Ezra-Nehemiah
Retrograde Revolution

Yael Leibowitz

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Matan
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This book of Torah is dedicated to the memory of

Sadie Rennert z"l

A true angel, who established a home filled with Torah values and good deeds that have been passed down through the generations of her beloved family. We are forever grateful that Matan carries her name and that so many women are studying and teaching Torah in her merit.

פִּיהָ פָּתְחָה בְחָכְמָה וְתוֹרַת חֶסֶד עַל לְשׁוֹנָהּ
Her mouth is full of wisdom, Her tongue with kindly teaching.

And it is dedicated in honor of

Ira Leon and Ingeborg Hanna Rennert

their children

Tamara and Randall Winn
Yonina and Mitchell Davidson
Ari and Erynne Rennert

and grandchildren

Pillars and leaders of the Jewish world, living lives filled with Torah and gemilut chassadim, infusing the Jewish people with a beautiful light, and strengthening Medinat Yisrael. With thanks for helping Matan spread inspiring Torah learning to every corner of the world.

וּרְאֵה בָנִים לְבָנֶיךָ שָׁלוֹם עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל

*And you will see your children's children. Peace upon **Israel**.*

With hope that the themes of restoration, rebuilding,
and prayer that permeate the books of Ezra-Nehemiah
are a source of strength for Am Yisrael in the current times.
And with thanks to Yael for this work of great scholarship.

Nicole and Raanan Agus
Jerusalem and NYC

Dedicated in memory and honour of

Louis and Gabi Weisfeld z"l

who had a vision of advanced Jewish learning,
guided by love of Torah, Israel, Zionism and the Jewish people,
supporting Torah learning for men and women equally.

The Weisfeld Family Charitable Foundation

Netanya, Highland Beach, FL, and Toronto

In memory of my beloved mother

Ellen Rich z"l

who imbued me with a love of Jewish learning,
an appreciation for the arts, and the value of acts of kindness.

Joseph Rich

In the 1980s, Rabbanit Malke Bina began teaching a groundbreaking Talmud *shiur* for women, held around the dining room table of Lili Weil *z"l*. Inspired by this pioneering learning, Rabbanit Bina and her students envisioned an advanced Beit Midrash for women. This became a reality in 1988 with the establishment of Matan: The Sadie Rennert Women's Institute for Torah Studies. From its inception, Matan has been dedicated to cultivating high-level scholars, educators, and leaders, revolutionizing opportunities for women to engage deeply with Torah study.

Today, Matan has eleven branches, serving tens of thousands of students in Israel and worldwide. It offers intensive Beit Midrash programs in Bible, Talmud, Halakha and Jewish thought, continually raising the bar for women's Torah study. Additionally, there is a broad choice of weekly classes and series, Yemei Iyun in Israel and beyond, a summer learn-and-tour program, pre-holiday programming, an international mother-daughter bat mitzva program, and weekly *parasha* podcasts in Hebrew and English. Matan remains at the forefront of Torah study, inspiring and empowering the next generation through transformative Torah learning.

Kitvuni – Fellowship Program for Writing Torah Literature

In 2022 the Kitvuni Fellowship was launched, led by Dr. Yael Ziegler, a distinguished Matan graduate and senior lecturer. The initiative nurtures exceptional *talmidot ḥakhamim*, supporting them in writing and publishing books of Torah scholarship across diverse fields. Kitvuni provides a structured framework, mentorship, and professional support for every cohort, ensuring that each scholar's work reaches its highest potential. In collaboration with Koren Publishers, the program is producing books that will enrich the Jewish bookshelf for generations to come.

The first Matan Kitvuni publication in English, *Ezra-Nehemiah: Retrograde Revolution* by Yael Leibowitz, is part of the Maggid Studies in Tanakh series. The book explores the revolutionary strategies of Jewish leaders in the early Second Temple period as they navigated the challenges of restoration and rebuilding. Upcoming Kitvuni publications will feature works on Bible, Talmud, Halakha, Hassidut, and Kabbala, further enhancing contemporary Torah scholarship.

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Preface

Calls for revolution these days do not seem to hold much promise, not because we doubt the conviction of those claiming dissatisfaction with the existing order, but because we doubt that they have a superior, implementable alternative. Revolutions, and the people who drive them, claim to want to break with the past and forge new, uncharted paths; to leave broken systems in the dustbins of history and enlighten the future with their sophisticated, upgraded ideals. Some revolutions succeed, while others fail. Historians, sociologists, and political scientists expend tremendous energy trying to discern what spells the difference between those outcomes. Many theories have been proposed; none is perfect.

The title of this book, *Retrograde Revolution*, speaks to a characteristically Jewish element of the watersheds that have shaped Jewish history. "Retrograde" means to move backward or revert to an earlier state. It softens the implications of the word "revolution," while, ironically in many cases, ensuring the success of its initiative. And while in our modern, progress-obsessed culture, the word itself may conjure negative connotations of regression and decline, what we will come to understand through studying the book of Ezra-Nehemiah is that true, lasting

change manifests only when we are able, as a community, to move both backward and forward simultaneously. The past is not all bad, and all things new are not necessarily better; there are pieces of our past that we should want to recreate, occasions in which our system served the highest interests of our people, and instances in which we realized our shared potential. Identifying and endeavoring to return to those moments is vital to any true progress. For good reason, the book of Lamentations, written at one of the lowest points in Israelite history, concludes with the sentiment "Renew our days to be as they once were."[1]

That said, progress also demands that we identify how past systems have failed, how we have failed. Just as the past is not all bad, it is also, quite obviously, never all good. Being a self-conscious community means possessing both the ability and the desire to look at our past through an honest, critical lens and identify those components of our social and religious machinery that led to malfunctions. It is about knowing which parts need to be replaced, which need to be updated, which need lubrication to minimize unavoidable friction, and which are so antiquated as to be unsalvageable. New is not *necessarily* better, but sometimes it is. And that is where revolutions come in. Ezra-Nehemiah was written at a time when revolution was, on some level, unavoidable. The historical events that led to its writing compelled the Jewish people to reconsider their past and reflect upon what they wanted their future to look like.

But there is an additional reason this title was chosen for the study of Ezra-Nehemiah. The term "retrograde" also has astronomical connotations, which may serve as a helpful metaphor for understanding some important components of Ezra-Nehemiah, namely, studying, witnessing, and being Jewish in history. Astronomers claim that all planets move around the sun in the same direction, and that direction is referred to as "direct motion." But the speed at which a planet moves is contingent on its proximity to the sun. Planets closer to the sun move more quickly than those further away. So, when looking at the sky from Earth, planets moving at the same speed, or faster than us, appear to be moving in direct motion. But like the illusion experienced by runners on a track or drivers on a highway, those moving slower than us, despite moving in the same

1. Lamentations 5:21.

direction, appear to be moving backward. This apparent motion is what astronomers call "retrograde." Of course, what is interesting to consider, and what astronomers are keen to point out, is the relative nature of the terms ascribed to the two motions. Celestial motion is neither direct nor retrograde; it is only our perspective that confers those designations.

In history, as in astronomical nomenclature, self-awareness is the key to appreciating the difference between direction and perceived direction. And Ezra-Nehemiah, perhaps more than any other book of the Bible, is cognizant of its orientation. It redraws the borders of national identity, revives ancient laws, and reconfigures society. But it does all that while carefully considering its community relative to those around it in space and relative to other eras in time. Ezra-Nehemiah is aware of the critical juncture at which it stands, and it employs that awareness to reshape our understanding of how Jews move through history. It does not use the speed at which things progress to gauge their course, and it does not assume that things that move differently are necessarily moving in opposition. Ezra-Nehemiah sees the direct motion of Jewish evolution, where others perceive retrograde motion and, in doing so, inspires its readers to do the same.

