

THESE ARE THE DAYS OF THE PROPHETS:

A LITERARY ANALYSIS OF EZRA 1–6

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Summary

*This study outlines a plot structure for Ezra 1–6 based upon the **עלה** ('lh) imperative and **בנה** (bnh) imperative given in the decree by Cyrus (Ezra 1:2-4) and argues that they provide a clear framework for the narrative. The Judaeans are able to accomplish the **עלה** imperative without conflict, but the **בנה** imperative is not completed as easily. The temple rebuilding project reaches a standstill in Ezra 4:24. At this point the prophets Haggai and Zechariah intervene and become the catalyst for the resolution of the **בנה** imperative and the narrative as a whole (5:1; 6:14). The narrative is structured to demonstrate that YHWH is the one who enables the temple rebuilding project to succeed through the action of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah over against the Persian kings.¹*

1. Introduction

The structure and outline of Ezra 1–6 has often been debated without a consensus view emerging. Often the plot of Ezra 1–6 is subsumed into the plot of Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13 without full consideration for structure of the temple rebuilding project and specifically the powerful role of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah.² Focusing specifically on Ezra 1–6,

¹ I would like to thank Mark J. Boda for his helpful comments and encouragement. All errors remain my own.

² See Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah* (SBLMS, 36; Atlanta: Scholars, 1988): esp. 43, where she argues 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'. 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. For

Lisbeth Fried has argued that the structure of the text fits the pattern for temple building projects in the ancient Near East with some revisions 'to conform to Aristotelian rules of tragic drama'.³ However, what has not yet been explored is the manner in which the verbs **עלה** and **בנה** as given in the decree of Cyrus provide a clear structure for the Ezra 1–6 narrative. With this structure in place emphasis is drawn to the role of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah in the completion of the temple rebuilding project.⁴

2. Structure of Ezra 1–6

2.1 Imperatives 1:1-4

The structure of Ezra 1–6 is clearly graphed around the use of the two key verbs in the chapter, namely **עלה** (go up) and **בנה** (build). The verbs are the same as those employed in the decree from Cyrus that begins the narrative. These two verbs are used throughout the narrative as a way to mark the progress and eventual success of the directives given by Cyrus.

The expectation of the Ezra 1–6 narrative is outlined in the first four verses. Ezra 1:1-4 can be divided into two parts (1:1, 2-4). Ezra 1:1 highlights that the events of the narrative are in accordance with the prophetic message of Jeremiah and initiated by YHWH. The narrator reports that Cyrus was roused (**עורר**) by YHWH and that it was YHWH who motivates Cyrus to issue the decree. Cyrus sees himself as the one appointed to build the temple for YHWH (1:2).

Eskenazi, because of her understanding of what the house of God represents, the decree is not fulfilled until the events of Neh. 8:1–13:31. See also Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, 'The Structure of Ezra-Nehemiah and the Integrity of the Book', *JBL* 107 (1988): 641-56.

³ Lisbeth Fried, 'Deus ex Machina and Plot Construction in Ezra 1–6' in *Prophets and Prophecy in Ancient Israelite Historiography*, ed. Mark J. Boda and Lissa M. Wray Beal (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2013): 189-207, esp. 207. See also Lisbeth Fried, 'The Land Lay Desolate: Conquest and Restoration in the Ancient Near East' in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period*, ed. Oded Lipschits and Joseph Blenkinsopp (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2006): 21-54; Lisbeth Fried, 'Temple Rebuilding in Ezra-Nehemiah' in *From the Foundations to the Crenellations: Essays on Temple Building in the Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible*, ed. Mark J. Boda and James Novotny (AOAT, 366; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2010): 319-38.

⁴ Fried, 'Deus ex Machina', 189-207 also draws attention to the role of the prophets but in a different manner.

The decree from Cyrus sets out the expectation for the Judean community and expresses two imperatives which form the goal of the narrative (Ezra 1:2-4).⁵ These are the **עלה** imperative and the **בנה** imperative. These imperatives are given in Ezra 1:3b as the text reads, ‘and let him go up (**עלה**) to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and let him build (**בנה**) the house of YHWH God of Israel. He is the God who is in Jerusalem’.⁶ These imperatives represent the two problems for the narrative of Ezra 1–6, specifically the exile from the land promised to the patriarchs and the destroyed temple.⁷ Cyrus’ decree allows the people to rectify these problems and functions as the expectation for the narrative. The completion of the plot will be signalled by the fulfilment of the **עלה** and **בנה** imperatives.

