*, 1078 reads “always, except Ezr 5:5, at beginning of sentence, introducing new stage of narrative with some emph[asis].”

<sup>177</sup> This is strikingly curious in relation to what is said about Zerubbabel in both Haggai and Zechariah. In the book of Haggai it appeared that Zerubbabel would be leader of the restored community (Hag 2:20–23). This does not appear to be the situation in Ezra where he is not mentioned at the dedication of the temple. What might have happened to him has been the subject of numerous debates.



until this point. The reader must wonder if Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai are going to add to the problems.

Although they send a letter to the court, Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai do not ask for the temple rebuilding to be stopped, but rather seek to verify the claims of the Judean community. They ask “who established a decree to build this temple and to complete this structure?” (מִן־שָׁם לָכֶם טַעַם בִּיְהִי דָּנָה לְבָנָא וְאִשְׁרָנָא דְּנָה לְשִׁכְלָלָהּ) and “what are the names of the men who are building this building?” (מִן־אֲנֹן שְׁמֹתַת גְּבָרִיא דִּי־דְּנָה בְּנִינָא בְּנִין).<sup>178</sup>

Their questions are focused on investigating the legitimacy of the people’s work and should not be taken as a harsh accusation.<sup>179</sup> They investigate the activities that are going on in Judah concerning the temple. It is interesting to note that the people do not respond in this section (5:3, 4). The response only comes in the letter to Darius after the question has been repeated (5:9–16). This suggests that these authorities have less control over the circumstances of the Judean community as the people press on in the temple rebuilding project despite Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai investigating the situation.

### *iii. Themes*

Ezra 5:1–5 develops further the theme concerning the sovereignty of God. However, there is not a strong connection to past Israelite communities.<sup>180</sup> The sovereignty of God can be seen in the interaction between the people and the Persian

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<sup>178</sup> Fleishman (“Tattenai,” 91) writes, “by means of this question the Persians wanted to investigate the motives of the builders, and who was behind the intensive building. If it were to become clear to the commission that the Jews had no explicit license, and that the people standing at the head of the work were not the legitimate leaders of the province of Judea, and that they are not counted among the loyal supporters of the Persians, then it would be clear that the building activity is to be seen as sedition against the Persian authorities.”

<sup>179</sup> Williamson, (*Ezra, Nehemiah*, 76) comments, “There is nothing in the text to demand that Tattenai’s inquiry be understood as hostile in intent or as something maliciously instigated by the inhabitants of the north.”

<sup>180</sup> However, Allen and Laniak (*Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 43) note that for the narrator the prophets represent, “the voice of the God of Israel, whose people were the postexilic group of returned exiles who claimed continuity with the preexilic religious community.”

authorities. At the end of the previous section (Ezra 2:68–4:24) the sovereignty of God had come under question because the temple rebuilding project was forced to stop. When the people start building again the governor of Beyond the River, Tattenai, and his associates ask the people two questions to discover the reason why they are rebuilding the temple. The first concerns the identity of the person who gave the Judean community permission to build the temple and the second, the identities of the people who are building the temple. A striking element in the text is that the rebuilding of the temple is not stopped while investigation is made concerning the people's right to build (5:5). Numerous reasons could be proposed for why Tattenai did not stop the people, but the text clearly states that it was because “the eye of their God was watching over them” (עֵינַי יְהוָה הָיָה מִשְׁמָרְתִּים; 5:5), emphasizing for the reader the sovereignty of Yhwh over the temple rebuilding project.<sup>181</sup> Williamson notes here that “‘the eye of God’ is certainly a somewhat unusual expression (cf. Ps 33:18; 34:16 [15]; Job 36:7) that speaks of his caring watchfulness over his people.”<sup>182</sup> A closely related phrase is עֵינַי יְהוָה (“eyes of Yhwh”).<sup>183</sup> This expression occurs in Zechariah 4:10b in the interpretation of the vision which Zechariah had in Zechariah 4:1–5. Mark Boda points out that “the phrase ‘eyes of the Lord’ appears ... in the Old Testament to speak of God’s observing the activities of his creation either to bring discipline or blessing (Deut. 11:12; Ps. 34:15; Prov. 5:21;

<sup>181</sup> Allen and Laniak (*Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 44) suggests that “Tattenai had no doubt that the necessary bureaucratic confirmation would be forthcoming” and that is why he did not stop the Judean community from working on the temple.

<sup>182</sup> Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 77. He goes on to suggest “It may be contrasted with the more common ‘hand of God’ which occurs frequently in the narrative of both Ezra and Nehemiah. There may be a hint in this difference of usage that the narrator of Ezra 1-6 is to be distinguished from the one who gave the remainder of the books their present shape.”

<sup>183</sup> Throughout the Aramaic sections of the Bible the divine name (יהוה) does not appear. The closest instance occurs in Dan 5:23 with the expression מְרָא-שְׁמַיָא [lord of heaven].

15:3; 22:12).”<sup>184</sup> Similar usage of this expression is found in 2 Chr 16:9 where the text reads, “for the eyes of Yhwh go back and forth throughout all the earth to strengthen the heart of the one who are completely his.” This suggests that in the context of Ezra 5:5 the “eye of their God” should be seen as a reference to God watching and strengthening the people as they work on the temple. One must wonder why עֵין אֱלֹהֵיהֶם was not over the people throughout the first stage in the project. However, the reappearance of a reference to God suggests that the people will be successful in accomplishing this work despite the fact they presently have no right to rebuild.

#### *iv. Plot*

As the tension builds in a story, the reader waits for the key moment of change. In the Ezra 1–6 narrative the problem reaches a climax in Ezra 4:23 when the בנה imperative cannot be fulfilled because Artaxerxes has decreed that work on the temple must stop. This tension has been built up by the narrator by introducing conflicts which the Judean community faced as they worked on the temple rebuilding project. The tension was introduced in Ezra 3:3 as the people of the land caused the Judean community to be fearful as work began on the temple in the form of the altar being laid. The people were able to successfully lay the altar despite that fear, but opposition grew from there as the enemies of Judah and Benjamin were able to lobby the Persian court to suspend all work on the temple (4:8–23). It was at this point that the narrator transported the reader into the world of the Persian court by switching into the official language of the empire.<sup>185</sup>

The first signs of resolution occur when the prophets break into the narrative and motivate the people to return to the temple rebuilding project despite the fact that they do

<sup>184</sup> Boda, *Haggai, Zechariah*, 273.

<sup>185</sup> See Arnold, “Aramaic,” 1–16.

not have permission to rebuild the temple. In the narrative of Ezra 1–6 an imperial proclamation still stands, but the prophets instruct the people to start building the temple again. The message of the prophets is successful and the people return to work on the temple as Jeshua and Zerubbabel lead the people in a renewed effort to complete the בנה imperative (5:2). It appears at this point that the בנה imperative issued by Cyrus will be completed regardless of the frustration that they received in the previous section because of the influence of the prophets.

The tension in the narrative decreases, but only for a brief moment since Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai appear to investigate the Judean community's actions. For a moment it appears that work on the temple will be stopped again, but the people seemingly ignore the questions addressed to them by Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai. The questions asked by Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai focus on the people's progress on the בנה imperative and it is this concern over building that prompts the investigation. In Ezra 5:3 they ask who authorized the building (בנה) and in Ezra 5:4 they ask for the names of the ones who are doing the building (בנה). The people are bold and courageous and continue to work on the בנה imperative even without permission from the court and despite the questions that have been put forth to them. The narrator suggests to the reader that circumstances will be different in this case because the "eye of their God" is watching over the people as they work (5:5). All these events were initiated through the appearance of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah (5:1).

This action is the apex of the narrative as the tension never returns to the level of frustration experienced at 4:23 when the temple rebuilding project was stopped. This does not mean that all tension is released in the narrative. Although there are literary clues that

the events in the narrative will turn in favour of the Judean community there are still unknowns that cause anxiety as the narrative unwinds.<sup>186</sup> By mentioning in Ezra 4:24 that work was stopped until the reign of Darius, the narrator creates an expectation of a reversal of fate when Darius is finally introduced into the narrative.<sup>187</sup> Also, when Cyrus first issued the *עלה* imperative and the *בנה* imperative it was in accordance with Jeremiah the prophet. With Haggai and Zechariah present in the narrative one can expect similar success as was seen in the time of Cyrus. All these elements contribute to the tension in plot lessening with the main change taking place when Haggai and Zechariah prophesy to the community.

#### *v. Conclusion*

The most urgent question from the previous section (2:68–4:24) was concerning the apparent disappearance of Yhwh from the narrative. The Persian authorities appear to be in control of the situation as the people are forced to stop rebuilding the temple. The switch into the Aramaic language highlighted the frustration of the people. However, in Ezra 5:1-5 Yhwh answers this question by raising up his prophets to speak to the people (5:1). The people immediately respond to the words of the prophets and return to the task (*בנה* imperative) assigned to them by Cyrus in Ezra 1:2–4. Jeshua and Zerubbabel are the ones who lead the work after the prophets spoke to the people, but the emphasis remains on the community as a whole and not one leadership figure. The enemies appear to be neutralized, but concern arises over the involvement of Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai as the memories of the last time the Persian court took notice of the temple rebuilding project the work came to a standstill (4:8–24). Nevertheless, there is hope since Yhwh has

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<sup>186</sup> The fact that Ezra 4:24 gives a finite amount of time suggests that rebuilding of the temple was going to again take place at some point in the reign of Darius.

<sup>187</sup> See Allen and Laniak (*Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 40) and fn. 168 above.

intervened and because the narrator makes clear the “eyes of Yhwh” are watching over the people. The *בנה* imperative will at last be completed.