Acknowledgments

If I were to sit down and try to make a list of all the people to whom I owe thanks, the acknowledgments section of this book would no doubt be longer than the book itself. I have crossed paths with, and gleaned so much from, so many extraordinary individuals, and among the things I thank God for daily are the people He has brought into my life. So, if you are reading these words and we have a relationship, or even just a fleeting connection, please know, I am grateful for you.

For close to twenty-five years, I have had the privilege of learning Tanakh with students of different ages and from all walks of life. To those of you with whom I have been blessed to learn, whether you were in high school, college, or beyond, you have inspired me to broaden and deepen my knowledge; you have challenged my way of thinking; and, most importantly, you have made learning fun. The material in this book has been enhanced by the myriads of formal and informal conversations we have had, and I thank you for your contributions to my thinking. I am the teacher I am today because of the combined effect of having learned with each and every one of you.

Thank you to the administrators at the Upper School of Ramaz many years ago for taking a chance on a young, inexperienced educator, and

thank you to my colleagues-turned-friends for showing me how it's done. To Yeshiva University, thank you for being my life-long academic anchor, and thank you for seven of the most enriching teaching years of my career.

After making aliya in 2014, I quickly found my intellectual and spiritual home at Matan. I do not take for granted the fact that I get to spend my days surrounded by *talmidot ḥakhamim* who are equal parts brilliant, humble, driven, and kind. To Rabbanit Malke Bina, thank you for having the foresight, over thirty-five years ago, to know how badly our community needed Matan, and thank you for having the resolve to transform your vision into reality. Because of you, we now have generations of sophisticated, erudite, female religious leaders, and, perhaps more importantly, we have young girls who don't even know the courage it once took to do what they now assume is their birthright.

The Kitvuni writing fellowship which Matan launched in 2022 defined the next frontier in women's learning, and I am deeply honored and grateful to have been a part of Kitvuni's first cohort. To Jordana Schoor, our collective community is a better place because your wellspring of ideas never dries up, nor does your selfless desire to see others excel. To Dr. Yael Ziegler, your breadth of knowledge and passion for teaching are a force to behold. Thank you for your example. To my fellow writers, Dr. Shifra Assulin, Dr. Sharon Galper-Grossman, Dr. Adina Sternberg, Dr. Merav Suisa, and Dr. Miriam Weitman, I cherish the time we spent together. Each of you came into the program with more wisdom than any one book can contain, and I grew by simply watching you spin your grand ideas into finite texts. Thank you for your support and your camaraderie. To Chaya Bina, I cannot think of anyone who works as tirelessly as you do to bring to life the programs others dream up. You are loyal, forthright, and indefatigable. Thank you, Chaya, for Matan, for Kitvuni, and for your friendship.

When I was told that the Kitvuni program included a mentor, I knew right away that I wanted Dr. Ari Mermelstein to guide me through the writing process. Ari's own scholarship combines meticulous research and a deep respect for our history and traditions, but, more notably, Ari is the consummate *mensch.* Thank you, Ari, for being so generous with your time, long after the fellowship ended, and thank you for making the writing of my first book such a heartening experience. Dr. Aaron Koller

was kind enough to read through a manuscript of this book. Aaron, I cannot thank you enough for taking the time. Your feedback was characteristically discerning and thought-provoking, and I am most grateful for it. Thank you, Dr. Gillian Steinberg, for your warmth, your professionalism, and your easygoing manner that puts first-time authors at ease. Thank you Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter for your early review, your guidance, and more broadly speaking, for your ongoing support throughout the years. Dr. Diana Lipton, I don't know what I did to deserve being on the receiving end of your big-heartedness and intellectual rigor, but I am so grateful to you for both. To Saadya Schoor, editing references between calls to *miluim* is no simple feat. Thank you for what you did for this book, and, more importantly, for what you do for our country. And thank you Maayan Wertentheil for representing the "young, highly-educated, inquisitive, and spiritually inclined" demographic so eminently.

Thank you to Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, Matthew Miller, and Alex Drucker at Koren Publishers, and to their fantastic team of editors. Debbie Ismailoff and Esther Shafier, I have not yet gotten the chance to meet you in person, but I am so grateful for your scrupulous editing. Rabbi David Silverstein, you have been a sounding board from the inception of this project. Thank you, as always, for your candidness and your expertise. Caryn Meltz, working with you is an absolute pleasure. Thank you for taking care of every detail and for making it seem effortless in the process. Tani Bayer, thank you for so beautifully coupling artistic creativity and graciousness.

Thank you to my friends (and "framily") – to those who are an integral part of my daily life and those who have been with me from afar for the long haul; your love and laughter keep me sane. To my siblings (the ones I grew up with, and the ones I was gifted through marriage), thank you for your integrity and your dependability, for nurturing my children, and for always making fun of my dreams while secretly rooting for them. I love you all. To my in-laws, words will not suffice. Nonetheless, thank you Larry, for your calm, and thank you mom, one of the most graceful writers I know, for loving us marvelously and unconditionally. To my parents, who gave me everything. Abba, thank you for showing us that intellectual curiosity and pure faith can seamlessly co-exist and, like Ezra and Nehemiah, for always making sure that our religious experiences

were simultaneously כתורת משה and thoroughly joyful. Mommy, your passion for the land of Israel inspired my own, and your unqualified devotion to those you love has taught me how to be.

To Azriel, Yair, and Nili, there are no words I can conjure to summarize in a sentence or two how much I love, respect, and enjoy each of you. (And, honestly, I hope you know, without having to read these pages!) So, I will simply thank you for being you. I am in perpetual awe of the human beings you are becoming. You are the first thing I thank Hashem for every morning and the last thing I thank Him for at night. You are my greatest blessing.

Lastly, to Aaron. Thank you for being my true partner in every sense of the word. You are the person I continue to learn the most from, and, after all this time, the best part of my day is still coming home to you. Thank you for what we have built.

All four of my grandparents *z"l* experienced *ḥurban* (destruction), and all four, in its wake, chose to rebuild. This book is dedicated in loving memory to them and to the ever-Jewish legacy they imparted.

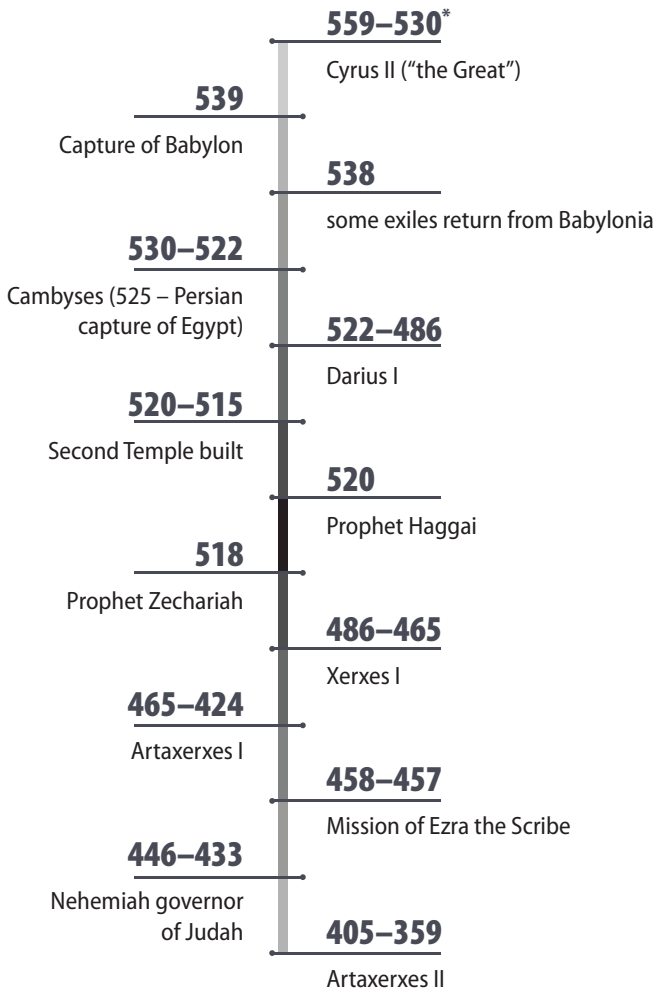
While the bulk of this book was written before October 7th, 2023, large portions of it were edited and tweaked while we reeled as a people – searching for our missing, burying our dead, running to safe rooms, and sending those we love most in the world off to fight. As these words go to print, grief and fear still grip the country. Soldiers are still giving their lives to keep us safe, civilians are still being terrorized, and many are still unable to return to their homes. Most surrealistically, we still have innocent men, women, and babies being held by sadistic monsters. They are an hour's drive away from where I sit typing and we cannot get to them. Little about our new reality makes sense. Yet alongside the shock, horror, and overwhelming feelings of vulnerability and betrayal, exists a profound sense of Jewish nationalism, Jewish pride, and Jewish unity. For the first time in a long time, the country is unified by its convictions, and for the first time in a long time, Jews throughout the Diaspora are becoming increasingly vocal in support of their homeland. If Ezra-Nehemiah teaches us anything, it is that no matter the scope or the scale of tragedy, what we do is learn from