2.2 *The עלה Imperative 1:5–3:1*⁸

Ezra 1:5 serves as a bridge verse between the commands given by Cyrus and the action of those who decide to respond. It is reported that many immediately arise to go up and to build the temple; they are all the ones who were roused by YHWH (1:5). It is clear that YHWH is involved in motivating both Cyrus and the people and the interconnectedness of the actions is connected through the verb **עור**, which is used in Ezra 1:1 and 1:5. Ezra 1:5 also identifies that the people understood the purpose of Cyrus’ decree as the verbs **עלה** and **בנה** are now recast in the indicative to describe the people’s response.

The success of the **עלה** imperative, which occurs without considerable tension, is reported in Ezra 1:5–3:1. The people return and gather together in Jerusalem (3:1). The verb **עלה** has an important role in this section as it describes the movement of the people (1:11) and also characterises them as a people (2:1, 59).

⁵ Grammatically the verbs that are used by Cyrus are not imperatives but jussives. However, their function in the narrative is to create expectation for the people to return and rebuild the temple.

⁶ All translations are my own.

⁷ Eskenazi, *Prose*, 42-43 outlines how Cyrus’ decree is an ‘objective defined’. However, she forces this objective to remain the expectation of the narrative in Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13. Fried, ‘*Deus ex Machina*’, 198, considers Ezra 1–2 to form the prologue of the narrative.

⁸ There is an overlap in the **עלה** and **בנה** imperatives. The **עלה** imperative was not entirely completed until the people settled in Jerusalem as per the 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 ‘heads of families’ (2:68).

2.3 The *בנה* Imperative 2:68–6:22

The main focus of the narrative of Ezra 1–6 is not the return of the people but the rebuilding of the temple.⁹ This is demonstrated by the repeated use of the verb *בנה*, which is used thirty-one times in Ezra 1–6.¹⁰ The *בנה* imperative is not completed with the same ease with which the *עלה* imperative was completed. The Judaeen community is confronted with several obstacles that prohibit the quick and successful completion of the temple rebuilding project.

The initial moment of tension occurs while the Judaeen community set up the altar. They do this only with apprehension being concerned about the people of the land (3:3).¹¹ The fear of the Judaeen community is realised in Ezra 4:1-24. Although the beginning of the section relates how the ‘enemies’ approached the Judaeen community offering to help rebuild the temple, the text clearly characterises them as being adversaries and the subsequent events appear to justify the decision of the leaders to reject the offer from the ‘enemies’. It is reported that the temple rebuilding project reached a standstill until the time of Darius. The events analogous to the situation experienced by the Judaeen community are then presented in Ezra 4:6-24.¹² Although historically

⁹ It is also interesting to note that the list in Ezra 2:2b-63 draws attention to the temple. The list is divided 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 who could not prove they were descendants of Israel (2:59-63).

¹⁰ This includes both the Hebrew and Aramaic roots of *בנה*.

¹¹ The opposition is caused by groups with different titles (‘people of the land’ 3:3; ‘enemies of Judah and Benjamin’ 4:1, and ‘people around them’ 4:5) even though they all fill the same role of opposing the people who are rebuilding the temple. See Baruch Halpern, ‘A Historiographic Commentary on Ezra 1-6: A Chronological Narrative and Dual Chronology in Israelite Historiography’ in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Interpreters*, ed. William H. Propp et al. (Biblical and Judaic Studies, 1; Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1990): 81-142, esp. 109-110; Lisbeth Fried, ‘The *‘am hā’āreṣ* in Ezra 4:4 and Persian Imperial Administration’ in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period*, ed. Oded Lipschits and Manfred Oeming (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2006): 123-45.

¹² Ezra 4:8–6:18 is written in Aramaic. For recent discussion concerning the Aramaic section in Ezra see Bill T. Arnold, ‘The Use of Aramaic in the Hebrew Bible: Another Look at Bilingualism in Ezra and Daniel’, *JNSL* 22.2 (1996): 1-16; Richard Steiner, ‘Bishlam’s Archival Search Report in Nehemiah’s Archive: Multiple Introductions and Reverse Chronological Orders as Clues to the Origin of the Aramaic Letters in Ezra 4–6’, *JBL* 125 (2006): 641-85, esp. 675; Joshua Berman, ‘The Narratorial Voice of the Scribes of Samaria: Ezra IV 8-VI 18 Reconsidered’, *VT* 56.3 (2006): 313-26; Joshua Berman, ‘The Narratological Purpose of Aramaic Prose in Ezra 4.8–6.18’, *Aramaic Studies* 5.2 (2007): 165-91; H. G. M. Williamson, ‘The Aramaic Documents in Ezra Revisited’, *JTS* 59 (2008): 41-62.

there is considerable tension in the flow of the remainder of Ezra 4, the present synchronic reading is not concerned with the historical chronology of the events, but rather the rhetorical presentation of the narratives.¹³ For the Ezra 1–6 narrative the frustration of the temple rebuilding project during the reign of Artaxerxes becomes the action that causes the tension in the narrative to reach its climax. Artaxerxes declares that the rebuilding must be stopped.

