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Ezra-Nehemiah

Gary Edward Schnittjer

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Cover photo: Seal impression of Hezekiah, King of Judah, 8th cent. BCE

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1

Yahweh Initiates Restoration

(Ezra 1)



Overview

Ezra 1 reveals Yahweh's faithfulness to his word. Yahweh initiates a return of his people to rebuild his temple in Jerusalem.

The chapter begins with the edict of Cyrus (1:1–4) and narrates Sheshbazzar's return to Jerusalem with the temple vessels (1:5–11). The famous edict of Cyrus functions as an effect of Yahweh's word of promise through the prophet Jeremiah. The author presents this version of the edict of Cyrus—three versions of it appear in the Ezra-Nehemiah narrative (cf. 1:2–4; 5:13–15; 6:3–5)—as an invitation for God's people to go up to Jerusalem and rebuild his temple. The edict's leading invitations to go up and to build preview the structure of the first major section of Ezra-Nehemiah: going up (chaps. 1–3) and building (chaps. 4–6).

Yahweh himself initiates the restoration. He stirs the spirit of Cyrus and the spirit of the first group of returning exiles. Cyrus charges Sheshbazzar to bring the temple vessels back to Jerusalem. Yahweh's invisible actions mediated through administrators of the empire reveal his faithfulness. This new exodus lacks blood, frogs, and hail. Yet this divine work of renewal overflows with symbols of continuity with God's covenantal redemptive work, such as the oracles of Jeremiah and the temple vessels. The restoration represents a new chapter of the enduring mercy of Yahweh.

Translation

[*borrowed citation formula*] ¹In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to accomplish¹ the word of Yahweh by the mouth of Jeremiah, Yahweh stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom, and also in a writing declared: [*embedded 1st per. citation*] ²“Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: Yahweh, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has appointed me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. ³Any of those among you who are of his people, may their God be with them, may they go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and may they rebuild the house of Yahweh, the God of Israel; he is the God who is in Jerusalem. ⁴And may all of the remnant² in every place they sojourn be assisted by the people of their place with silver and gold, with goods and with animals, along with all of the freewill offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem.”

[*3rd per. narration*] ⁵The heads of the ancestral houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred up,³ arose to go up and to rebuild⁴ the house of Yahweh in Jerusalem. ⁶All their neighbors encouraged them with silver vessels, with gold, with goods, with livestock, and with valuable gifts, besides all that was freely offered.⁵ ⁷King Cyrus brought out the vessels of the house of Yahweh that Nebuchadnezzar had brought out from Jerusalem and had placed in the house of his gods. ⁸Cyrus king of Persia had them brought out by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer,⁶ and he counted them out to Sheshbazzar

1. Interpreters generally take “accomplish” (*klh*) in v. 1 as synonymous with “fulfill” (*ml'*; e.g., Ryle, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 4; Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 3). Frolov rightly notes that the Hebrew Bible nowhere else uses “accomplish” of fulfilled prophecy, but he goes on to overstress the meaning of this term as “to end” (*klh* Qal or Piel; here in Qal), and wrongly suggests that God stirred up Cyrus’s spirit “to cancel Jeremiah’s ‘word’ rather than actualize it” (“Prophecy of Jeremiah,” 600). Frolov’s problematic interpretation becomes evident when he concludes that the text “leaves it up to readers to select one [meaning] of them” (“Prophecy of Jeremiah,” 601). The Chronicler uses “accomplish” (*klh* Qal) in the sense of *finish* building the temple (1 Chron. 28:20; 2 Chron. 8:16), *complete* a task (29:34), *finish* sacrificing (29:28); in a similar vein, apparently, *accomplish* the word of Yahweh to Jeremiah (2 Chron. 36:22//Ezra 1:1). The Chronicler demonstrates the synonymous function of these terms when he refers to exile as “fulfilling” (*ml'* Piel inf. const.) the word of Yahweh through Jeremiah (2 Chron. 36:21) and in the next verse interchangeably uses “accomplishing” (*klh* Qal inf. const.) the word of Yahweh by means of Cyrus’s edict (36:22). The view here is that Ezra 1:1 uses “accomplish” (*klh*) in the sense of Piel “fulfill” the prophetic word. See the detailed explanation in OTUOTPL 2:762–65; Schnittjer, “What’s Old?,” 73–76.