our mistakes, and then, with broken hearts and battered bodies, we rebuild. We have done it countless times over our long and winding history, and we will do it again this time. We have no other choice; resilience is our imperative.


Judah in the Persian Period
Black Sea
MACEDONIA
THRACE
CILICIA
Carchemish
Aleppo
CRETE
CYPRUS
Hamath
BEYOND THE RIVER
Tadmor
Mediterranean Sea
Sidon
Tyre
Damascus
SAMARIA
Jerusalem
AMMON
Ashdod
MOAB
LYBIA
(CYRENAICA)
EDOM
Memphis
SINAI
Nile
EGYPT
Red
Sea
0 100 200 km


Caspian Sea
ASSYRIA
Euphrates
Tigris (Hidekel)
MEDIA
PARTHIA
Ecbatana
BABYLONIA
Susa
Babylon
KEDAR
PERSIA
Persepolis
ARABIA
Persian Gulf

Timeline



* all years in BCE

Introduction

HISTORICAL BACKDROP

After the Exodus from Egypt and their wanderings in the desert, the people of Israel entered the land of Canaan in approximately 1250 BCE. Over the next six and a half centuries, the Israelites organized and built armies, cities, temples,[1] and empires. There were high points in the period, during which the Israelites flourished, but there was also no shortage of political and religious upheavals. In the late eighth century BCE, the northern Israelite kingdom was conquered by the invading Neo-Assyrian Empire,[2] and the majority of the twelve Israelite tribes were exiled from the land.[3]

1. In addition to Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem, there were also holy sites built in Shiloh (Josh. 18:1; Judges 21:19; Ps. 78:60; Jer. 7:12–15, 26:5–6), Dan (Judges 17–18; I Kings 12:28–29), Beth-El (I Sam. 10:3), Gilgal (I Sam. 13:4–5, 15:12–21, Hos. 4:15, 9:15, 12:12; Amos 4:4, 5:5), Mizpah (Judges 21:1–8; I Sam. 7:5–16, 10:17–25), Bethlehem (Judges 19:18; I Sam. 20:6, 28–29), and Nob (I Sam. 21:1–10, 22:16–19; Is. 10:32).
2. For a series of studies on the period of Neo-Assyrian conquest in Israel, see Shuichi Hasegawa, Christoph Levin, and Karen Radner, *The Last Days of the Kingdom of Israel* (Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2018).
3. Most, but not all, of the northerners were exiled, the implications of which will be felt in Ezra-Nehemiah and discussed in chapter seven.

The Southern Kingdom of Judah, comprised of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, evaded Assyrian capture and remained in the land with its capital in Jerusalem. In 597 BCE, the Neo-Babylonian Empire exiled one of Judah's kings along with the kingdom's aristocrats. And then, in 586 BCE, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem and exiled most of the remaining populace to Babylon.[4] Most of the exiles went to Babylon. But then, in 539 BCE, after the Babylonian Empire fell to the Achaemenid dynasty, Cyrus, the first of the Achaemenid kings, released an edict allowing displaced peoples to return to their native lands and rebuild the temples the Babylonians had destroyed.

CONTENT AND STRUCTURE[5]

Ezra-Nehemiah depicts the activities of the Jewish community in the

4. II Kings 24:14–16 tells us that the first deportation in 597 saw seventeen thousand exiled. Although, according to Jeremiah 52:28, the number was only 3,023. Regarding the second deportation, both II Kings 25 and Chronicles 36 make clear that the deportation was definitive and the land was left desolate. In contrast, Jeremiah 52:29-30 tells us that 832 Judeans were exiled in the second deportation. Archaeological studies on Judah in the sixth century show that while the land was not left completely desolate, a sharp population collapse (likely from approximately 110,000 to about 15,000 to 40,000.) For more on this, see: T. Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia: A Study of Deportees in the Sixth and Fifth Centuries BCE* (Brill, 2019).

5. Within the Hebrew Bible, Ezra and Nehemiah appear as two separate books. However, ancient Jewish sources point to the fact that the two were originally one literary unit, and it is under that assumption that we will be working throughout this study. The earliest hint of the work's initial integrity is the appearance of the Masoretic annotation for the midpoint of the work found in Nehemiah 3:21–22, which is in fact the midpoint of the two combined works. (The Masoretes, or *baalei hamesora*, refers to the group of Jewish scholars and scribes who compiled a system of vocalization, accents, and detailed technical notes to standardize the text of the Hebrew Bible.) The Septuagint (the third-to-second-century BCE Greek translation of the Bible, often abbreviated as LXX) similarly refers to the full text of Ezra-Nehemiah as 2 Esdras. In Josephus's first-century work (*Against Apion* 40), his enumeration of the biblical books seems to indicate that Ezra-Nehemiah was considered one work, and the Babylonian Talmud concurs that the books of Ezra and Nehemiah refer to the book of Ezra-Nehemiah (Bava Batra 15a; Sanhedrin 93b). There, the work is referred to simply as the book of Ezra, and the question why Nehemiah has no book called by his name is raised by the Rabbis. In the third and

Land of Israel in the aftermath of that edict.[6] The natural, overarching goal of the period was restoration, but, as we will see, that concept is charged and multifaceted. The restoration described in Ezra-Nehemiah entails a series of different movements.[7] The first movement, led by Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, and Jeshua the high priest (ca. 538–515 BCE), rebuilt the Temple complex and restored Temple ritual. The second movement, under the leadership of Ezra, reinstated religious law and Torah learning in the community (ca. 458–457 BCE.) And the third, led by Nehemiah, reconstructed the city walls around Jerusalem and repopulated the city itself (ca. 446–433 BCE).[8] Each movement included a leader, a mission, opposition to the mission, and the movement's

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fourth centuries, a division was introduced by the church fathers and evidenced by the early church father Origen. The division is also found in the Vulgate edition of the Bible, and by the fifteenth century, Jewish printed versions of the Bible began adopting the division as well. For a sampling of modern scholars who address this topic, see Sara Japhet, *From the Rivers of Babylon to the Highlands of Judah: Collected Studies on the Restoration Period* (Eisenbrauns, 2006); Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah* (Scholars, 1988); H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah,* vol. 16 (Zondervan Academic, 2018); Lester L. Grabbe, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (Psychology Press, 1998).

6. The work covers the events that occurred in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE.

7. Scholars voice different views on how the period the book covers should be divided. Sara Japhet, for example, argues that the work can be divided into two distinct periods, with each period led by two figureheads, one political and one religious, working side by side. In the first wave, those leaders are Zerubbabel and Jeshua, and in the second wave they are Ezra and Nehemiah (Sara Japhet, "Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel – Against the Background of the Historical and Religious Tendencies of Ezra-Nehemiah," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 95, no. 2 (January 1, 1983). Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, on the other hand, traces three distinct movements steered by groups of people and extending through the reign of three Persian monarchs. The three waves, according to Eskenazi, are bound together by adherence to God's will and royal decrees (Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose,* 45.) Juha Pakkala identifies four distinct but interrelated movements. See J. K. Pakkala, "Centers and Peripheries in the Ezra Story," in E. Ben Zvi and C. Levin, eds., *Centres and Peripheries in the Early Second Temple Period* (Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 295–314.