It is at this moment that the prophets Haggai and Zechariah are introduced. It is their prophetic message that causes the Judaeen community to return to work on the temple (5:1-2). Their action brings immediate results. Zerubbabel and Jeshua lead the people as they return to the temple rebuilding project. This action is greeted with concern by the Persian officials who immediately investigate whether the people have the right to be working on the temple. The investigation reveals that the Judaeen community was given permission from Cyrus to rebuild the temple. Darius supports the project and the Judaeen community is able to bring it to completion.

The end and success of the temple rebuilding project is clearly presented in Ezra 6:14 with reference to the message from prophets that enabled the community to continue building (בנה) and resulted in their succeeding (צלח; 6:14). In Ezra 6:14b בנה is used for the final time in the narrative of Ezra 1–6. To mark the completion of the temple, the verb כלל (complete, finish) replaces צלח in Ezra 6:14b highlighting the success of the temple rebuilding project. Ezra 6:14 begins with ‘building and succeeding’ (בנין ומצלחין) and then moves to ‘and they built and they completed’ (ובנו ושכללו). It is also important to note that participles are now replaced by verbs in the suffix conjugation making clear the difference between continuing action and completed

¹³ Historically, 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 be Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes and then Artaxerxes. For recent discussion see A. Philip Brown III, ‘Chronological Anomalies in the Book of Ezra’, *BibSac* 162 (2005): 33-49; Lester L. Grabbe, “Mind the Gaps”: Ezra, Nehemiah and the Judean Restoration’ in *Restoration: Old Testament, Jewish and Christian Conceptions*, ed. James M. Scott (Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism, 72; Leiden: Brill, 2000): 83-104; Greg Goswell, ‘The Handling of Time in the Book of Ezra-Nehemiah,’ *TrinJ* 31 (2010): 187-203; Sara Japhet, ‘Composition and Chronology in the Book of Ezra-Nehemiah’ in *Second Temple Studies: 2. Temple and Community in the Persian Period*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Kent H. Richards (JSOTSup, 175; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994): 189-216; Steiner, ‘Archival’, 641-85.

action. The expectation of fulfilment is replaced with the actualisation of fulfilment.

The third part of Ezra 6:14 describes the authorisation by which the people completed the temple, 'by the decree of the God of Israel and by the decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia'. However, Tamara Eskenazi does not see this as the signal of the end of the narrative, rather as a bridge to the future. She argues that '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 run 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'.¹⁴ However, this explanation is not necessary in the narrative of Ezra 1–6. Joseph 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 reference to Artaxerxes (cf. 4:7-8 at the beginning of the Aramaic section)'.¹⁵ 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'. Ezra 4:6 includes a reference to Xerxes and then proceeds to the time of Artaxerxes. If the mention of Xerxes, who did not issue any decree, is ignored then the order Cyrus-Darius-Artaxerxes is found in the text. When the reader arrives at Ezra 6:14 the narrator is closing the narrative by highlighting the end of the decrees of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes and provides their names in the order they were introduced to the reader in Ezra 4:5-7; that is in their historically correct order, fulfilling the same function as the double mention of the prophets in 5:1 and 6:14. With 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 were decrees that caused the building of the temple to start, stop, or

¹⁴ Eskenazi, *Prose*, 56. See also David Janzen, 'The Cries of Jerusalem: Ethnic, Cultic, Legal, and Geographic Boundaries in Ezra-Nehemiah' in *Unity and Disunity of Ezra-Nehemiah: Redaction, Rhetoric, Reader*, ed. Mark J. Boda and Paul L. Redditt (Hebrew Bible Monographs, 17; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008): 117-35.

¹⁵ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988): 129.

continue.¹⁶ Instead of signalling that the narrative continues on, as is most commonly proposed, the inclusion of Artaxerxes signals that this narrative of return and rebuilding has come to a close.

As the narrative concludes both the **עלה** imperative and the **בנה** imperative have been fulfilled and the people celebrate the completion of temple with its dedication. The Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread are also celebrated, which reintroduces worship of YHWH through the Festal calendar and provides a fitting conclusion to the narrative.¹⁷

3. The Role of the Prophets

The structure of the **עלה** imperative and the **בנה** imperative brings more attention to the vital role of the prophets in the narrative of Ezra 1–6. The prophet Haggai and Zechariah bracket the key section of rebuilding success (5:1; 6:14). Building the narrative in such a manner answers the key theological questions of Ezra 1–6, namely, who is responsible for the building of the temple?