### *3. Fulfillment 4: From Prophetic to Verification to Authorization: Ezra 5:6–6:13*

Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai went and investigated the temple rebuilding project. In Ezra 5:6–6:13 the two letters which make up the correspondence are incorporated into the narrative. This section will analyze the input of the letters in 5:6–6:13 on the setting, character, themes and plot in Ezra 5–6.

#### *i. Setting*

The letter to Persia keeps the reader in the framework of the Persian court. Even though the people are living in Yehud and the investigation that is being made by Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai concerns events in Yehud, it is the king who has the authority to either grant permission or stop the temple rebuilding project.

The spatial setting of the narrative in this section starts in Yehud as Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai prepare the letter to send to Darius. The narrative shifts to Mesopotamia as the letter is quoted in the text. The reader experiences the reading of the letter with Darius. Darius issues a decree to search for the records concerning the Jerusalem temple in the Babylonian archives (6:1). The narrator describes for the reader the exact location where the decree is found (6:2). This allows the reader to investigate the decree with the officials of Persia as they search the treasury and find the scroll in the citadel of Ecbatana. The fact that the narrator allows the reader to see the searching process, something which was not the case in Ezra 4:6–23, legitimizes the investigation process.<sup>188</sup> The reader is also seemingly with Darius as he discovers the contents of the scroll as the text

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<sup>188</sup> See Mallau, “Redaction,” 67–80; Matzal, “Structure,” 566–9.

immediately flows into the decree from Cyrus (6:2b, 3). After the letter is completed, the narrative returns to Jerusalem as the temple rebuilding process is allowed to continue.

The time that the investigation would have taken is not reported by the narrator. The manner in which the actions are reported suggests immediate response. The only time period provided by the narrator is found in Darius's return letter, which reports Cyrus's decree as being in his first year of reigning over Babylon. The narrator also allows the narrative to glance at the past as the decree from Cyrus is recorded in the text. The past extends back to Ezra 1:1–11 when Cyrus allowed the people to return to Jerusalem and gave them instructions to build the temple.

### *ii. Characters*

The narrator provides further characterization for Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai, along with a development in the characterization of the people. In the letters these characters are given a chance to speak for themselves. This is especially important for the characterization of the Judean community as they are finally able to argue their case to the authorities, something which was denied them in the letter to Artaxerxes (Ezra 4:8–16).<sup>189</sup> Darius also comes to the forefront of the narrative as he responds to the letter from Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai assuming the same narrative role as Cyrus and Artaxerxes.

The people make a plea to the king concerning their right to continue building the temple. Their argument in the letter helps to develop the narrative in a number of key respects and at the same time connects to material in previous sections. The letter refers to Cyrus and Sheshbazzar, the two figures who helped establish the goals of the narrative. The people reach back into a time before the beginning of Ezra 1 and describe how they came to be in Babylon in the first place. Unlike their previous encounter with the Persian

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<sup>189</sup> See again Mallau, "Redaction," 67–80; Matzal, "Structure," 566–9.

authorities, this section allows the people to speak for themselves concerning their right to rebuild the temple an action which was denied them. The people speak with boldness and confidence about what they were granted by Cyrus. The people demonstrate an awareness of their history and the reason why they were allowed to return and rebuild the temple.

The people argue “we are servants of the God of heaven and earth” ( אֲנַחְנָא הַמָּוּ ) עֲבָדוּהִי דִי־אֱלֹהֵי שָׁמַיָא וְאַרְעָא (5:11). This is the only time that God is called the God of heaven and earth. The word אֱלֹהִים / אֱלֹהֵי (God) is used 45 times in Ezra 1–6. The phrase אֱלֹהֵי שָׁמַיָא is used four times.<sup>190</sup> Williamson comments “the addition of ‘and earth’ to the title underlines the importance of this deity, who should therefore be considered worthy of a temple.”<sup>191</sup> This could also be understood as a charge against the authority of Darius on the earth. It is well enough to affirm that there is a God in heaven for a people group, but this God is also the God of the circumstances on earth.<sup>192</sup> While Darius has the authority to stop the work which is being done on the temple, the people are recognizing God’s ultimate authority in heaven and also situations on earth.

The people also declare their loyalty to their God (5:11). They are clearly articulating that despite Darius’s rule over them they are primarily the servants of God. This states to the Persian court a sense of confidence in their identity as a people. It is coded as a statement of defiance, suggesting that the people are not going to be stopped in their work on the temple. They are not the servants of Darius, but they are the servants of God.

<sup>190</sup> The majority of the occurrences of אֱלֹהִים / אֱלֹהֵי are in the phrases “house of God” or “temple of God.”

<sup>191</sup> Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 78.

<sup>192</sup> Fensham (*Ezra and Nehemiah*, 83) suggests that “*the God of heaven* is probably an attempt by the Jews to create sympathy for their cause in the Persian court, because Ahuramazda, the Persian god, was also regarded as ‘god of heaven’ and was known as the creator of heaven and earth.”



The people also articulate what they are doing. This is important because it again shows how the people understand their purpose. What they are working on is the rebuilding of the temple structure which was previously destroyed.<sup>193</sup> The people make sure to establish that the temple was a structure that previously existed and is not a new project (5:12). The people are ensuring that the king does not interpret their actions as one of rebellion against the king.

In the course of their explanation the people also take some responsibility for the destruction. The people admit to the fact that their forefathers angered Yhwh and that the temple they are constructing was previous destroyed. This acknowledgement is not expressed with the same vividness of the great penitential prayers found elsewhere in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, but it does affirm the justice of Yhwh's actions.<sup>194</sup> The reason God acted was because he was angered by their fathers. God did not forsake them, but was responding to the actions of their fathers.

This displays two important characteristics about the people. They identify the defeat of the temple and the exile of the people as part of the punishment that was brought upon them for angering their God. Also important is the way the people phrase the answer because they attribute the destruction to Yhwh rather than Nebuchadnezzar.<sup>195</sup> While it was the Babylonians who destroyed the temple it was Yhwh who handed the people over for destruction.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> This self understanding again works against Eskenazi's interpretation of the house of God extending to entire city and metaphorically reaching the status of the community.

<sup>194</sup> Ezra 9, Neh 9. Cf. Dan 9.

<sup>195</sup> Nebuchadnezzar is not viewed as unfavourably in Ezra 5:12 and 14 as in Ezra 1:7. Ezra 5:12 clarifies that Nebuchadnezzar was working as an agent of God.

<sup>196</sup> Clines (*Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 87) fills in the conversation by writing, "a deity who cannot preserve his own temple from the hands of desecrators might be thought ineffectual, that Jews hasten to add that the destruction of the temple had been actively willed by their God."

The people also bring attention to the permission they received from Cyrus to rebuild the temple (5:13–16). Their actions, which were questioned by Tattenai, were permitted by the order of Cyrus. The people recount accurately the events from Ezra 1 when Cyrus issued the decree to go up and rebuild and he brought out the articles which had been from the temple by Nebuchadnezzar (1:7–8). They also connect their action to Sheshbazzar who was apparently appointed as governor (פַּחוּה) even though this is not mentioned in Ezra 1.<sup>197</sup> The Persian title פַּחוּה authorizes further the temple rebuilding project by noting the involvement of a person designated by the Persian court. Sheshbazzar appears in the first stage of the rebuilding project, the return from Babylon to Judea, but disappears after. The people do not mention why Sheshbazzar left in this section and attribute the laying of the foundation to him and not to Jeshua and Zerubbabel as appears to be the case in Ezra 3. This demonstrates the care the people are taking to ensure that the verdict from the king comes back favourably as they align the work they did in accordance with the documents to which the king would have access. If a name was written on the document it would not be Jeshua or Zerubbabel; it would be Sheshbazzar.

The last line of the people's plea describes them as faithful workers. They argue "from then until now we have been building and have not finished" (וּמִן־אָדָּן וְעַד־כִּי־עַן ) (מִתְחַבְּנִים וְלֹא־שָׁלֵם; 5:16). The people accentuate their immediate and enduring response to Cyrus's decree. They do not explain why they were unable to complete the temple in the nineteen years which had passed since the decree was issued by Cyrus.<sup>198</sup> They do not

<sup>197</sup> Fensham (*Ezra and Nehemiah*, 84) notes that פַּחוּה could be used as a temporary title for a specific task. In this case the task would be to rebuild the temple.

<sup>198</sup> Fensham (*Ezra and Nehemiah*, 83–84) and Williamson (*Ezra, Nehemiah*, 78–80) highlight the importance of connecting the present work on the temple to the original decree from Cyrus.

blame the people of the land who would seem like an obvious scapegoat for their failure to finish the temple. They also do not suggest that it has anything to do with their lack of attention to the temple, as could be inferred from Haggai 1. They simply have not completed the temple even though they have been diligent in their work. The people are then characterized as faithful to the temple rebuilding project.

Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai still represent the opposition to the Judean community, but this category is somewhat in transition. The power of the opposition weakens after the introduction of the prophets into the narrative. They do not stop the people while an investigation is made concerning the legitimacy of the people's right to build the temple. Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai are seen as diligent in their task as they seem to investigate fully the circumstances surrounding the temple project.<sup>199</sup> They also ask questions to appropriately identify the people who are taking action. They do not act rashly, but seem to be following protocol (5:17).

Cyrus started the rebuilding phases, but Darius is the one who sees it through to completion. He gives the people the equivalent of a blank cheque as he states that the expenses for temple rebuilding project will be paid out of the royal treasury (6:8). He continues by decreeing that whatever is necessary (מִהַ חֵשֶׁק) must be given to the people to ensure that the temple is finished.<sup>200</sup> Darius makes provisions to provide the people with the ability to offer sacrifices at the temple. Cyrus encouraged the people around to support the Judean community in their rebuilding efforts as they leave Babylon for Judea,

<sup>199</sup> More about Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai's investigation will be made below in the plot section.