8. These dates reflect the generally accepted dates, although some scholars have challenged them. For a survey of the different theories as to when each leader administered, see F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (William B. Eerdmans, 1983), 6–9.

(partial) success. Thus, to understand Ezra-Nehemiah is to understand the facets of each movement in isolation and in their aggregate.

COMPOSITION AND STYLE

The Babylonian Talmud attributes the book of Ezra-Nehemiah to Ezra himself.[9] And while it is very possible that Ezra wrote significant portions of the text, internal clues lead us to believe that the compositional process was a more complicated one. There are sections of the work that date to a period later than Ezra,[10] and woven throughout the work are disparate literary genres. There are third-person narratives, extensive genealogical lists, official Aramaic documents, and first-person autobiographical sections written by both Ezra and Nehemiah, respectively. There are also chronological inconsistencies that break the flow of the narrative. For that reason, those accustomed to a straightforward writing style may initially feel disoriented and perhaps even overwhelmed by Ezra-Nehemiah's jarring stylistic shifts. Many have concluded, on account of these difficulties, that the book is simply a patchwork of disconnected sources.

In all likelihood, more than one pen did contribute to the formation of the book under discussion. And yet, as we explore the work, we will discover that *Ḥazal*'s attribution of the book to Ezra makes perfect sense because the book's internal coherence, even among the variegated sources, speaks to an underlying ideology that spans the work. That ideology proposes that unity and uniformity are not the same thing, and that a religiously conscious Jewish community is resilient enough to hold within it discord, mess, and heterogeneity. Disagreements do not undermine the whole, Ezra-Nehemiah's style proves; they shape it. As Tamara Cohn Eskenazi writes: "From a literary perspective, the divisions and fissures cease to be occasions to sever limbs but become, instead, clues to the book's overall intention."[11] So, taking into consideration the seemingly incongruous portions of the work, this study will look

9. Bava Batra 15a. But cooperation with Nehemiah is assumed.
10. The Talmud (ibid.) addresses some of the questions of this nature.
11. Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose*, 13.

for those ideas, unique to Ezra-Nehemiah, that can be comprehended only within the artistic totality of the book.

THE FOCUS OF THIS STUDY

Many approaches to the study of Ezra-Nehemiah are possible. In this book, we will focus on those ways in which Ezra-Nehemiah shapes our understanding of the period of restoration in Israel. We will do so by identifying the challenges that arose due to the unique set of circumstances under which the book was written and the ways in which the historical actors of the time met those challenges. We will wade through what appear to be history and politics only to realize, time and again, that we are knee-deep in theology. But identifying how and why that happens requires that we first understand the broader phenomenon of history writing in Tanakh.

Every person who studies Tanakh does so with a set of working assumptions about what kind of work Tanakh constitutes. In some cases, the assumptions are conscious and in others they are unconscious, but in all cases they influence the way that we relate to the text in question. Religious beliefs, educational training, and internalized cultural codes all factor into the questions we ask of the text and the answers we expect to find.

The psychologically inclined, for example, may look to understand the complex inner workings of the mind of any given biblical personality. However, their inquiry will likely be based on conjecture, because, while biblical characters are not flat or uninteresting, Tanakh is concerned with the paradigmatic nature of its characters, not their fully-fledged psychological portraits.[12] In a similar vein, accounts of Israel in ancient Egypt will not help those looking for the engineering secrets

12. While there is certainly room for character analysis in the study of Tanakh, the manifold inner thoughts of the characters' minds are rarely revealed to the reader. What we know about biblical characters is primarily construed through narration and dialogue, which makes a true analysis challenging. For further reading, see Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Indiana Press, 1987) and Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Basic Books, 2011).

behind the empire's impressive monoliths, just as the Tower of Babel story will not shed any light on the construction of ziggurats. Physicists will not understand *how* the world was created by reading the first two chapters of Genesis,[13] and those wondering about the otherworldly realm will not, after studying Tanakh, know what happens before or after we die. Those most likely to be frustrated, though, are historians looking for a comprehensive survey of the major and minor events of the periods Tanakh spans. Those who delve into the book of Kings eager to understand every detail of domestic life in the Judean Hills during the Late Iron Age will not find the answers, nor will those hoping to learn about the city-states that stood prior to Israel's entry into Canaan. An in-depth study of the book of Judges will yield an understanding of dangers of moral relativism, but it will not satisfy the curiosity of those looking for an exhaustive catalog of the events that took place during the 150-year period, because Tanakh is not a work of science or psychology, and, despite its facade, it is not simply a work of history either.[14]

Tanakh enables us to make sense of our individual place within society and the place of that society in relation to God. Tanakh contains wisdom literature that attempt to answer perennial questions about suffering and loss, love, and fulfillment.[15] It contains laments wailed into the hollows of devastation followed by lyrical balms of solace. Tanakh includes laws that curb our baser instincts and those that equip us to

13. Impressive attempts toward concordism of science and the Bible have been made in recent years. See, for example, Gerald Schroeder, *Genesis and the Big Bang Theory: The Discovery of Harmony Between Modern Science and the Bible* (Bantman, 2011); Nathan Aviezer, *In the Beginning: Biblical Creation and Science* (Ktav, 1990). For a critical perspective, see D. Shatz, "Is There Science in the Bible? An Assessment of Biblical Concordism," *Tradition* 41, no. 2 (2008): 198–244. Still, while the argument might be made that we can bring Genesis in line with what we know from scientific discovery, we could never glean those same scientific theories from a close reading of Genesis alone.

14. History writing as we think of it today did not exist as such in the ancient world. That said, Tanakh is one of the earliest examples of a work that blends factual reporting with theological and intellectual insights. For a discussion of the development and contributions of Biblical historiographical writing, see: Baruch Halpern, *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History* (Penn State Press, 2010).

15. The term "wisdom literature" refers to the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job.

reach elevated states of spiritual connection. In Tanakh we can find poetry in its highest form and prose that expresses the profundity of the human experience. We may not find all we want to know about the people that populate its pages, but we find models of how Israel should and should not behave. We find models of heroes and cowards, mavericks and conformers. We find models of those who tried but failed because of a tragic flaw and those who were wildly successful despite their shortcomings. We will not learn about architecture from the massive building projects Tanakh records, but we will learn about hubris, tyranny, and the failings of state. We will not learn elaborate military strategy, but we will be reminded, time and again, that there exists a force more powerful than man-made weapons, and that it controls our battlefields.

We will not discover what exists before and after life on the pages of Tanakh, but we will learn how to live purposively and make our time on this Earth meaningful.

History, for Tanakh, is the medium through which these concepts are communicated. There is a historical context for the law giving and for prophetic critique. And the personalities central to our national self-understanding are born into specific historical circumstances. But the way history is shaped and told is always an intentional act.[16] It entails the selection of events and personas from a myriad of possibilities and the subsequent linking of those details to create a coherent, relevant narrative. That carefully curated narrative shapes not only our knowledge of the past but, perhaps more importantly, our understanding and interpretation of it. Tanakh outlines the parameters through which we understand history and, in doing so, infuses it with meaning. That meaning, construed through the events of our past, becomes the basis for our collective identity. To quote from the seminal work of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, "If Herodotus was the father of history, the fathers of meaning in history were the Jews."[17]

16. Intentionalism is seen on both the individual and collective levels. For an illuminating discussion of collective memory and historical consciousness, and the role it played in biblical (and Jewish historical) writing, see Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (University of California Press, 1993).
17. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (University of Washington Press, 2011), 8.