2. The term “the remaining” (*hanniš'ār* Niphal) is definite and is used in a collective sense, “the remnant.”

3. The use of “stir up” in the causal stem (*'wr* Hiphil pf.) signals stirring up one’s motivations.

4. The use of “go up” (*lh*) and “build” (*bnh*) (both Qal inf. const.) connect with the jussive forms of these verbs in Cyrus’s edict in Ezra 1:3.

5. The use of “to offer freely” (*ndb* Hithpael inf. const.) matches the expectation by using a noun from this root in Ezra 1:4.

6. The term for “treasurer” (*gizbar*) is an Old Persian loanword and also appears as a loanword in an Aramaic context in 7:21 (CLLBH 79–80).

the prince of Judah. ⁹And this was the inventory: *[embedded list]* 30 gold basins; 1,000 silver basins; 29 knives; ¹⁰30 gold bowls; 410 paired silver bowls; 1,000 other vessels. ¹¹All of the vessels of gold and silver were 5,400. All these Sheshbazzar brought up, with the exiles⁷ who were brought up⁸ from Babylon to Jerusalem.

Interpretation

1:1. The first verse of Ezra-Nehemiah undergirds the entire story. The details of this important verse require extended evaluation.

Ezra 1:1 establishes Israel's God as the real source of restoration, covenantal community, and building the Second Temple. The divine acts that initiate and sustain the renewal are every bit as real as the more sensational terrors and wonders Yahweh let loose upon pharaoh and the Egyptians in the first exodus. While the new exodus, new temple, new Jerusalem, and postexilic worship are often beneficiaries of imperial edicts, official letters, and pronouncements of secular kings, the author constantly focuses on the divine mover. Ezra-Nehemiah often speaks of prayers, human acknowledgment of God's mercies, and even, as here, makes explicit the invisible acting of God upon the spiritual interior of the civil ruler and Yahweh's own remnant.⁹

"In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia" sets the time. The first year refers to 539 BCE, when Cyrus took Babylon. Cyrus had already been leading his army through a series of conquests for some years before this time.¹⁰ Dating events according to imperial rulers is a signature feature of postexilic biblical writings (see, e.g., Hag. 1:1; Zech. 1:1; Esther 1:1; Dan. 2:1; also see "Chronological and Narrative Structure" in the introduction). Cyrus appears many times in Ezra 1–6 (see Ezra 1:1, 2, 7, 8; 3:7; 4:3, 5; 5:13, 14, 17; 6:3, 14) and elsewhere in scripture (Isa. 44:28; 45:1; Dan. 1:21; 6:28[29]; 10:1; 2 Chron. 36:22–23).

The first verses of Ezra-Nehemiah are identical with the last couple verses of Chronicles (Ezra 1:1–3a//2 Chron. 36:22–23). Reexamination of the citation formulas in 2 Chron. 36:21, 22, and Ezra 1:1 uncovers evidence showing that the latter two verses depend on 2 Chron. 36:21, with Ezra 1:1 being the youngest of the three, as explained under "Date" in the introduction. The Chronicler ends in the middle of a sentence of Cyrus's edict ("may they go up") to emphasize the intended priority of right temple worship. The Ezra-Nehemiah

7. The term woodenly "the exiled (one)" (*gôlâ*) functions as a collective.

8. The verb "were brought up" (*bē'ālôt*, Niphal inf. const. of *'lh*) is probably passive rather than reflexive. See my comments on Ezra 1:11.

9. For explicit acknowledgment of acts of God by the characters and the author, see Ezra 1:1, 5; 5:2, 5; 6:14; 7:6, 9, 27; 8:31; Neh. 2:8; 4:15, 20; 6:12, 16; 9:33; 12:43. See also "Yahweh's Faithfulness" in the introduction.