<sup>200</sup> Blenkinsopp (*Ezra-Nehemiah*, 126–7) is skeptical of the king's provision for the temple as he writes, "It is also possible that certain features may be explained by the employment of a Jewish scribe in the redaction of the letter ... but the tone of the letter, with its enthusiastic and unconditional endorsement, cannot fail to arouse suspicion. Darius may conceivably have required that the day-to-day operation of the temple be financed out of satrapal revenues, but it is highly unlikely that the subsidy would be practically on demand."

but did not provide any livestock or cattle to assist in the sacrifices (6:9–10; cf. 1:4). In these actions Darius is seen as surpassing Cyrus's actions and so he characterizes himself as one that is more benevolent than Cyrus. Darius also asks that the people to "pray for the health of the king and his sons" (מִצְלֵיךָ לְחַיֵּי מַלְכָּא וּבְנוֹהֵי; 6:10) when they offer sacrifices.

The final action which Darius pronounces in his decree is to forbid any disturbance of the rebuilding of the temple, issuing a curse against anyone who rises up to cause problems for their rebuilding of the temple.<sup>201</sup> The punishment for going against the king's instruction is severe. This highlights that Darius is providing protection for the people. Darius also extends the curse beyond the possible opposition which the people might have received, by pronouncing a curse against anyone, king or commoner, who changes the decree or destroys the temple (6:12). Darius is providing a lasting decree to protect the house. This demonstrates that the previous decree from Artaxerxes has been nullified and declares that the temple must be completed.<sup>202</sup> Darius is seen in a favourable light in all the action which he takes. He provides for the people and the temple rebuilding project beyond all expectations.

### *iii. Themes*

In the letters there is a clear reflection of the two themes which run throughout the narrative. The theme of the sovereignty of God is highlighted in this section by the response of the people in the letter and Darius's support of the temple rebuilding project. The people clearly argue that God was in control of all the circumstances. This began

<sup>201</sup> This is how Fried ("Desolate," 48–49) classifies Darius's warning.

<sup>202</sup> Although historically there was no decree from Artaxerxes which needed to be rescinded at this time, but narratively the decree from Artaxerxes (4:17–23) is what was had caused the temple rebuilding project to come to a standstill.

with God turning the people over to Nebuchadnezzar (2 Chr 36:17). This is confirmed by edict found in Ecbatana and reported to the king (Ezra 6:5). Darius functions as an instrument of Yhwh in the same way that Cyrus was the instrument of Yhwh. As was apparent in Darius's characterization he goes beyond the benevolence which was provided by Cyrus to the Judean community (6:6–12). The narrator does not provide any information concerning whether Yhwh roused Darius's heart as he did with Cyrus. This is because the event which corresponds to Darius's action is all in the letter which was brought to Jerusalem. The actions of Darius in extending what Cyrus did highlights how the Persian court has returned to the position of working with and not against Yhwh.

The connection to the past communities of Israel is also present in Ezra 5:6–6:13. The people clarify that they are the people of God in their answer to Tattenai and are also part of the previous Jewish community (5:11–16). This is important because the action that they are taking is not a new action, but is a restorative one. They are not starting a new action so as to create division, but returning their society to the way it was previously. The people are arguing that they are connected to the previous Jewish community. This is important not just to convince Darius that they are not trying to revolt against the king of Persia, but to characterize them theologically. The people highlight that the temple was built long ago (5:11) and that it was their ancestors (5:12) who built the temple. Both of these aspects establish a link to the past communities of Israel. Additionally the people connect the destruction of the temple to Nebuchadnezzar who was the one responsible for destroying the temple long ago and exiling their ancestors (5:13). The people also leverage the recent past of Ezra 1:11. They argue that they are the same community of people that was authorized by Cyrus to return and build under the guidance of Sheshbazzar and therefore must be allowed to continue (5:14–15). After

Darius finds the decree from Cyrus he affirms that the Judean community has the right to rebuild the temple and quotes the decree directly into the text of the letter (6:3–5). Darius acknowledges that the current Judean community is in fact the same community which was allowed to go up because of Cyrus's decree.

#### *iv. Plot*

The previous section (5:1–5) displayed renewed efforts by the people to complete the *בנה* imperative. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah proclaimed the word of Yhwh to the people and then, led by Jeshua and Zerubbabel, the people returned to work on the temple. However, the Persian officials took notice of the work which the people were doing on the temple and began to investigate the temple rebuilding project. This section is the letter which Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai sent to Darius (5:6–17) and the response which follows (6:1–13). Tracing plot development is difficult when analyzing documents. However, the letters play roles similar to speeches and advance the narrative toward resolution.<sup>203</sup>

The letter breaks down into three sections. The first is the introduction to the situation from Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai (5:6–10). The second section is where the Jews respond to the questions that were given to them by Tattenai and Shethar-Bonzenai previously defending their right to build the temple of Yhwh in Jerusalem (5:11–16). The final section is where Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai request that the court verify the answers given by the Judean community (5:17). This letter develops the plot of the narrative as it becomes clear that the people are moving forward and getting closer to the completion of the *בנה* imperative. Also the tension of the narrative grows as the reader

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<sup>203</sup> See Boda (“Prayer as Rhetoric,” forthcoming) who demonstrates how prayer is used rhetorically in the book of Nehemiah. See also Mason, *Preaching*.

awaits the reply from the Persian courts to see if the people will be vindicated concerning their right to build the temple in Jerusalem.

The narrator provides the reader with an introduction to the letter as a bridge to the document. This makes clear that the document is not from any other time period, but addresses the specific situation of the people. The introduction also suggests that the narrator wishes the reader to understand that this is the exact document that was sent to Darius from the officials of Beyond the River.

The greeting of Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai in the letter represents the typical letter form from the Persian period.<sup>204</sup> The report reveals a couple of key facts. The first is that the Judean people, from the vantage point of Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai, are being successful. The officials of Beyond the River describe for Darius the method and manner by which the people are progressing in their work on the בנה imperative. The Judean community was building (בנה) the temple: “large stones and timbers are being placed in the walls” (אָבֹן גָּלֵל וְאֵע מִתְּשֵׁם בְּכִתְלֵיָא; 5:8). Two possible meanings have been proposed for the phrase אָבֹן גָּלֵל. As Fensham describes, “the term *large* (*g<sup>e</sup>lāl*) is connected to the root *gll*, which means ‘roll.’ In such a case the stones were so large that they were rolled to the building site. Another possibility is to connect *g<sup>e</sup>lāl* to Akk. *galālu*, a small stone. This would refer to small stones which were used for the rebuilding.”<sup>205</sup> Fensham chooses the first option because of the success expressed by Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai in the letter. The second portion of the phrase above is also interesting as it suggests that construction on the temple is well underway even though the precise meaning associated

<sup>204</sup> See Porten, “Address Formulae,” 396–415; Pardee, “Overview,” 337; Fitzmyer, “Aramaic,” 25–57; Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri*. Cf. Grabbe, “Persian Documents,” 531–70.

<sup>205</sup> Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 82; See also Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 121–2.

with *וְאָע מִחֶשֶׁם בְּכַתְלֵיָא* is debatable. Most of the interpretations suggest that the wood was for the support of the temple either for protection against earthquakes or possibly for the beams on which the roof would be constructed.<sup>206</sup> Regardless it is clear that the temple is being built and that the people are capable of completing the *בנה* imperative.

The last phrase of Ezra 5:8 identifies the progress of the people, as the text reads “and succeeding by their direction” (*וּמִצְלַח בְּיָדֵיהֶם*). The verb *צלח* is of interest in the development of the narrative as it highlights that the manner in which the people are working on the *בנה* imperative suggests to Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai that the work on the temple will be successful (*צלח*). This success would be marked by the completion of the structure, the goal of the decree which was given by Cyrus in 1:2–4. Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai make clear that the people, if allowed to continue working on the temple, will complete the *בנה* imperative.

The second section marks the beginning of the people’s response to Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai which is relayed to Darius. The people recount a brief history of the temple. The people argue that their work at rebuilding the temple is to restore the structure which was previously built. In Ezra 5:11 the verb *בנה* is used three times, thus drawing attention to the central activity of the narrative. After the people highlight that the work they are presently doing is to restore the temple which was built long ago by the king of Israel and later destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar (5:12), they draw Darius’s attention to the recent past and the decree which was given by Cyrus.

The people acknowledge the reversal of fortunes which occurred when Cyrus became the king of Babylon in the form of a decree which allowed them to rebuild the

<sup>206</sup> See Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 78; Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 82; Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 121–2.



temple (5:13). It is interesting that mention is only made of the *בנה* imperative as the people do not highlight the *עלה* imperative which was also included in the decree from Ezra 1:2–4.<sup>207</sup> This is because the *עלה* imperative has been successfully completed at this point in the narrative and the people do not need permission from the court to continue the return.<sup>208</sup> The people wish to draw the attention of the Persian court solely to the *בנה* imperative. As the people continue they highlight that Cyrus made specific instructions as to how to build the temple. According to the people they were instructed to build the temple at the exact place of the previous temple.<sup>209</sup> The people also mention Sheshbazzar (5:14, 16). Even though he is not present in the community at this point in the work on the temple, he was the one who was originally charged by Cyrus to bring the temple vessels back to the temple. The people are highlighting that the same *בנה* imperative which was given by Cyrus in the time of Sheshbazzar is active for the present community.