Ezra-Nehemiah: Retrograde Revolution

Ezra-Nehemiah, like other historiographical works of Tanakh, sifts through the events of its time to create a cohesive narrative. It contextualizes what the community had endured and, by extension, why and how it became what it did. The author of Ezra-Nehemiah recounts the past in a conscious attempt to articulate the direction he believes his community should take. And as we read the work, we will begin to appreciate the subtle, creative, and artistic ways in which historical facts are spun into ideological truths.

Chapter One

Content Survey

EZRA 1
THE EDICT OF CYRUS

In 539 BCE, the first king of the Persian Empire, Cyrus II,[1] grants amnesty to captives of the newly vanquished Neo-Babylonian Empire, allowing them to return to their native lands and rebuild their shrines.[2] Those

1. The work begins with the words "In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia." In fact, Cyrus ascended the throne in 559 BCE. In 539 BCE, the year in which Ezra-Nehemiah begins, Cyrus captured Babylon with, according to his own accounts, minimal effort. As such, the "first year" recalled at the outset of our work refers to his first year as king over Mesopotamia. For more on Cyrus's rise to power, see Matt Water, "Cyrus and the Achaemenids," *Iran* 42, no. 1 (2004): 91–102; Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire* (Penn State University Press, 2002), 31–61. The appellations attributed to the Achaemenid kings varied based on time and provenance. For a survey of the topic, see Elias J. Bickerman, "The Edict of Cyrus in Ezra," in *Studies in Jewish and Christian History* (Brill, 2007), 71–107.
2. Unearthed in 1879, what is known as the "Cyrus cylinder" speaks of Cyrus's appointment by the god Marduk as reprisal for the irreverence of Nabonidus (the last king of Babylon). The cylinder lists Cyrus's accomplishments, among them, his willingness to allow repatriation throughout his kingdom. Currently housed in the British Museum, the portion of the cylinder relevant for our chapter reads: "I am Cyrus, king of the universe, the great king, the powerful king, king of

former captives include the Jews who had been exiled, so the book of Ezra-Nehemiah begins with its version of that pronouncement.[3] In it, Cyrus proclaims that any Jews throughout his empire who want to

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Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four quarters of the world, son of Cambyses, the great king, king of the city of Anshan, grandson of Cyrus, the great king, ki[ng of the ci]ty of Anshan, descendant of Teispes, the great king, king of Anshan, the perpetual seed of kingship, whose reign Bel and Nabu love, and with whose kingship, to their joy, they concern themselves. When I went as harbinger of peace i[nt]o Babylon I founded my sovereign residence within the palace amid celebration and rejoicing. Marduk, the great lord, bestowed on me as my destiny the great magnanimity of one who loves Babylon, and I every day sought him out in awe. My vast troops marched peaceably in Babylon, and the whole of [Sumer] and Akkad had nothing to fear. I sought the welfare of the city of Babylon and all its sanctuaries. As for the population of Babylon [… , w]ho as if without div[ine intention] had endured a yoke not decreed for them, I soothed their weariness, I freed them from their bonds(?). Marduk, the great lord, rejoiced at [my good] deeds, and he pronounced a sweet blessing over me, Cyrus, the king who fears him, and over Cambyses, the son [my] issue, [and over] my all my troops, that we might proceed further at his exalted command. All kings who sit on thrones, from every quarter, from the Upper Sea to the Lower Sea, those who inhabit [remote distric]ts (and) the kings of the land of Amurru who live in tents, all of them, brought their weighty tribute into Shuanna, and kissed my feet. From [Shuanna] I sent back to their places to the city of Ashur and Susa, Akkad, the land of Eshnunna, the city of Zamban, the city of Meturnu, Der, as far as the border of the land of Qutu – the sanctuaries across the river Tigris – whose shrines had earlier become dilapidated, the gods who lived therein, and made permanent sanctuaries for them. I collected together all of their people and returned them to their settlements, and the gods of the land of Sumer and Akkad which Nabonidus – to the fury of the lord of the gods – had brought into Shuanna, at the command of Marduk, the great lord, I returned them unharmed to their cells, in the sanctuaries that make them happy. May all the gods that I returned to their sanctuaries, every day before Marduk and Nabu, ask for a long life for me, and mention my good deeds, and say to Marduk, my lord, this: "Cyrus, the king who fears you, and Cambyses his son, may their … […] [… ….]." The population of Babylon call blessings on my kingship, and I have enabled all the lands to live in peace." (New translation by Irving Finkel, Curator of Cuneiform Collections at the British Museum: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1880-0617-1941)

3. The discrepancies between the narrative's retelling and extant documents from Persia that likely served as its basis should not trouble the reader. The author of Ezra-Nehemiah presents history through a theological lens, a practice characteristic of biblical writing. The Aramaic version of the pronouncement that appears in Ezra 6 (to be discussed below) is likely analogous to the original document. For

return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple are now free to do so.[4] And, the king further declares, any Jews who choose not to go are to donate to the cause.

So, laden with the contributions of those who remained behind,[5] the heads of Judah and Benjamin,[6] the priests, the Levites, and all "those whose spirit had been stirred by God" prepare for their journey back to their land. Cyrus removes the First Temple vessels from the storerooms where they had been held since the days of Nebuchadnezzar[7] and hands them over to Sheshbazzar, who is tasked with returning them to their rightful place in Jerusalem.[8] And thus begins what is referred to as the Jewish period of restoration. Its objective was established by Cyrus's

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a comprehensive collection of sources from the Achaemenid period with accompanying annotations, see Amelie Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period* (Routledge, 2013).

4. Scholars speculate that the Temple in Jerusalem served the political and fiscal interests of the Persian throne and that the Persians were driven by motivations beyond those identified in Ezra-Nehemiah. See, for example, Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander,* 48; and Joachim Schaper, "The Jerusalem Temple as an Instrument of the Achaemenid Fiscal Administration," *Vetus Testamentum* 45, no. 4 (1995): 528–39.
5. The image of Jews leaving a foreign land of captivity for Israel, replete with the riches from the locals, is evocative of the Exodus story (Exodus 3:21–22, 11:2, 12:35–36), a parallel that is threaded through much of the work.
6. After the exile of the northern tribes by Assyria in 722 BCE, Judah and Benjamin remained in the land. As such, they were exiled by the Babylonians in 597–586 BCE and on the receiving end of Cyrus's decree.
7. II Kings 25 tells us of the Temple plundering by Babylonians.
8. After his brief mention in chapter 1, Sheshbazzar is mentioned in the historical retrospective of Ezra 5:14, 16, where he is called "governor" and credited with laying the foundation of the Temple. But beyond that, nothing more is known of him. Some scholars have identified him with Shenazzar, the fourth son of Jehoiachin (I Chr. 3:18). Ezra 5 credits Sheshbazzar with laying the foundation of the Temple, while Ezra 3 credits Zerubbabel. Some attempt to harmonize the conflicting portraits by arguing that they are one and the same (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews,* 11.1.3). But there is little support for either of those approaches. In all likelihood, Sheshbazzar was one of the earliest Persian-appointed governors of Judah and the one responsible for laying the Temple's foundation. But because Zerubbabel was leader when the Temple was completed, he retained more space in the collective memory of the Judeans and is celebrated alongside Jeshua as leader of the first wave of return. For the intricacies of this discussion, see Sara Japhet, "Sheshbazzar and

opening decree, and the waves of return that follow marked the different phases toward the realization of that objective.

Orienting the monumental event theologically, Ezra-Nehemiah is quick to point out that historical changes transpire because the "end of exile" has arrived, just as the prophet Jeremiah had predicted. And the wording of the edict is likewise infused with monotheistic overtones, with the Persian king recognizing God's powers and universal sovereignty.[9] Still, students of Tanakh will notice that, in contrast to earlier phases of biblical history, in which prophets emphatically declared "so says the Lord," the opening of Ezra-Nehemiah presents a God who is active but silent.[10] His will is expressed indirectly through a foreign ruler rather than directly through a prophet. And, rather than being told emphatically what to do, the people are invited to return to the land should they so choose.[11] This obliqueness is emblematic of the era depicted in Ezra-Nehemiah and the root in many ways of both its challenges and opportunities.