James Trotter proposed that the temple rebuilding project was not because of the ‘religious fervor’ of the Judaeen community, but by the Persian imperial administration to provide stability for them politically and economically.¹⁸ The author of Ezra 1–6 would clearly answer ‘no’ to this statement. The suggestion that Trotter presents points to the reasons why the Persian Empire would have acted favourably towards the Judaeen community, but this is not the rhetoric of Ezra 1–6. For the author of Ezra 1–6 the Persian Empire is an agent moved by YHWH. At first they help the Judaeen exiles to return and build the temple

¹⁶ A similar understanding is provided by Andrew E. Steinmann, ‘Letters of Kings about Votive Offerings: The God of Israel and the Aramaic Document in Ezra 4:8–6:18’, *JHS* 8 Art: 23 (2008): 1–14, esp. 12–14. <http://purl.org/jhs>.

¹⁷ See Bob Becking, ‘Continuity and Community: The Belief System of the Book of Ezra’ in *The Crisis of Israelite Religion*, ed. Bob Becking and Marjo C. A. Korpel (Boston: Brill, 1999): 256–75.

¹⁸ James M. Trotter, ‘Was the Second Temple a Primarily Persian Project?’, *SJOT* 15.2 (2001): 276–93. Trotter lists six specific reasons why the Persian Empire would want a temple in the province of Yehud. See also the more nuanced proposal of partnership between the Achaemenid kings and the Judaeen community in Christiane Karrer-Grube, ‘Scrutinizing the Conceptual Unity of Ezra and Nehemiah’ in *Unity and Disunity of Ezra-Nehemiah: Redaction, Rhetoric, Reader*, ed. Mark J. Boda and Paul L. Redditt (Hebrew Bible Monographs, 17; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008): 136–59, esp. 142–45.

through the decree of Cyrus. It is not indifference to the temple rebuilding project that causes it to stall, but the Persian Empire's demand given by Artaxerxes that the temple not be rebuilt. The people are powerless against the workings of their enemies and authority of the Persian court.

The introduction of Haggai and Zechariah signals a rhetorically positive turn in the narrative of Ezra 1–6. At this point in the narrative the people have no right to be rebuilding the temple, but through the prophetic actions of Haggai and Zechariah the people return to the temple rebuilding efforts. In the rhetoric of Ezra 1–6 this action is directly against the decree of the Persian court. It is this action done by the prophets that also provides the reintroduction of YHWH to the narrative in the form of the eyes of the peoples' God looking over them. This is set out as the reason why the temple rebuilding is not stopped while the officials investigate whether the Judaeen community has the right to be building. One could have called into question the sovereignty of YHWH as the people were unable to continue with the temple rebuilding project at the end of chapter 4, but now this concern would be answered with the initial success and determination expressed at the beginning of chapter 5 coinciding with the appearance of the prophets. For the rest of the narrative of Ezra 1–6 the situation is extremely positive with no more disruption from their enemies and unlimited support from the Persian Empire.

How the people interact with the Persian Empire also demonstrates that under the leadership of the prophets the fortunes of the community have improved. In Ezra 4 the people are instructed to stop building the temple without any interaction with the Persian officials and no protest. This is not the case in Ezra 5–6 as the people are able to defend themselves and their right to build. The letter that Tattenai and Shethar-bozenai write to Darius provides the people the opportunity to argue their case before the court. Tattenai and Shethar-bozenai quote the answers that the Judaeen community provided and this allows the people's voice to be heard by the Persian court. The Judaeen community draws attention to the decree of Cyrus that allowed them to return and build in the first place. When this is investigated the claims of the Judaeen community are confirmed and they received unequivocal support for the temple rebuilding project from Darius that even exceeds the support provided under the reign of Cyrus. Through the letter the people are able to gain an audience with the king who

then rules favourably for them. This all occurs within the framework of the prophetic actions of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah (5:1; 6:14).

4. Conclusion

Ezra 1–6 emphasises the importance of the prophetic voice, with the actions of Haggai and Zechariah's being set out as the catalyst for the success of the temple rebuilding project. Their presence reintroduces the voice of YHWH to the narrative and success for the community follows. The structure of the narrative, specifically the use **עלה** and **בנה**, shows that the expectations set out in Ezra 1:1-4 are fulfilled and also draws attention to the prophets' essential role in bringing construction of the temple to completion in the narrative of Ezra 1–6.