The people also argue that they have been working to fulfill the *בנה* imperative since the command by Cyrus, highlighting that this command is still in force (5:16). While the narrative of 4:5–24 suggests otherwise, the people are attempting to draw attention to the continuity between the work which was started with the imperatives from

<sup>207</sup> In Ezra 5:14 the people highlight that Cyrus instructed them to *אזל* [go, walk], the Aramaic equivalent of *הלך*. While this could be interpreted as highlighting part of the process involved in completing the *עלה* imperative the Aramaic word which is generally considered to be the Hebrew equivalent for *עלה* (go up) is *סלק*.

<sup>208</sup> Albertz (*Israel*, 120) identifies one of the problems in the Ezra 1–6 narrative as being “while the Hebrew translation of the edict of Cyrus (1:2-4) includes both the rebuilding of the temple and permission for the exiles to return, the Aramaic ‘memorandum’ of this edict (6:3-5) mentions only the rebuilding of the temple and the return of the temple vessels.” This ‘problem’ disappears when one takes into consideration that the return was been completed (3:1) and the only part of the restoration process that is under question is the right for the people to be rebuilding. Even on a historical level the fact that Darius does not quote the part of the edict which allows the people to return should not be troubling.

<sup>209</sup> This should remind the reader of Ezra 3:3 and the attention of the people to placing the altar upon the exact place which the altar was before.

Cyrus and the work which they are doing right now. They are imploring Darius to be like Cyrus and grant them permission to continue the בונה imperative (5:11–16). Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai ask Darius to verify the story which the people provided. Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai, the people, and the reader must now await a response from Darius concerning the בונה imperative.

The decree found in Ecbatana immediately vindicates the people's claim that Cyrus issued to them a decree to build the temple (6:3–5). The decree, which is quoted in Darius's letter, appears to be the original Aramaic decree issued by Cyrus, with Ezra 1:2–4 being the Hebrew translation prepared for proclamation. By quoting the decree in the letter the narrative highlights that there was an actual decree found when the archives at Ecbatana were searched (6:2). After Cyrus's decree then Darius breaks into the letter with his own set of instructions for Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai, thereby adding to the בונה imperative given by Cyrus. Even though the decree from Cyrus has just been quoted and despite indication of a shift to more positive circumstances, the reader must still be concerned that Darius might act in the same manner as Artaxerxes in Ezra 4 rather than Cyrus in Ezra 1. These concerns are quickly put to rest as Darius instructs Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai not to interfere with what the Judean community is doing and outlines the type of support that they are to receive (6:14). Darius does not just act like Cyrus, but adds to what Cyrus had already done for the Judean people.

Part of Darius's instructions to Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai is to offer protection for the people in their work on the temple. This demonstrates a complete reversal of the situation which the people experienced in Ezra 4:24. The Persian court does not just allow the people to continue working on the בונה imperative, but provides protection for them so

that there are no possible hindrances (6:11–12). The form of the protection offered by Darius is the pronouncement that anyone who interferes with the temple rebuilding project is to be impaled on a beam and his house is to be made a pile of rubble (6:11). This warning provides confidence to the people and the reader. It appears the *בנה* imperative will be completed immediately now that the full support of the Persian court has been given to the people.

Ezra 5:6–6:13 represents the second correspondence between King and the Persian officials concerning the Judean community. Rehum and Shimshai had previously sent a letter concerning the temple rebuilding project to Artaxerxes who instructed that the temple should not be rebuilt (4:8–23). The second correspondence reverses this decision of Artaxerxes. Hans Mallau has outlined a parallel structure for the two correspondences.<sup>210</sup> Stefan Matzal has since built on Mallau's study.<sup>211</sup> By comparing Ezra 4:8–24 with Ezra 5:1–6:18 Mallau is able to identify important differences. This first is the manner in which the authorities interact with the Judean community and present the case to the Persian king. He identifies that in Ezra 4:8–23 the Persian authorities present an argument against the Judean community, while in Ezra 5:6–17 an impartial description of the situation is provided.<sup>212</sup> Another difference is the characters who initiate the communication with the Persian king. In the first instance it is the "enemies of Judah" who cause the investigation to happen, while in the second instance it is the prophets

<sup>210</sup> Mallau, "Redaction," 70–71. His structure follows the pattern: conflict (4:1–3; 5:1–4), consequence (4:4–7; 5:5), copy of letter (4:8–11; 5:6–7), situation (4:12; 5:8), warning of consequence (4:13–14; 5:9–16), recommendation to search (4:15; 5:17a), renewed warning/ expectation of unprejudiced royal answer (4:16; 6:1–5), response (4:17–22; 6:6–12), order given (4:21–22; 6:7–12), final result (4:23–24; 6:13), stall/reconstruction of temple (4:24; 6:14–18).

<sup>211</sup> Matzal ("Structure," 566) delineates the structure, "Encounter (iv 1-5; v 1-5), Request (iv 6-16; v 6-17), Decree (iv 17-22; vi 1-12) and Enactment (iv 23-24; vi 13-15)." Matzal draws attention to verbal parallels and identifies similarities between the framing of Ezra 4:6–6:18, namely Ezra 4:1–5 and 6:19–22.

<sup>212</sup> Mallau, "Redaction," 73.

Haggai and Zechariah who provide the catalyst for the Persians to be involved.<sup>213</sup> The analysis done by Mallau draws attention to how the introduction of the prophets changes the situation for the Judean community and leads to the successful completion of the בנה imperative.

#### *iv. Conclusion*

The letters are quoted extensively by the narrator to allow the tension of the narrative to build concerning the response of the court and to invite the reader to experience the process with the Judean community. The narrator allows suspense to build as the reader must progress through the letters and does not receive a swift answer from the court. The time it takes for the response to be sent to the Persian court is mirrored by the length of the letter which Tattenai sends to Darius.

Ezra 5:6–17 is the letter of investigation which Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai send to Darius regarding the Judean community building the temple in Jerusalem. This letter provides a level of characterization of the people. The people are portrayed in a different manner than the previous section.<sup>214</sup> In Ezra 4 the people are silent and are not given an opportunity to give a defence for their actions. Rehum does not go to the people and give them a chance to account for their actions. This is different in the time of Darius as Tattenai goes to the people and asks them to answer a number of questions. It is unclear whether Tattenai heard about the temple and then decided that an investigation was needed or if he discovered the people working on the temple as part of a routine visit to

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<sup>213</sup> Mallau, "Redaction," 73.

<sup>214</sup> Blenkinsopp (*Ezra-Nehemiah*, 120) comments, "it also presents the Jews in their relations with the central government in a quite different light, a cast which may help to explain the present order of the material."

the Yehud community.<sup>215</sup> The questions Tattenai asks are straight forward and suggest appropriate investigation and not malicious intent. Nevertheless, their questions raise concerns for the reader about what would happen in this situation once the Persian court has become aware (5:3–4). Instead the narrator does not provide an answer in the body of his text as to how the people respond. The response from the people is included in the letter that Tattenai sends to Darius which the narrator quotes. They provide a clear account explaining why they were in Babylon to begin with and also leverage the proclamation given by Cyrus as authorizing them to continue to build the temple.

The search for the decree, as suggested by Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai, occurs immediately following the close of the letter. The plea of the people is heard immediately and verified without procrastination. This again shows that the people have control over the situation. However, it might be argued that the reason for the haste by the Persian officials was to make sure that if the people were not allowed to be building that they could stop the work on the temple before it was completed.

The author includes the official memorandum which was found in Ecbatana. The inclusion of the decree before the letter responding to the situation allows the reader to discover what is written at the same time that Darius does. Of course, the reader actually had this information at the beginning of the narrative (Ezra 1:2–4). Darius not only affirms that the people are allowed to be rebuilding the temple, but also provides them with resources and protection until the temple is complete.

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<sup>215</sup> Clines (*Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 84) comments further, “in the unsettled early years of Darius ... a provincial governor would keep his ear and eyes open for signs of incipient rebellion, and the temple under construction would have looked suspiciously like a fortress.”

### 5. *Completion of Expectation/Resolution of Problem: Ezra 6:14–22*

With Darius authorizing the temple to be rebuilt all that remains is for the people to follow through and complete the *בנה* imperative. This section will highlight the setting, characters, themes, and plot of Ezra 6:14–22 and how they influence the narrative of Ezra 1–6.

#### *i. Setting*

The spatial setting of the narrative returns to Jerusalem as Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai complete with diligence the command of Darius from the letter (6:13). The setting remains the temple area as the building is completed (6:16–18). The people dedicate the temple and it is the temple which hosts the celebration of festivals, both the Passover (6:19–21) and the Festival of Unleavened Bread (6:22)

The narrator establishes the temporal setting of the narrative by providing the date when the temple was completed, as the text reads, “And the temple was completed on the third day of the month of Adar in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king” (6:15).<sup>216</sup> This reveals that the historical time which the temple took to build was twenty five years. However the story of the temple rebuilding project is dramatically condensed as the narrative moves swiftly from Cyrus’s decree (539) to temple completion under Darius (514).<sup>217</sup>

#### *ii. Characters*

The main characters of this section are the people, but there is mention of the Assyrian kings in the final verse (6:22). The people are characterized as fulfilling the tasks which were assigned to them. There are no leadership figures given by name in the

<sup>216</sup> Adar is the twelfth month of the year. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 47.

<sup>217</sup> Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 47.

narrative describing the dedication of the temple and the celebration of the Passover. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah are mentioned again in 6:14, but no mention is made concerning Jeshua and Zerubbabel.<sup>218</sup> The leadership of the community is condensed into the title *שְׂבִי יְהוּדִיָּא* (elders of the Jews) along with the priests and the Levites who make preparation for the celebrations.