Zerubbabel – Against the Background of the Historical and Religious Tendencies of Ezra-Nehemiah," in *From the Rivers of Babylon to the Highlands of Judah: Collected Studies on the Restoration Period* (Eisenbrauns, 2006), 66–98.

9. God, in the declaration's opening sentence, is referred to as "The God of the heavens," an epithet ascribed in Persian to the Zoroastrian god Ahuramazda. Cyrus's ascription of the epithet to the God of Israel is part of an important theme that will be developed in chapter six. For more on Ahuramazda and Persian religion during the Achaemenid period, see William D. Davies and Louis Finkelstein, eds., *The Cambridge History of Judaism: Volume 1, The Persian Period* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 279–307. And for a more thorough discussion of the Persian context of the apparent theological elements of the decree, see Bickerman, "Edict of Cyrus," 78–82.
10. For more on this rhetorical element, see Gordon F. Davies et al., *Berit Olam: Ezra and Nehemiah* (Liturgical Press, 1999), 6.
11. The verbs in the decree appear in the jussive (rather than command) form, leaving the choice up to the people.

EZRA 2
FIRST WAVE OF RETURN

The first group of people to return to the land, those referred to as "the people of the province" (*benei hamedina*),[12] are listed by name and tallied by family in Ezra 2.[13] This sort of extensive list of laypeople is uncharacteristic of Tanakh, and yet it is perfectly at home in Ezra-Nehemiah. In fact, each movement depicted in Ezra-Nehemiah is framed by a list of names at its beginning and another at its end.[14] As we will see,[15] that seemingly peculiar literary feature demonstrates how the author envisions the "newly improved" social structure of Judah, and who he believes its main characters to be. The two leaders who work in tandem and take center stage during this phase, Jeshua and Zerubbabel, are introduced in this chapter as well.

The bulk of Ezra 2 is a list of the names of laypeople, Temple priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and Temple servants.[16] In some cases, spe-

12. One of the ways the Persian kings were able to maintain control over their vast empire was through the establishment of a system whereby the empire was divided into smaller satraps, all of which were connected to the Persian capitals through an intricate and efficient system of roads. Judah (Yehud) was a semiautonomous province within the larger Trans-Euphrates satrap aptly named "Beyond the River" (Abar Nahara). For the division and duties of satrapies within the Persian administrative context, see Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander,* 63–66, 338–90 and Anson F. Rainey, "The Satrapy Beyond the River," *Australian Journal of Biblical Archaeology* (1969).

13. Some suggest that the impressively large total of over forty thousand includes tallies from subsequent returns as well. This theory is supported by the fact that certain names and places included in Ezra 2 become relevant only at later stages of the restoration. The scholarly literature dealing with the particulars of the Persian period–Judean population is vast and conflicting. For a sampling of the varied opinions, see Oded Lipschits, "Demographic Changes in Judah Between the Seventh and the Fifth Centuries BCE," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period* (2003), 323–76 and Gabriel Barkay, "Additional View of Jerusalem in Nehemiah Days," *New Studies in the Archaeology of Jerusalem and Its Region (Collected Papers)* 2 (2008): 48–54.

14. Ezra 8, 10; Nehemiah 3, 7, 10–12.

15. Chapter six.

16. The origins and role of these servants, known as *netinim* (נתינים), are not entirely clear. Internal evidence indicates that they were housed in their own quarters (Neh. 3:31) and that they were among the principal signers of the *amana* in Nehemiah 10

cific guilds are mentioned, adding an authentic and personal air to the lists, as well as a sense of dutiful cooperation toward a united goal. But just as we are beginning to assume the work is moving in the direction of "happily ever after," we discover that the Jewish status of several returnees is called into question because they are unable to provide documentation of their Jewish ancestral heritage.[17] In a similar development, we learn that some priests are disqualified from serving in the priesthood when written records of their genealogy cannot be found. The governor, weighing in on the matter, recommends that those priests abstain from partaking of the holy food offerings until the Urim and Thummim can be used to ascertain their status.[18] But, since the Urim and Thummim had either fallen out of use or had been lost with the destruction of the First Temple,[19] the permanent exclusion of those priests is, for all intents and purposes, a foregone conclusion. Still, despite the membership debates that surfaced, as the chapter draws to a close, we see the various strata of Judeans settling into their towns and the leaders making generous donations to the Temple building project, all of which point toward the commencement of that most important undertaking.

(v. 29) and listed as "heads of the province" (Neh. 11:3). For a survey of the suggested theories, see Baruch A. Levine, "The Netînîm," *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1963): 207–12.

17. This fact, mentioned offhandedly in chapter 2, foreshadows a much broader issue of Jewish identity that surfaces in this period. It is discussed at length in chapter seven.

18. In addition to their mention in Ezra-Nehemiah (they are mentioned again in Neh. 7:65), the Urim and Thummim are mentioned by name several times in Tanakh (Ex. 28:30; Lev. 8:8; Num. 27:21; I Sam. 28:6) and are likely implied in numerous other contexts as well; see, for example, I Samuel 14:41. While their role and function remain somewhat enigmatic to modern readers, what we do know is that they were used to "inquire of God" when the answer (often to a simple yes-or-no question) was being sought. For a careful study of the apparatus and phenomena associated with them, see Cornelis Van Dam, *The Urim and Thummim: A Means of Revelation in Ancient Israel* (Eisenbrauns, 1997); Irving L. Finkel, "In Black and White: Remarks on the Assur Psephomancy Ritual" *ZA* 85, (1995): 271–76; Victor Avigdor Hurowitz, "Urim and Thummim in Light of a Psephomancy Ritual from Assur (LKA 137)," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 21, no. 1 (1992).

19. The opinion of the Rabbis in Sota 48a is that the Urim and Thummim were not used beyond the era of the early prophets.

EZRA 3
LAYING THE TEMPLE'S FOUNDATIONS

By the time the seventh month arrives, the people are settled in their towns and ready to begin building the long-awaited Temple. They assemble in Jerusalem "as one,"[20] and then, on the very spot where Solomon's Temple stood for four centuries, Jeshua and the other priests, along with Zerubbabel and his comrades,[21] build an altar to God upon which they present burnt offerings morning and evening.[22] And lest anyone doubt the religious legitimacy of their worship, the text assures us that the offerings are all carried out "as prescribed in the Torah of Moses."

On the festival of Sukkot, the people bring the mandated sacrifices.[23] And after the festival's conclusion, they continue to bring all the offerings prescribed in the Torah.[24] We are reminded briefly that all of this happens despite the fact that the Temple had yet to be built.[25] But

20. The same words are used in Nehemiah 8:1 as well, highlighting the fact that at both central events of the era, the community participated in unison.
21. From other biblical works in which Jeshua and Zerubbabel are mentioned, we know that Jeshua was the high priest (Hag. 1:1, 12, 14, 2:2; Zech. 3:1) and that Zerubbabel held the title of governor (Hag. 1:1, 12, 2:2). We also know that Zerubbabel was the grandson of Jehoiachin, one of the last kings of Judah (I Chr. 3:16–19). The conspicuous absence of these details in Ezra 3 is not accidental and will be addressed in chapter six. Ezra 3, like Haggai 2:18 and Zechariah 4:9, credits Zerubbabel with laying the Temple's foundation, in contrast to Ezra 5:16. (See above note 8.)
22. The text briefly mentions the community's apprehensions regarding the "peoples of the land," a topic that will prove to be of great consequence in Ezra-Nehemiah. (See chapter seven.)
23. Numbers 29:12–38.
24. Ibid., chapter 28.
25. Trying to make sense of how such a situation came about, the Rabbis suggest that it was only a provisional measure sanctioned by a prophet (Zevaḥim 62a). That approach is further expanded upon in the Talmud with the claim that the sanctity of the First Temple "hallowed it for the nonce and for the future" (Zevaḥim 107b). Throughout the early biblical period, worship was not limited to the Temple in Jerusalem, although in his day Josiah attempted to centralize worship in Jerusalem (II Kings 23). Jeremiah seems to indicate that sacrifices continued in Jerusalem even after the destruction of the Temple (Jer. 41:5), and it is interesting to note that in the book of Jeremiah as well, the pilgrimage described took place in the seventh month. The books of Haggai (2:14–19) and Zechariah (7:2–3) both refer to the ritual system that was in place before the construction of the Temple. But Haggai,

in the same breath we are also informed that the leaders, with Cyrus's permission, are paying hewers, stonemasons, and workers to import building materials and facilitate the advancement of the program. In their second year, the people begin appointing priests and Levites to supervise the construction project, and leaders, including Kadmiel and the sons of Henadad, to supervise the builders.

