THESE ARE THE DAYS OF THE PROPHETS:
A LITERARY ANALYSIS OF EZRA 1–6

Christopher R. Lortie

Summary

This study outlines a plot structure for Ezra 1–6 based upon the העלה (‘lh) imperative and בנייה (bnh) imperative given in the decree by Cyrus (Ezra 1:2-4) and argues that they provide a clear framework for the narrative. The Judaean people are able to accomplish the העלה imperative without conflict, but the בנייה 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 בנייה 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,
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’. However, what has not yet been explored is the manner in which the verbs הָעָלָה and בָנָה 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.

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 עָלָה (go up) and בָנָה (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 Y HWH. The narrator reports that Cyrus was roused (עור) 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.


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 Judaeans community and expresses two imperatives which form the goal of the narrative (Ezra 1:2-4). These are the "לָעֵל" imperative and the "בָּנוּ" imperative. These imperatives are given in Ezra 1:3b as the text reads, ‘and let him go up (לָעֵל) to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and let him build (בָּנוּ) the house of YHWH God of Israel. He is the God who is in Jerusalem’. 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. 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 "לָעֵל" and "בָּנוּ" imperatives.

2.2 The לָעֵל Imperative 1:5–3:1

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 "לָעֵל" and "בָּנוּ" are now recast in the indicative to describe the people’s response.

The success of the "לָעֵל" 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 "לָעֵל" 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).

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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 "לָעֵל" and "בָּנוּ" imperatives. The "לָעֵל" imperative was not entirely completed until the people settled in Jerusalem as per the decree from Cyrus (1:3). The "לָעֵל" imperative was at the foreground of the narrative for most of 1:5–3:1, but 2:68-69 draws attention to the "בָּנוּ" imperative moments before the "לָעֵל" 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 Judaean 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 Judaean 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 Judaean community is realised in Ezra 4:1-24. Although the beginning of the section relates how the ‘enemies’ approached the Judaean 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 Judaean community are then presented in Ezra 4:6-24.12 Although historically

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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.


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. 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 Judaean 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 Judaean community was given permission from Cyrus to rebuild the temple. Darius supports the project and the Judaean 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 הבנה is used for the final time in the narrative of Ezra 1–6. To mark the completion of the temple, the verb全长 (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 וומצלחין) and then moves to ‘and they built and they completed’ (וובנו 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

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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

continue. 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 בננה 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.

3. The Role of the Prophets

The structure of the עלה imperative and the בננה 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 Judaean community, but by the Persian imperial administration to provide stability for them politically and economically. 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 Judaean 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 Judaean exiles to return and build the temple

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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 Judaean 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 Judaean community provided and this allows the people’s voice to be heard by the Persian court. The Judaean 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 Judaean 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 על 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.