The people have been the focus through the narrative even though individual figures have emerged on different occasions. The focus has often been on the unity of the people and a connection to the past communities in Israel. This thread is continued in this section as the people make sure all Israel are represented in the dedication of the temple. Ezra 6:17 records the sacrifices that were presented for the temple's dedication. The last offering in the list makes clear that a sin offering was presented for each of the tribes of Israel. This reflects the intention of the author to include all of Israel in the celebration as the people complete the work of Yhwh. It is important to note that the people are united as the temple is completed. There is no disappointment in the people as the temple is dedicated or the Passover is celebrated. This was not the case when the foundation of the temple was laid (3:12). This time all the people are united and are not disappointed about the appearance of the temple. They are all celebrating the temple's completion and the Passover.

The narrator also identifies the people as the ones who returned from exile using the term *הַגּוֹלָה* in Ezra 6:19 and 20. The narrator has previously called the people *הַגּוֹלָה* in Ezra 1:11 and 2:1 and again draws attention to the fact that these people are the ones who returned from Babylon. This is explicitly clear in Ezra 6:21 as the text reads “sons of

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<sup>218</sup> This particularly surprising, especially in the background of Zech 4:6b–10a.

Israel, the ones who returned from the exile” (בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל הַשָּׁבִיִּים מִהַגְּלוּתָהּ). Being the people who returned from Babylon is a key distinguishing feature for them. However, the community opens themselves to include others (6:21), allowing “all the ones separated themselves from the uncleanness of the nations around them to seek Yhwh the God of Israel” (6:21). The people were clearly opposed to anyone joining them in the temple rebuilding project (4:3), but now after completion if one desires to join the גּוֹלָה community, they can do so by following after Yhwh and not following the practices of the surrounding people.

The prophets make their second appearance in the narrative of Ezra 1–6 at 6:14, forming an *inclusio* with Ezra 5:1–2 around the final key phase of reconstruction.

Williamson comments that it would “be a mistake to use v 14 as evidence for the length of ministry of Haggai and Zechariah. Their continuing assistance is simply assumed, as in 5:1, and they are included here to form an *inclusio* around the work of temple-building.”<sup>219</sup> Williamson is correct in the above statement, but such a position does not do justice to the effect that the inclusion of the prophets has at this point in the narrative. The narrator saw it fit to ignore any comment about Zerubbabel and Jeshua, although a reference to these two leaders would have formed an appropriate *inclusio* as well if the narrator had desired.<sup>220</sup> The narrator is noting that the prophets were responsible for

<sup>219</sup> Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 83.

<sup>220</sup> If one reads the brackets chiasmically there is a pattern with: foreign rulers (4:24), prophets (5:1), leaders, in this case Jeshua and Zerubbabel (5:2), Tattenai (5:3) which would correspond to Tattenai (6:13), leaders, this time the elders of the Jews (6:14), prophets (6:14), and then foreign rulers. Throntveit (*Ezra-Nehemiah*, 31) provides a similar structure although he does not include the references to the foreign rulers (4:24; 6:14). The second reference to the foreign rulers might better be understood referring back to 4:5–7 more than Ezra 4:24.



seeing the *בנה* imperative through to completion.<sup>221</sup> The reader is reminded that success was only possible because the prophets were looking over the situation. The prophets should be seen as involved from the time they inspired the people to return to work (5:1) until the temple is completed (6:14).

Ezra 6:14 and 6:22 provide excellent summary verses for the involvement of Yhwh and also for the kings of Persia. The narrator highlights that the success of the project came about because of the involvement of “the God of Israel” and “Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes, the kings of Persia” (6:14). Fensham provides two important comments, “this verse thus shows that God works through history and historical processes. It is therefore of importance to note that the name of God has been given priority in the list of names.”<sup>222</sup> The narrator makes sure to highlight that God is chief in the giving of the decrees and is not just going along with what the Persian rulers were doing. He was the one who raised up Cyrus and he was also the one to direct the prophets to speak to the community before Darius was even aware of the situation in Yehud. It is also made clear that he had not abandoned his people, as could have been deduced when Artaxerxes forced the temple rebuilding project to come to a close. The narrator states that Yhwh’s role in reversing the situation clearly in the last verse of the narrative as the text reads that the people rejoiced because Yhwh “turned the heart of the king of Assyria” ( *וְהִסֵּב לֵב* ; *מֶלֶךְ אֲשׁוּר עָלֵיהֶם*; 6:22). This reference provides the final characterization for the figure of the king in the Ezra 1–6 narrative. The term king of Assyria had not occurred previously in this narrative. Williamson comments that if this is not a scribal error then “we must

<sup>221</sup> Fensham (*Ezra and Nehemiah*, 92) argues, “It is probable, however, that they pronounced prophecies which were not taken up in the canonical books of the Bible. We must accept that not every pronouncement of a prophet has been transmitted to us.”

<sup>222</sup> Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 92.

regard the phrase as a stereotyped description of a foreign ruler, since Babylon inherited the Assyrian empire, and Persia the Babylonian.”<sup>223</sup> The narrator brings closure to a successful return by suggesting that the action started by the Assyrians in uprooting the Israelite people, which was carried through by the Babylonians in destroying the temple and exiling the Judean people, has been restored through the aid of Cyrus and Darius.

### *iii. Themes*<sup>224</sup>

God’s sovereignty is demonstrated in the Ezra 6:14–22 as the narrator notes that God’s presence was watching over the entire situation. As noted above 6:14 and 6:22 provide references to how Yhwh brought about the temple’s completion. It was through Yhwh’s command (6:14) and his turning of the heart of the king of Assyria that the people were able to finish the temple (6:22). This makes clear that the entire circumstances were watched over by Yhwh from the first moment in the text when Yhwh roused (עור) Cyrus’s heart until the completion of the narrative as Yhwh is praised for turning (סבב) the heart of the king of Assyria. As the narrative closes the reader is reminded that the reason the people have been successful is because of Yhwh their God.

As mentioned in the previous section on the characterization of the people, the Judean community connects to the past by making sure to include all of Israel in the celebration. This is clear by the people offering twelve goats for a sin offering (6:17). The narrator also connects the installation of the priests to what was written in the book of Moses (6:18). This demonstrates how the community wants to function in the same manner as the previous Exodus community. The actions they take with the priesthood is

<sup>223</sup> Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 85. See also Japhet, “Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel,” 74.

<sup>224</sup> More concerning the fulfillment of the themes will be discussed in the plot section.

an attempt to ensure success for the restoration of Israel after they have returned from Babylon.

Additionally, the people celebrate the Passover (6:19–21) and the Feast of Unleavened Bread (6:22) after the dedication was completed.<sup>225</sup> The people begin to celebrate the festivals which were celebrated by their forefathers now that the temple is complete. This highlights a connection to past communities and also suggests that life in Judah has returned to a state similar to what it was before the period of exile.<sup>226</sup>

#### *iv. Plot*

With no more impediments blocking the בנה imperative and with the full support of the Persian court behind them, the completion of temple appears to be imminent. After Darius's letter comes to a close (6:13), Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai react by completing all the orders given by Darius. The specific actions which they take are not provided by the narrator, but the phrase אָסְפְּרָנָא עֲבָדוּ (carried it out with diligence) suggests that all that was outlined by Darius in the decree was done for the people. When Cyrus issued the decree to the people in Ezra 1:2–4, the narrative described the fulfillment of those actions by the people immediately after they receive word (1:5). Likewise, after the letter from Darius the people succeed by completing the temple. The narrator highlights that all the actions were done through the watchful eye of the prophets as Ezra 6:14a reads “and the elders of the Jews were building and succeeding with the prophets Haggai the prophets and Zechariah son of Iddo” (וְשֹׁבֵי יְהוּדָיָא בְּנִין וּמְצַלְחִין בְּנְבוּאָתַת חַגִּי נְבִיאָה וְזַכְרְיָה) (בְּר־עֲדוּא). The investigation by Tattenai is bracketed by the ministry of the prophets. They

<sup>225</sup> See Becking, “Continuity and Community,” 260.

<sup>226</sup> This is the polemic of 1 Esdras as there is a rhetorical connection between the Passover celebrated by Josiah (1 Esd 1:1–22; 2 Kgs 23:21–23; 2 Chr 35:1–19) and one celebrated by the Judean community (1 Esd 7:10–11; Ezra 6:19–20).

did not prophesy and then disappear, but maintained a presence by helping the community until the temple was completed.

The prophets' message enables the community to continue building (בנה) which results in them succeeding (צלה; 6:14). The use of these verbs together reminds the reader of Ezra 5:8 where בנה and צלה were used together by Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai as they describe the actions of the people. This repetition of terms shows how the people were actively working on the בנה imperative throughout the investigation made by Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai and also makes clear that the temple will be completed. The next phrase highlights the fulfillment of the בנה imperative as the date on the temple's completion is given by the narrator (6:14b). In this phrase בנה is used for the final time in the narrative of Ezra 1–6. To mark the completion of the temple כלל (complete; finish) replaces צלה in the expression with בנה, highlighting the successful completion of the temple.

After the narrator assured the reader that the בנה imperative was successfully completed under the watchful eye of the prophets, a summary comment is provided which reads “and they built and completed according to the decree of the God of Israel and the decree of Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia” (וּבְנוּ וְשִׁבְּלוּ מִן־טַעַם אֱלֹהֵי) (6:14).<sup>227</sup> The decrees of Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes are clearly given in the narrative (1:2–4; 4:17–22; 6:1–12). The mention of the decree from Artaxerxes has caused some interpretation problems as “no one could suppose that in chap. 4 Artaxerxes did anything positive towards the Jews in

<sup>227</sup> Blenkinsopp (*Ezra-Nehemiah*, 128) comments, “in their own way the Masoretes have avoided the impression of parity between the two commands by different vocalization: *ta'am* for God's command, *f'ēm* for that of Cyrus.”