Then, when the foundation is firmly established, the priests dress themselves in their vestments and, armed with trumpets, take up their positions, as do the Levites with their cymbals. They raise their voices and praise God and His goodness. But their shouts of happiness are not heard alone. They are fused, we are told, with the cries of those in the crowd who remember the First Temple in all its glory. And as the chapter concludes, the clamor created by the combination of those two experiences echoes into the distance.[26]

EZRA 4
THE "ADVERSARIES" OF JUDAH

If, until now, we were under the impression[27] that the restoration project progresses smoothly and unhindered, in Ezra 4 we learn that this is not the case. While we know from Ezra 1 that Cyrus gives the returnees permission to rebuild,[28] in Ezra 4 we discover that the construction is not completed until the days of Darius,[29] and that delay requires an explanation.

According to Ezra 4, those responsible for the stagnation of the process are labeled the "adversaries of Judah and Benjamin."[30] Those

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as part of his attempts to encourage the construction, criticizes the impurity of the sacrifices, telling the people that only a purification will rectify the situation (Japhet, "The Temple in the Restoration Period: Reality and Ideology," in *From the Rivers of Babylon,* 183–232).

26. The depiction of this scene is emblematic of Ezra-Nehemiah's worldview and is discussed in full in chapter four.
27. As we saw in the previous chapter, this opposition is referred to (v. 3), but, without context, the import of the reference is not fully understood.
28. 539 BCE.
29. The Temple was completed in the sixth year of Darius's reign (516 BCE).
30. Not all early Second Temple authors blamed external forces for the delay.

adversaries, according to the text, initially approach the leaders of the Judeans claiming that they too worship God and want to participate in building His Temple.[31] But Zerubbabel and Jeshua swiftly reject their request. Only "our people," the leaders declare emphatically, shall build. The Judeans maintain that their rejection is in keeping with the directives of the Persian government.[32] But their harsh repudiation has consequences.

The "people of the land" who are refused[33] seek to weaken the Judeans and foil their building efforts through political maneuvering. They send letters to the Persian kings claiming that the Judeans are rebuilding their Temple and city in preparation for the uprising they are mounting against the empire[34] and warn the kings against sanctioning the building of that rebellious city.[35] In the letter quoted in Ezra 4,[36]

Ezra-Nehemiah's choice to fault the Judeans' adversaries is an intentional rhetorical decision and is discussed in chapter four.

31. The group claimed to worship the God of Israel since Esarhaddon, king of Assyria (681–669 BCE), brought them to the land. More on their claim and its veracity or lack thereof can be found in chapter seven.

32. Their rejection, one of the most complicated and important topics in the work, is discussed at length in chapter seven.

33. The Hebrew phrase used, *am haaretz* (עם הארץ), has a wide semantic range within the Bible. In Ezra-Nehemiah, it likely refers to the inhabitants of Judah who were not considered members by the *gola* community. For a survey of the phrase's uses and evolutions, see Shemaryahu Talmon, "The Judean Am Ha'ares in Historical Perspective," in *Fourth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, vol. 1 (1967), 71–76.

34. Artaxerxes's reign (465–424 BCE) was marked by numerous points of instability, beginning with the revolt of his brother Hystaspes in Bactria at the beginning of his time in power. In 460 BCE, a nationalistic revolt supported by the Athenians broke out in Egypt. It was put down in 445 BCE, but in 448 BCE, Megabyzus, the satrap of Abar Nahara, also rebelled. All of this points to a climate ripe for the king to take extra precautions in response to reports on potentially rebellious peoples within his empire, particularly those living in Abar Nahara, located not far from Egypt (Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander,* 569–611).

35. In addition to the letter from the days of Artaxerxes, which comprises the bulk of the chapter, the text also mentions, without citing its content, that a letter was written in the time of Xerxes as well, giving readers the sense of unrelenting attempts at diplomatic subterfuge by the adversaries.

36. Ezra 4:8–6:18, along with 7:12–26, is written in Aramaic rather than Hebrew. And while we know that Achaemenid Judah was a bilingual society (Nehemiah 8:8) and

Rehum the chancellor and Shimshai the secretary urge Artaxerxes to refer back to older scrolls from the days of his predecessors.[37] In those

that there were even some children in Judah who, to their leaders' chagrin, did not speak Hebrew at all (Neh. 13:24), that does not explain the unusual narratological choice of the author. Scholars discuss this curious feature at length. Some suggest that maintaining the original language in which the documents were composed gives them an air of authenticity, which, when it comes to written documents, as we will see in chapter eight, is a central concern of the author. Others assert that the language itself is a literary tool used to denote the point of view being expressed (Bill T. Arnold, "The use of Aramaic in the Hebrew Bible: Another Look at Bilingualism in Ezra and Daniel," *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 22, no. 2 [1996]: 1–16). For an interesting theory on what the intentional use of Aramaic in late biblical and early Jewish texts might reveal about the complexities of Jewish identity in an era of foreign domination, see: J. Berman, "The Narratological Purpose of Aramaic Prose in Ezra 4.8–6.18," *Aramaic Studies* 5, no. 2 (2007): 165–91.

37. The seemingly "misplaced" documents that appear in Ezra 4 have been a source of confusion and debate. In the middle of recounting the challenges of Temple building in the days of Cyrus and Darius, the book jumps to letters from the days of Xerxes and Artaxerxes, who ruled after Darius and, more importantly, well after the Temple had been completed. The simplest explanation for the seemingly disordered material is that, while on the topic of "adversarial opposition," the author thought to include other times throughout the period in which opposition of the sort surfaced. So, he skipped ahead to later reigns and told of those events as well. Since the "adversaries" tried to undermine the wall-building project in the days of Artaxerxes, just as they had with the Temple-building project in the days of Cyrus and Darius, the author includes those events. Ezra 4:24, which scholars categorize as "repetitive resumption," functions to bring the reader back to where the narrator had been chronologically before his thematic tangent. See Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah: A Commentary* (Westminster John Knox, 1988), 111. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi likewise contends that the letter from the time of Artaxerxes is not misplaced. She asserts that in the period of Ezra-Nehemiah, the House of God (which Eskenazi distinguishes from the word *heikhal,* temple), extended beyond the Temple to include the city and its walls. As such, any discussion about opposition to building the House of God would necessarily include opposition to building the city's walls, which is why, according to Eskenazi, the letter from Artaxerxes's time was not only perfectly in place but was also a carefully situated rhetorical device that drove home the author's conception of the House of God. See Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose,* 55–56. Sara Japhet sees the documents in Ezra-Nehemiah as a structuring device that bracket off the subunits of the larger narrative. In her understanding, the author used documents to tell the story of the period, and, as such, when an authentic document could not be found, rather than forging one, he would simply "borrow" a similarly themed document and insert it into the missing

scrolls, the adversaries claim, the king will find records of Jerusalem's long history of insurrection and understand the dangers inherent in their current building. So the king does so, and his reply, in which he confirms the adversaries' allegations, demands that the Judeans terminate the building project.[38] Of course, as soon as the adversaries read the king's response, they waste no time getting to Jerusalem and enforcing the new decree. So, as the chapter ends, we learn that work on the Temple is frozen until the second year of King Darius.