10. On the chronology of Achaemenid rulers, see "Ancient Near Eastern Context" in the introduction.

narrative opens with a fuller presentation of Cyrus's edict that emphasizes Yahweh accomplishing his word as well as the details of continuity between the first exodus and the return from exile.

What does the "word of Yahweh by the mouth of Jeremiah" refer to? The traditional view, which seems correct, is the seventy years expected in Jer. 25:11–12 and 29:10. But since Ezra does not spell that out, other contexts in Jeremiah have been proposed, including Jer. 17:19–27; 23:1–8; 29:10–14; chaps. 30–33.¹¹ Though Ezra-Nehemiah alludes to Jeremiah elsewhere (Jer. 17:19–22 in Neh. 13:15–22), there is good reason to see Ezra 1:1 as alluding to the seventy years. The most important evidence is the explicit reference to the seventy years leading into the synoptic parallel of 1:1 in 2 Chron. 36:21. This corresponds with several references to Jeremiah's seventy years in the postexilic period, including the people's excuses for not rebuilding the temple ("It is not time," Hag. 1:2), the judgment of Jerusalem (Zech. 1:12), the people wanting to stop fasting because the seventy years are nearly over (7:5), as well as an allusion to Daniel's prayer about the seventy years (Dan. 9:2) in Neh. 1:5.¹² All of this gives us strong reason to think that Ezra 1:1 sees the edict of Cyrus as a fulfillment of Jeremiah's seventy years.

Several scriptural contexts emphasize the seventy years differently.¹³ The Chronicler explains the seventy years of exile in terms of completing the land's Sabbath years with no temple (just over seventy years between the destruction of the temple in 586 BCE and its rebuilding in 515 BCE). But Jeremiah speaks of the seventy years earlier than this in a letter to the exiles of 597 BCE (Jer. 29:4–23). In any case, Ezra-Nehemiah emphasizes Yahweh as stirring up the spirit of the Persian king to accomplish Jeremiah's word. In Ezra-Nehemiah, restoration begins with Yahweh himself.

The claims of fulfillment in Ezra 1:1 and the failure of the restoration within the Ezra-Nehemiah narrative creates great difficulty. Some interpreters handle these difficulties by reading against the sense of the text and claiming "partial fulfillment."¹⁴ That the Second Temple did not measure up to Solomon's Temple is used to get at readers' dissatisfaction with the restoration narrative in Ezra-Nehemiah.¹⁵ The present approach rejects the partial fulfillment view and follows the interpretation of the author of Ezra-Nehemiah that Yahweh stirred the spirit of Cyrus to accomplish his prophetic word through Jeremiah.¹⁶ Ezra opens with the bold claim that the edict of

11. See Karrer-Grube, "Scrutinizing," 150–57; and see Campbell, "Structure, Themes, and Theology," 403.

12. See *OTUOTPL* 2:160–61.

13. On the seventy years of Jeremiah in scripture, see Schnittjer, "Individual Versus Collective," 126–29.

14. See McConville, "Fulfillment of Prophecy," 207; Ulrich, *Now and Not Yet*, 6–7, 25.

15. See Gilhooley, *Edict of Cyrus*, 54, 137.

16. On "accomplishment" as "fulfillment," see the translation footnote on Ezra 1:1.

Cyrus offers decisive evidence of Yahweh's faithfulness to accomplish his word through Jeremiah.

The version of the edict on the Cyrus Cylinder encourages return to the homeland and reestablishment of traditional worship of patron deities. Cyrus seeks goodwill with the gods of the nations as well as his subjects to whom he grants these liberties. The Cyrus Cylinder (6th cent. BCE) is an eight-and-a-half-by-three-inch baked clay barrel-shaped inscription to be placed with other building inscriptions celebrating Cyrus's support for restoring Babylonian worship. The Babylonian Chronicle corroborates the historical reliability of the claims of the Cyrus Cylinder to restore Babylonian worship.¹⁷ The Cyrus Cylinder provides both historical corroboration and interpretive analogy for the version of the edict of Cyrus embedded in Ezra 1.¹⁸ In the following excerpt, note the contrast Cyrus makes between Nabonidus's (556–539) neglect of Marduk's temple over and against his own support (bold). Also notice Cyrus restoring displaced people to their homeland (underlining).¹⁹