Jerusalem.”<sup>228</sup> Eskenazi does not look to Artaxerxes’ previous decree but looks for an action by Artaxerxes in the future. She argues that this is a signal to the reader that the work on the house of God is not complete, but will continue on in the reign of Artaxerxes, with a new decree, and continue until Neh 12:27–13:3.<sup>229</sup> Looking ahead into Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13 one must wonder where the decree from Artaxerxes concerning the house of God appears in the narrative. Artaxerxes provides Ezra with a decree, but even though the house of God is mentioned in the letter, it is not the focus of the decree. Nehemiah received permission to rebuild the wall, but there was no decree provided by the narrator which is curious if the narrator was being careful to connect these later actions with the “linchpin” of Ezra 6:14.

It is better to look backward in the narrative of Ezra 1–6 to understand Artaxerxes’ inclusion in this list of foreign rulers who helped the building of the temple. Even though Artaxerxes’ decree brought a negative result, the narrator acknowledges that this decree had an impact on the temple rebuilding project. It is a final reminder that the decree from Artaxerxes was nullified through the message of the prophets and the vindication of the people when Cyrus’s decree was discovered by Darius (6:2–5). Blenkinsopp comments, “the allusion to the prophets who sustained the work forms an inclusion with 5:1, and the same stylistic feature may help to explain the unexpected

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<sup>228</sup> Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 83.

<sup>229</sup> Eskenazi (*Prose*, 56) argues “One would be tempted to suppose that now the building project as a whole has been completed and Cyrus’s decree has been fulfilled. But Ezra 6:14 prevents this conclusion by specifying that there is more to come ... going up and building in response to Cyrus’s decree have not un their full course with the preceding events; they will continue and be completed by a decree of Artaxerxes, a decree that is yet to come.” Williamson (*Ezra, Nehemiah*, 83–84) provides a similar understanding as he comments, “It is much more probably that we have here an anticipation of Artaxerxes’ support for the temple and its services in 7:15–24, 27 (and perhaps 9:9), but whether by our author himself, or by a later glossator, it is difficult to tell.” Cf. Grabbe (*Ezra-Nehemiah*, 97) who offers this criticism, “also problematic is [Eskenazi’s] view that Ezra 6:14 summarizes and encapsulates the central event of the book. This may fit its content, but there seems to be no structural reason to focus on this particular verse, and its choice looks arbitrary.”

reference to Artaxerxes (cf. 4:7–8 at the beginning of the Aramaic section).”<sup>230</sup> In Ezra 4:5 the text reads, “and they hired counsellors against them to frustrate their plans all the days of Cyrus king of Persia and until the reign of Darius king of Persia” (וּסְכָרִים עָלֵיהֶם (יֹעֲצִים לְהַפֵּר עֲצָתָם כָּל-יְמֵי בּוֹרֶשׁ מֶלֶךְ פָּרַס וְעַד-מְלָכוּת דָּרְיוֹשׁ מֶלֶךְ-פָּרַס). Ezra 4:6 includes a reference to Xerxes and then proceeds to the time of Artaxerxes. Thus if the mention of Xerxes, who did not issue any decrees, is ignored then the order “Cyrus, Darius, Artaxerxes” is found in the text.<sup>231</sup> When the reader arrives at Ezra 6:14 the narrator is closing the section of the narrative by highlighting the completed decrees of Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes and provides their names in the order which Artaxerxes, and the opposition which brought the temple rebuilding project to a standstill, was introduced to the reader in Ezra 4:5–7. In Ezra 6:14 the narrator is ensuring that the reader understands that in addition to the completion of the temple, the decrees concerning the temple have also come to an end whether these are decrees which allowed the building to start, stop, or continue on the temple. The בנה imperative has been completed by the people and the narrative unit comes to a close as that fact is celebrated by the community. The narrative now returns to the Hebrew language after the temple has been dedicated (6:19). This highlights that no longer do the people need to be under the authority of the Persian empire since they have completed the task that was set out for them.

As the narrative comes to a close, the plot begins to unravel. Both the עלה imperative and the בנה imperative have been fulfilled and the people celebrate the completion of temple with its dedication. The Passover is also celebrated which brings

<sup>230</sup> Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 129.

<sup>231</sup> This interpretation does not explain the curious reference to Xerxes, but there are no decrees from Xerxes suggesting that the author was not required to close any off the decrees from the narrative.

about one of the main purposes of the *עלה* imperative and the *בנה* imperative, that is, to reintroduce the worship of Yhwh through the Festal calendar.<sup>232</sup> The Passover is an appropriate conclusion to the narrative because of the reference to Jeremiah at the beginning. It was proposed that Jer 16:14, 15 and 23:7, 8 could be seen as part of the initial reference to Jeremiah's prophetic work. The appropriate response for the people is to commemorate God's work by celebrating the same festival which was instituted when the people of Israel left Egypt. The narrator has used certain past events as a way to draw this community close to the past Israelite community. In Jer 16:14, 15 and 23:7, 8 the idea is that once they have returned they will praise Yhwh for bringing them back, but this time they will not be celebrating the return from Egypt. When they celebrate they will be celebrating the return from the land of the north and thus a Second Exodus. Then the people follow the celebration of the Passover with the Festival of Unleavened Bread.<sup>233</sup>

### 6. Conclusion

In Ezra 5:1–6:22 the prophets Haggai and Zechariah direct the people to begin rebuilding for the second time. The two prophets speak to the people and then Zerubbabel and Jeshua, the same leaders from Ezra 3, refocus their attention on the temple. The rebuilding goes ahead despite the fact that the decree from Artaxerxes has not been rescinded. The rebuilding phase proceeds but there is some opposition in the form of the Persian officials Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai. Opposition from the enemies of Judah and Benjamin disappears. Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai send a letter to the officials in Persia requesting an investigation concerning the right of the people of Judah to rebuild

<sup>232</sup> See Becking, "Continuity," 260.

<sup>233</sup> Williamson (*Ezra, Nehemiah*, 85); cf. Exod 12:15; Lev 23:6.

the temple. The officials in Persia discover Cyrus's decree and affirm that the people of Judah have every right to be rebuilding the temple. The people then finished the temple. After dedicating the temple the Passover is celebrated and the story comes to a close.

The moment the prophets take control of the situation, events begin to be favourable for the Judean community. It is the prophets' involvement which brings resolution to the narrative. In Ezra 1–6 there are two references to the work of Haggai and Zechariah in the process of the temple being rebuilt. The first reference is Ezra 5:1 when the temple rebuilding has been stopped by the Persian court and the second reference is Ezra 6:14 as the temple reaches its point of completion. These two references bracket two letters which are quoted in the text. The first letter is from Tattenai, the governor of the Trans-Euphrates, and Shethar-Bozenai, another official of the Trans-Euphrates, sent to Darius the King. The second letter is the response that the Darius provides to the leaders. This narrative inclusion reveals the watchful and protective influence the prophets maintain over the temple rebuilding project.<sup>234</sup> They are there after the temple rebuilding project has been halted and are the voices which encourage the people to return to the work that they had started. They are there watching over the building from the time the letter from Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai is sent to Darius and the letter from Darius is returned. They remain there as the people are building, ensuring that the work on the temple is completed.

There are a number of positive actions that take place between the references to the prophets. This suggests that throughout the time the prophets were on site in the Judean community they helped to bring about the changes which enabled the community

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<sup>234</sup> Williamson (*Ezra, Nehemiah*, 83) suggests it would “be a mistake to use v 14 as evidence for the length of ministry of Haggai and Zechariah. Their continued assistance is simply assumed, as in 5:1, and they are included here to form an *inclusion* around the work of temple-building.”



to be successful. These actions are seen in the characterization of the Judean community, the Persian officials, and Darius the king. There is also the continuation of the key themes which were laid down in Ezra 1:1–4:24 that helped bring the narrative to a conclusion.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

#### *1. Introduction*

This study set out to analyze Ezra 1–6 as a narrative with close attention to the setting, characters, themes, and plot. It was proposed that the introduction of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah represented the turning point in the narrative (5:1). Their action of prophesying to the Judean community initiates a return to the temple rebuilding project. This section will synthesize the analysis of the previous chapters to highlight the role of prophets in the narrative of Ezra 1–6. The section headings from the previous discussion will serve as the guidelines here as well; setting, characters, themes, and plot.

#### *2. Review of Narrative Analysis*

##### *i. Setting*

Setting is the most difficult of the categories to see the prophets' influence in the Ezra 1–6 narrative. Nevertheless, the narrator uses both the temporal setting and spatial setting to highlight the role of the prophets.

The temporal setting begins with the first year of Cyrus's reign over the Persian empire (Ezra 1:1). Cyrus immediately sets out to accomplish the task of building the temple and the people respond to his decree. However, the fact that the narrative is dated according to the reign of a foreign monarch immediately shows the reader that the situation for the Judean people is different than in previous times. As actions in the narrative occur, the temporal setting appears to follow a consecutive chronology without

considerable gaps in the time of the narrative. The people leave Babylon and move to Judah and then to Jerusalem. Against the background of history, the return, which appeared to have happened immediately, actually only occurred much later.<sup>235</sup> The narrator arranges the material not in chronological order, but in an arrangement which will best advance his ideology. This is especially clear as the reader enters the Aramaic part of the Ezra 1–6 narrative (4:8–6:18). The structure of the temporal setting of the narrative highlights the important position of the prophets. The narrator thrusts the time of the narrative into the future by outlining an occurrence from the time period of Artaxerxes. This episode shows the severity of the action taken against the Judean community. However this opposition did not happen in 520 when Haggai and Zechariah would have spoken to the community.<sup>236</sup> The narrator arranges the narrative not in chronological order, but in a manner in which the prophets' role is seen to have the most dramatic influence (5:1). Had the events described in Ezra 4:6–24 been placed after the prophets intervention (5:1), the appropriate chronological order, then the work of Haggai and Zechariah would not be as significant.