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document's place. Obvious anachronisms, according to Japhet, were less important to the author than the ideological concepts he sought to convey. See Japhet, "History and Literature in the Persian Period," in *From the Rivers of Babylon,* 152–68. In a most intriguing of theories, Richard Steiner posits that the source of the four letters in Ezra 4–6 is in fact one report sent to Artaxerxes by Bishlam, Mithredath, and Tabeel after an archival search done at the king's behest. Like an excavated *tel*, Steiner explains, the newest information would have been most accessible, and as such the information is recorded in what appears as reverse chronological order. The author "flashes forward," according to Steiner, mentioning events from the days of Xerxes and Artaxerxes as they correspond to the quoted documents, and then brings the discussion back to Darius at the end. See Richard C. Steiner, "Bishlam's Archival Search Report in Nehemiah's Archive: Multiple Introductions and Reverse Chronological Order as Clues to the Origin of the Aramaic letters in Ezra 4–6," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125, no. 4 (2006): 641–85. While each theory has its strengths, all of these scholars seem to agree that the documents that appear out of place were not accidentally left by an uninformed author or sloppy editor. Rather, because written documents were revered in the restoration period (see chapter eight), the author incorporated them creatively into his storytelling. For more on the chronological issue, see Mark J. Boda, "Flashforward: Future Glimpses in the Past of Ezra 1–6," in *Let Us Go Up to Zion* (Brill, 2012), 245–60.

38. The previous records that they were told to consult included Persian as well as Babylonian (and possibly even Assyrian) records, as the Persians saw themselves as the legitimate successors of the Babylonians. As such, in the course of their search, they would have found records of the rebellions of Judah's kings and Jerusalem's eventual capture and destruction by Nebuchadnezzar. ANET, 288, 563–64; see also Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 63.

EZRA 5
THE JUDEANS SEND COUNTERCLAIMS

How and why the building project is restarted in the days of Darius is accounted for in Ezra 5. The chapter begins by mentioning the prophetic activities of Haggai and Zechariah,[39] which presumably result in Zerubbabel and Jeshua rebuilding the Temple in earnest.[40] Of course, when Persian officials get wind of what is happening, they demand to know the names of those responsible for the apparent flouting of the building ban.[41]

In the letter that they then send to King Darius, Tattenai,[42] Shetar Bozenai,[43] and their associates report the details of the building that they witnessed in Jerusalem. But in that same letter, they also include a quotation from the Judean builders themselves, defending the legitimacy of their actions.[44] Readers of Ezra-Nehemiah are already familiar with the content that serves as the basis for the Judean defense, but the

39. The content of their prophecies can be found in the books called by their respective names.
40. This image of the prophets encouraging and working in tandem with the priests and political leaders of the period gives readers, familiar with the tensions and corruption that marked the First Temple period, reason to believe things will be different this time.
41. The text informs us that while the adversaries were waiting for their letter to reach Darius and for the king to respond, God's providence ensured that in the interim the Judeans did not stop building.
42. The governor of the Province Beyond the River. According to Persian documents, a man by the name of Ushtani was the governor of Abar Nahara at the time. It is possible then that Tattenai was a high official responsible to the satrap but is referred to here as governor because he assumed the office later in the reign of Darius. See Charles F. Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (William. B. Eerdmans, 1982), 79–80. It is also possible that the word "governor" (פחה) was flexible and that more than one person could have held the title at once, which explains why Zerubbabel was also called governor at the time. Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah,* 77.
43. Likely the secretary. Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah,* 77.
44. There is no reason to lump Tattenai and his associates together with the "adversaries." As Persian officials, it was their job to determine whether the activities of locals within their province were conforming to Persian legislation. Furthermore, the early years of Darius's reign were marked by upheaval, and, as such, it is not surprising that even years later, internal affairs of the provinces were being carefully monitored.

narrative seems to imply that neither Darius nor the Persian officials overseeing the province were kept abreast of developments. So the text cites the Judeans' account of how their previous Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians when their ancestors angered God.[45] It tells of their exile to Babylon and of Cyrus's liberating decree that directed them to return to their land and rebuild the Temple. The citation even recalls the details of Cyrus's handing over of the Temple vessels to Sheshbazzar and his directive that they be brought back and placed in the restored Temple, which is to be built on its original site.

The Judeans then explain that while Sheshbazzar laid the Temple's foundation as instructed,[46] they are unable to finish what he started because those overseeing the province are unaware of Cyrus's decree. Contrary to what their adversaries have written about them, the letter insinuates, their desire to build the Temple is a purely religious act driven by respect and loyalty to Persia's great first king.

After quoting the Judeans, the letter ends with a humble request by its authors that the king search the royal archives in Babylon to determine the validity of the Judean claim and guide the officials in how to proceed.

EZRA 6
COMPLETION AND DEDICATION OF THE TEMPLE IN JERUSALEM

As per the appeal of his officials, Darius requisitions a search of the archives in Babylon, and eventually one scroll is found that corroborates the Judeans' story.[47] It substantiates their claim that in the first year of his reign, Cyrus issued an edict that the Temple in Jerusalem be rebuilt and even includes details of the building's dimensions and features. It

45. This seemingly minor point strategically focuses on their religious offenses against their God rather than their political offenses against Babylon when attributing a reason for the destruction. It serves as a response to the claims made about them in the Rehum letter (Ezra 4:15).
46. As mentioned above (note 8), this account conflicts with Ezra 3, which credits Zerubbabel with laying the foundation.
47. The document was not found in Babylon itself but in Ecbatana, the summer residence of some later Persian kings.

records that Cyrus assumes the cost of the building and instructs that the vessels from the First Temple are to be returned.[48]

So, with the new information at hand, Darius pens an edict of his own and sends it to Tattenai, Shetar Bozenai, their associates, and the surveyors of Abar Nahara. In that new edict, he warns his officials to keep their distance from the Judeans and to stop interfering in their building project. They are to let the Judean governor and their elders build their Temple on its original site and finance the cost of the building with the taxes collected in Abar Nahara. All that is needed for the Temple's functioning, Darius continues, is to be provided daily and promptly by the officials,[49] so that the Judeans can offer fragrant sacrifices to God and pray for the life of the king and his children.[50] The decree ends with a threat of impalement for anyone who deviates from the decree as well as the ruin of the offender's house.[51] And that threat extends to kings and nations who might dare to harm the House of God in Jerusalem.

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48. The version of the edict that appears in Ezra 6 differs in several ways from that which is recorded in Ezra 1. In addition to the language of composition, the most obvious of the differences, it is also significant that the proclamation in Ezra 1 connects the Jewish return with the building of the Temple, whereas Ezra 6 is only concerned with the details of the Temple's construction. Ezra 1 makes no mention of financial support from the Persian treasury, whereas Ezra 6 makes no demands on the Jews who remained behind in Babylon. These and other minor discrepancies have led some scholars to speculate about the authenticity of the different versions. In all probability, the differences between the documents reflect their different functions. While the first one was directed at a large audience and likely announced as a herald or placed as a placard in public spaces, the second was placed in the royal archives as an official "memorandum." The differences in their functions account for the differences in their language, style, and even content. For more on this, see Bickerman, "Edict of Cyrus" and Japhet, "The Temple in the Restoration Period."
49. Those provisions included bulls, rams, and sheep for offerings, as well as wheat, salt, wine, oil, and whatever else the priests in Jerusalem might request.
50. It was common practice at the time to pray for the king and other high officials. Jeremiah told the Jewish exiles to pray for the place to which they were exiled (Jer. 29:7). There is evidence that Cyrus requested prayers for his welfare and that of his son. And when the Jews of Elephantine wrote to Bagohi, the Persian governor of Judah, they assured him that if their Temple were rebuilt, as per their request, they would always pray for him. Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, 90.
51. The threat spoke of impalement using the very beams of the offender's house that would be removed upon violation of the decree. Impalement in the ancient Near