The worship of Marduk, king of the gods, he [Nabonidus] removed from his mind. He repeatedly did that which was bad for his city. Daily [. . .] he destroyed all his [subjects] with an unending yoke. . . . Marduk . . . searched through all the countries, examined (them), he sought a just ruler to suit his heart, he took him by the hand: Cyrus, king of Anshan, he called, for dominion over the totality he named his name. . . . I, Cyrus, king of the universe, . . . **set up, with acclamation and rejoicing, the seat of lordship in the palace of the ruler. Marduk** . . . daily I cared for his worship. My numerous troops marched peacefully through Babylon. I did not allow any troublemaker to arise in the whole land of Sumer and Akkad. The city of Babylon and all its cult-centres I maintained in well-being. . . . All their people I collected and brought them back to their homes.

A couple of observations regarding the version of Cyrus's edict on the Cyrus Cylinder provide context to interpret it. First, since the Cyrus Cylinder focuses on Marduk and Babylon, it does not indicate a general return of exiles to their respective homelands. The returns mentioned in this cylinder refer to peoples of Mesopotamia.²⁰ Second, the Cyrus Cylinder provides evidence that Cyrus likely produced other edicts to support local deities and their temples.²¹ The Cyrus Cylinder corroborates the historical veracity of Ezra 1:1–4.

The causative stem of the term "stirred up" (*'wr*) in v. 1 in reference to the spirit of Cyrus can mean wake up or put into motion or initiate.²² The author

17. See ABC 7 iii 21–22 (110).

18. So also Japhet, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 50.

19. Quoted from PE 70–72, emphasis added.

20. See Kuhrt, "Cyrus Cylinder," 87.

21. See Kuhrt, "Cyrus Cylinder," 93.

22. See HALOT 1:802–3, *'wr* II.

may be using the language applied to Zerubbabel by the prophet Haggai (who in turn is using the language of Isa. 45:13; Jer. 51:1, 11) to explain how God also worked in the political edict (Hag. 1:14).²³ Yahweh initiates renewal by moving the spirit of the celebrated first returning exiles (Ezra 1:5; cf. Neh. 7:5).

The concept of a deity stirring a ruler's heart in ancient temple building can be compared to Ezra 1:1 (cf. 2 Chron. 36:22). Among Nebuchadnezzar's building projects are two ziggurats, one in Babylon and another in nearby Borsippa. The two-column foundational cylinders of the Borsippa ziggurat called E-ur-me-imin-anki (House that controls the seven *Me*'s [decrees] of heaven and underworld) reads, in part: [Nebuchadnezzar said,] "My great lord Marduk *stirred my heart* to rebuild it."²⁴ The acknowledgment of divine initiative and sanction for ancient religious building projects is one part of the larger ideological apparatus that accompanies such projects. This traditional aspect of divine motivation of the king becomes an entry point for biblical writers to identify a concrete testimony of fulfillment by Cyrus of God's word through his prophets.

1:2–4. The edict of Cyrus provides a decisive function in Ezra-Nehemiah. Most importantly, the edict is an effect of Yahweh's providential and active redemptive will (Ezra 1:1). Yahweh himself accomplishes his word, and Cyrus serves as a tool. The author repeatedly comes back to the edict of Cyrus as a generative cause of numerous additional acts of God's mercy. For instance, when the temple builders face local opposition, they explain their mission as defined by Cyrus (4:3). Nearly two decades later, the Yahwistic Judeans make the same claims about Cyrus to provincial rulers who accuse them before Darius (5:13–17). When Darius has the royal archives searched, it is a copy of the edict of Cyrus found in the archives that decides the matter (6:2). When Darius issues his own decree on behalf of the Judeans, he begins by quoting this other archival version of the edict (6:3–5) and, based on it, instructs the provincial accusers to lend their full support to the temple-building project in Jerusalem (6:6–12). The panoramic summary in 6:14 connects the entire section together, which began with the edict of Cyrus, and even connects it to the sequels under Artaxerxes (cf. 4:11–22). "The elders of the Judeans continued building by the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah son of Iddo. They built and finished by the command of the God of Israel

23. The verb "stir up" (*'wr*) is connected with building the temple only in Hag. 1:14 and Ezra 1:1/2 Chron. 36:22. See Goswell, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 55.