The narrator also makes sure to draw attention to the time at which certain significant actions took place in the life of the community. The people assembling together in the seventh month (3:1) and the people laying the foundation for the temple in the second month (3:8) demonstrate how the narrator is intentional about the dates when the Judean community acts. These dates link the action of the Judean community with the past communities of Israel.

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<sup>235</sup> See above pg. 51 esp fn. 138.

<sup>236</sup> See dates in Hag 1:1, 15; 2:1, 10, 20 and Zech 1:1, 7; 7:1.

The initial spatial setting is established as Persia is the place where Cyrus issues a decree concerning the temple in Judah. The spatial setting shifts as the people make their return first to Judah and then to Jerusalem (1:11; 2:1–3:1). From there the narrative remains in the Jerusalem and the temple area until Ezra 4:6. Beginning with Ezra 4:7 and until Ezra 6:14 there is a cyclical movement between Jerusalem and Persia as letters are exchanged between Persian officials and the Persian king (4:8–16; 4:17–4:23; 5:6–17; 6:1–13). Since the narrator has included the letters into the narrative the reader is able to experience the reading of the letter, and this results in a sense of movement as the letters go from official to king and then back. It is within this cycle that Haggai and Zechariah speak to the community (5:1) and they are also present when the locational turmoil ceases (6:14). After the final letter from Darius is received, while the prophets are seemingly still involved in encouraging the people, the spatial setting no longer shifts and remains in Jerusalem as the people celebrate the completion of the temple.

In both the temporal setting and spatial setting of the narrative the prophets Haggai and Zechariah are drawn to the forefront, highlighting their climatic role in the reconstruction of the temple.

### *ii. Characters*

The prophets' influence in the narrative is clearly seen in the changes which occur in the three central character groups of the Ezra 1–6 narrative.<sup>237</sup> These characters are the people, the opposition against the Judean community, and the kings of Persia. Mention will also be made concerning the characterization of the prophets.

The people are the main characters in the narrative of Ezra 1–6. No single figure leads the people throughout the entire narrative, but different figures take charge to

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<sup>237</sup> Yhwh's role in the narrative will be discussed in the themes section.

support the people in the return and in the temple rebuilding project. Sheshbazzar was the leader in the return of the people from Babylon to Jerusalem (1:8, 11), but he does not factor in the temple rebuilding project until the people make reference to his initiation of the project (5:14, 16), something which is not recorded in the narrative of Ezra 1. Jeshua and Zerubbabel are with the people as they return to Jerusalem (2:1) and help to begin the work on the temple (3:2). They are also the ones who are leading the people after the prophets Haggai and Zechariah motivate the people to return to the temple rebuilding project (5:1). However, neither Jeshua nor Zerubbabel is considered present by the narrator when the temple is completed. The fact that there is not a consistent individual hero in the narrative identifies the people as a group as the central character in the narrative. They are the ones on whom the narrator focuses throughout Ezra 1–6. The narrator also draws attention to the people by quoting the long list of those who returned to Judah from Babylon (2:1–70). The names of the people help the reader identify with the individuals who returned.

The character of the people develops as the narrative moves forward and a dramatic change occurs after the prophets appear in the narrative (5:1). At the beginning of the narrative the people appeared strong as they immediately responded to the decree of Cyrus. There is no delay in the people's response as they faithfully prepare to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple as God moves their hearts (1:5). After the people assemble to begin the work, opposition rises up against them. The people manage to succeed in establishing the altar on its former place, but they are fearful of the people who surrounded them (3:3). This opposition is a foreshadowing of more severe opposition which the people will undergo in the future. The people are able to lay the foundation of the temple without opposition, but it is immediately after they celebrate the completion of

the temple's foundation that the enemies of Judah and Benjamin attempt to frustrate the people's work on the temple. The enemies initially ask to be involved in the project, but the leaders of the Judean community do not allow them to participate as they make clear that Cyrus instructed the Judean community to build the temple (4:1–3). After the enemies are not allowed to participate in the temple rebuilding project they focus their attention on disrupting the work that the Judean community is doing on the temple. They accomplish this goal by hiring counselors (4:4–5). Then the enemies lodge accusations against the Judean community and the Persian court becomes involved. Throughout this process the Judean community is unable to respond in any matter, but is under the complete control of the Persian court. Rehum and Shimshai characterize the Judean people as being wicked and rebellious suggesting that if the temple structure is completed then the people will not pay taxes, tribute or duty to the Persian court (4:12–13).<sup>238</sup> The people are unable to defend themselves from this accusation either made by Rehum and Shimshai, or by their enemies, in the letter which is sent to Artaxerxes.

The situation changes after the prophets come into the picture both in terms of the fear which the people experience while building and the people's ability to defend themselves in front of the Persian court (5:1). Immediately following Haggai and Zechariah prophesying to the people, Jeshua and Zerubbabel lead the people in the temple rebuilding project. The people's work is greeted with concern from the Persian official as Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai visit the site of the temple. Even though Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai go and investigate the work that the people are doing on the temple the people are not stopped (5:5). This is attributed to the fact that the "eyes of God" are upon the people. Even though the "eye of God" might not be the prophet per se, it is clear that

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<sup>238</sup> The text reads "city and walls."

the support of the prophets has caused a dramatic change in the situation. In Ezra 3:3 the people are said to be fearful of the people surrounding them. In 5:3–4 the narrator never mentions any fear or hesitation from the people after they are visited by the Persian officials. The message of the prophets has empowered the people so that they can persevere and complete the *בנה* imperative.

It is also clear that the prophets have influenced the narrative by the material included in the letter to Darius from Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai. In the previous correspondence with the Persian court the people were not able to defend themselves. This is not the case in Ezra 5:7–17 as the people's response to Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai's questions makes up the majority of the letter. The fact the Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai do not even summarize the people's response highlights the renewed determination which the people have since the prophets entered the narrative. The people are able to plead their case concerning why they should be able to continue building the temple. Even though it is not the prophet speaking to the authorities the result of the initial prophetic message is having lasting effects.

Similarly, the key role of prophets can be seen in how the people celebrate their achievements. The people celebrate the foundation of the temple being complete, but the entire community is not joyous. Ezra 3:12 records the disappointment which some of the older priests, Levites, and family heads who had remembered the first temple. Others shouted for joy as this initial stage of success. Even though the *בנה* imperative is moving ahead there is still disappointment and not complete joy throughout the Judean community. After the temple is completed this is no longer the case. All the people celebrate the temple's completion and there is not mention of a person who is

disappointed in the success of the community. The community celebrates the temple's dedication with joy (6:16) and then celebrates the Feast of Unleavened Bread for seven days with joy (6:22).

As touched upon in the discussion concerning the change in the Judean community, the opposition against the people changes after the prophets enter the narrative of Ezra 1–6. The opposition makes their first appearance in the narrative passively as the narrator simply refers to the Judean community's fear of the people surrounding them (3:3). However, it is not clear what caused the Judean community to be fearful as the altar was being laid. After the foundation of the temple is celebrated the opposition again appears in the narrative, but this time performs actions against the Judean community. In Ezra 4:2 the “enemies of Judah and Benjamin” offer to help with the temple rebuilding project. When the Judean community rejects this offer of support, the enemies set out to frustrate the work of the Judean community. The opposition is diligent in their task as Ezra 4:4–6 outlines the course of action taken by the enemies. The opposition successfully causes the temple rebuilding project to be stopped through the aid of Artaxerxes the king. They were the ones who hired the counselors to work against the Judean community. The Persian court siding with the accusations made the opposition becomes the main point of struggle for the temple rebuilding project before Haggai and Zechariah enter the narrative and bring about a reversal to the situation (5:1). From this point onward there are no enemies who work against the *בונה* imperative. The appearance of the prophets coincides with the disappearance of the enemies from the temple rebuilding project. While it is the Judean people who are forced to stop working on the



temple in chapter 4, it is their opposition which is frustrated in chapters 5–6 after the appearance of the prophets.

The first verse of the narrative introduces an important figure into the narrative of Ezra 1–6. The position of the king is influential for the success and failure of the people. Cyrus, fulfilling the prophetic words of Jeremiah, issues a decree to the people to go up and build the temple. Cyrus also helps the people by mandating support for the people from the neighbours of the people who will return (1:4). Cyrus also brings out the articles which were previously taken from the temple by Nebuchadnezzar. These actions suggest that the Persian court is supporting the temple rebuilding project. This support does not last though as Artaxerxes stops the temple rebuilding project from continuing after the enemies of the Judean community cause accusations to be made (4:6–24). After the prophets speak to the community and once the community has begun working on the temple again the Persian authorities take notice and consult Darius, who is now the king. Darius's response to the people demonstrates that the Persian court will once again support the temple rebuilding project. Darius does not only allow the people to continue their rebuilding, but exceeds the support given by Cyrus. Darius orders that the expenses for the temple reconstruction will be paid from the royal treasury. Protection is also provided by Darius for the Judean community ensuring that there will be no further opposition.

It appears that when the prophets and the court are working together, the people experience success. Jeremiah's prophetic words anticipated Cyrus's decree to allow the people to leave Babylon and build the temple. Haggai and Zechariah speak to the people to rebuild the temple and then the Persian court is persuaded to allow and then invest in the temple rebuilding project. Such benevolence from the Persian court, despite

Artaxerxes stalling the project, allows the narrator to thank the Persian court for their support as the narrative comes to a close.

The prophets Haggai and Zechariah are mentioned twice in the narrative of Ezra 1–6 (5:1; 6:14). The narrator does not provide much characterization for the prophets, but does identify one significant aspect. The Haggai and Zechariah prophesied “in the name of the God of Israel” (5:1) and are called “prophets of God” (5:2). They are to be considered as agents of Yhwh and their prophesying to the community represents an intervention from Yhwh.

The manner in which the narrator characterizes the people, the opposition, and the Persian court before and after Haggai and Zechariah enter the narrative highlights the importance of the appearance of the prophets in Ezra 5:1.

### *iii. Themes*

The prophets highlight the fulfillment of the themes in the narrative. The development of the themes comes to completion through the work of the prophets in the narrative. This is true of the theme which highlights the sovereignty of God throughout every circumstance and also of the theme which connects this Judean community with the past Israelite people.

God’s sovereignty is displayed at the beginning of the narrative when, fulfilling the prophetic message of Jeremiah, Cyrus decrees that the Judean population should return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. In this initial section Yhwh and the Persian court are working together to aid in the people’s return until 4:6–24. There are serious questions about the sovereignty of God in the narrative of Ezra 1–6 because of the “opposition” against the Judean community and the fact that the Persian court stops the temple rebuilding project. There is no mention of Yhwh in Ezra 4:6–24 and it appears

that he is no longer supporting the people. However, once the prophets enter the narrative concern over Yhwh's presence in the narrative is removed. The prophets are quite clearly the agents of Yhwh as they speak "in the name of the God of Israel" (5:1). Additionally, after this point, the "eye of their God" is then focused on the community (5:5). From the point the prophets entered the narrative until the temple is completed it appears Yhwh is supporting the project.

Throughout the narrative of Ezra 1–6 there have been connections established between the Judean community which returned from exile in Babylon and Israelites from past communities. The opening phrase of the narrative highlights that it was a prophet who identified that the people would return to Jerusalem after being exiled in Babylon (1:1). The list of people returning (2:1–70), the description of the return of the articles from the first temple (1:7–11; 6:14), and the depiction of the manner in which they built the altar and the temple (3:3; 3:7–11) contribute to this connection. Additionally when the altar is laid and when the temple is completed the people begin to celebrate the religious festivals in the same manner as their ancestors (3:3–6; 6:19–22). The prophets do not bring resolution to this theme as no reversal is necessary, but they contribute to the development of this theme as the narrative progresses. The prophets were the mouth pieces of Yhwh throughout the time of the previous Israelite communities and are again in the post-captivity time with Haggai and Zechariah.

#### *iv. Plot*

The expectation of the narrative begins with Cyrus's decree in Ezra 1:2–4. As the plot develops conflicts which disrupt the success of the *עלה* imperative and the *בנה* imperative create points of tension in the narrative. The tension mounts as the people

experience more opposition and finally the tension in the narrative reaches its climax when Artaxerxes stops the temple rebuilding project (4:17–23). It is only by the prophets' intervention that the tension in the plot begins to decrease.

The narrative of Ezra 1–6 reports the journey of the Judean community to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the temple which was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. The people were allowed to return to Jerusalem because Cyrus issued a decree allowing the Judean community to leave Babylon and return to life in their former land, what has been called the *עלה* imperative in this study. Cyrus also instructed the people to rebuild the temple, what has been called the *בנה* imperative (1:2–4). Cyrus's actions were done to fulfill the word of Yhwh spoken to the prophet Jeremiah (1:1). These two imperatives identify the two fundamental expectations of the narrative. As the story develops the people will work to fulfill Cyrus's decree by completing the *עלה* imperative through successfully returning to Jerusalem and by completing the *בנה* imperative through rebuilding the temple. The success of these two expectations represents the goal of the narrative.

The focus of the narrative is first on the *עלה* imperative as the people travel from Babylon to their own cities (2:70) and then on to Jerusalem (3:1). The people are able to complete this part of Cyrus's decree without opposition. Frustration is limited to a group of priests who could not provide proof of their lineage. As attention shifts to the *בנה* imperative the narrator provided a narrative bridge between the *עלה* imperative and the *בנה* imperative as provisions for the temple rebuilding project are outlined (2:68–69) before the people assembly in Jerusalem (3:1). This reveals the interconnectedness of the two imperatives.

With the *עלה* imperative fulfilled, the people focus their attention on the *בנה* imperative. They assembled in Jerusalem with the purpose of rebuilding the temple (3:1). It does not take long before there is opposition from outside groups (3:3). The people establish the altar, but they are fearful to do so because of the people around them. The narrative progresses as more work is done on the temple, but the opposition against them grows and their enemies work against them to frustrate the work on the temple (4:1–5). The enemies of the Judean community are successful in their opposition as the Persian court becomes involved and forces work on the temple to stop (4:6–24). It is at this point that the tension in the narrative reaches its climax. The people are not allowed to work on completing the *בנה* imperative. Yhwh had been influential in the narrative up to this point, but now it appears as if he has abandoned the people. It is when the situation seems hopeless that the prophets Haggai and Zechariah come on the scene and motivate the people to return to the temple rebuilding project (5:1).

After the prophets speak to the people there is an immediate response from the community. The people begin to work again on the temple. The Persian court again is involved as Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai investigate the work which the people are doing. This brings the narrative tension up again, but this time, after the investigation is carried out by the Persian court, support is given to the people for their work on the temple (6:1–13). The provisions offered by Darius exceed those of Cyrus and Darius also offers protection for the people (6:11–12). The temple is completed and the *בנה* imperative fulfilled as the people celebrate their success (6:14–22).

The narrative of Ezra 1–6 incorporates two languages: Aramaic and Hebrew. This shift in language causes the point of view to shift from a Judean situation (Hebrew) to a

Persian situation (Aramaic). When the people begin to experience the harshest persecution the language switches from Hebrew to Aramaic (4:8). The prophets enter the narrative after this situation, but the language does not immediately switch back into Hebrew. The prophets appear with this Aramaic narrative world dominated by the Persian court and affect the circumstances from this vantage point (5:1; 6:14). It is only after the temple is complete and people are celebrating the Passover that the language returns to Hebrew (6:18).

The plot of the narrative should be understood in the context of the dual imperatives given by Cyrus in Ezra 1:2–4, the *עלה* imperative and the *בנה* imperative. By the close of the narrative both imperatives initiated in Cyrus's decree have been fulfilled by the people. However emphasis was drawn to the *בנה* imperative because this imperative is the one where there is narrative tension. The fact that the *עלה* imperative is successful without problems shifts rhetorical weight to the *בנה* imperative. It is the prophets Haggai and Zechariah who enable the *בנה* imperative to be completed. The intervention by the prophets is the turning point in the narrative and must be seen as the climactic point. The dual reference should be seen as highlighting the beginning of the resolution (5:1) and fulfillment of the resolution (6:14) for the *בנה* imperative.

This study analyzed the Ezra 1–6 narrative focusing on the setting, characters, themes and plot. It was proposed that the reference to Haggai and Zechariah provided the moment toward resolution in the narrative. Through the analysis of this study it has become clear that the intervention of the prophets in the Ezra 1–6 narrative is the catalyst through which the people are able to complete the temple rebuilding project.

### 3. Implications

In the introduction of this study it was noted that few narrative studies have been conducted on the book of Ezra or the book of Nehemiah. A critical analysis of Eskenazi's work on Ezra-Nehemiah revealed that, although her work was a tremendous stride forward for appreciating the narrative value of these works, it appeared she forces a plot structure onto Ezra-Nehemiah to bring the two works together. By identifying the objective of the narrative as being the *עלה* imperative and the *בנה* imperative given by Cyrus in Ezra 1:2–4, and the climactic point in the narrative as the introduction of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, it becomes clear that Ezra 1–6 is a complete narrative unit not dependant on Ezra 7– Nehemiah 13 for its resolution.

Future research on Ezra-Nehemiah needs to consider how a separate discernable plot structure for Ezra 1–6 influences the reading of Ezra-Nehemiah. The phrase “after these things” (*וְאַחַר הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה*; Ezra 7:1) connects the Ezra 1–6 narrative with Ezra 7–10 which at some point was joined to Neh 1–13. It is unclear whether Ezra 1–6 was joined only to Ezra 7–10 or an already formed Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13 corpus. The influence of Ezra 1–6 on the presentation of Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13 should be considered, but from the vantage point of Ezra 1–6 being a distinct unit.

It also appears that the narrative of Ezra 1–6 displays certain links to Chronicles. Despite this Ezra 1–6 does not depend on Chronicles for the development of the plot. When considering the overlapping of material between 2 Chr 36:22–23 and Ezra 1:1–3a it is interesting to consider where the break happens. The last word of 2 Chr 36:23 reads “and let him go up” (*וַיַּעַל*). In the introduction this jussive verb was identified as being the initiation of the *עלה* imperative for the Judean community to go up to

Jerusalem. In Ezra 1:3 the text goes on to provide the *בנה* imperative (וּבִנְיָהוּ). The emphasis of the closing line in 2 Chr 36 remains focused on the return of the people and does not draw attention to the building of the temple. While this alone does not prove or disprove the theories concerning the composition of Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, it identifies different motivations for including the decree from Cyrus into the narratives of these works. It is clear that further studies focused on Ezra-Nehemiah must take into consideration the distinctive plot structures outlined in these works. Nevertheless the link which Ezra 1–6 serves as a bridge between Chronicles and Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13 must be considered.

#### *4. Conclusion*

In all these sections it has become apparent that the introduction of the prophets is the climatic point in the narrative of Ezra 1–6 (5:1; 6:14). It is through their work that the people are able to complete the task assigned to them by Cyrus (1:2–4). It is precisely when all hope seemed to be lost (4:24) that the prophets, in the name of the God of Israel, speak to the people motivating them to finish the restoration process by completing the temple.



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