24. George, "Stele of Nebuchadnezzar II," 169, emphasis added. The italicized Akkadian phrase "stirred the heart" and the Hebrew phrase "stirred up the spirit" (Ezra 1:1) are related semantically, not linguistically. The Akkadian verb "stir" (*dekū*) is used elsewhere of Marduk prompting a building project (CAD 3:128 [6.c]), and the Akkadian noun "heart" (*libbu*) is often used with the sense of "mind," "intention," or the like (CAD 9:169–70). Thank you to Nancy Erickson for help with this Akkadian phrase. For images of the so-called Tower of Babel stele, see Schnittjer, *Torah Story*, 85.

and by *the decree of Cyrus* and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia” (6:14, emphasis added). The divinely motivated edict of Cyrus, then, undergirds the entire restoration project, concretely in the case of Darius’s archival research (6:1–5), and by analogy in the case of Artaxerxes’s official support of Ezra (7:12–26) and Nehemiah (Neh. 2:7–8). While all of this will be unpacked along the way in Ezra-Nehemiah, the critical point here is how it all begins. Covenantal renewal starts with Yahweh, yet not out of the blue. The work of Yahweh through Cyrus testifies to the faithfulness of God, who had proclaimed these things long ago through his preachers Isaiah and Jeremiah (Isa. 44:28–45:1; Jer. 25:11–12; 29:10).

On the human plane, Cyrus’s edict promotes religious toleration, which may simply have been good politics. Religion was big business, with the temples of the big cities of ancient lower Mesopotamia often employing thousands of worship personnel. Previous lack of commitment to the temple of Marduk by the Chaldean overlords antagonized the Babylonian priests and temple personnel toward the Chaldean invaders. The Cyrus Cylinder promotes the religious toleration of Cyrus by demonstrating him throwing in his support for the temple of Marduk in Babylon (see above). The dissatisfaction of the worship personnel with the Chaldeans combined with the religious toleration exemplified in the edict of Cyrus partially explains why Cyrus’s forces can simply walk into Babylon and overthrow the Chaldeans, with Cyrus being hailed as a hero.²⁵

The version of the edict of Cyrus in 1:2–4 offers categorical support for the temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem in powerful and elegant language. Two other versions of Cyrus’s edict appear later in the story (Ezra 5:13–15; 6:3–5).²⁶ Cyrus acknowledges his debt to Israel’s God: “Yahweh, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth” (1:2). Cyrus makes explicit that Israel’s God has appointed him to rebuild the shrine at Jerusalem. There is no evidence that Cyrus devoted himself personally to Israel’s God.²⁷ The evidence points to Cyrus dispensing religious liberties for political advantage.²⁸

Isaiah voices Yahweh’s word in first person: “The one who says of Cyrus, ‘My shepherd will accomplish all my purposes,’ and says of Jerusalem, ‘It shall be rebuilt,’ and of the temple, ‘Its foundation shall be established’” (Isa. 44:28). Although Ezra 1:1 names Jeremiah, Ezra 1:2–4 programmatically sets up the entire first section of the narrative to accomplish Cyrus’s will along the lines of Isaiah’s oracle.²⁹ This accords with the normal style of Ezra-Nehemiah

25. See ANET 315.

26. For side-by-side layout, see OTUOTPL 2:143–46; cf. OTUOT 652–54. See also Fried, *Ezra*, 63.

27. See Kuhrt, “Cyrus Cylinder,” 89.

28. See Kuhrt, “Cyrus Cylinder,” 93.

29. For other cases of citing one text blended with one or more others, see Schnittjer, “What’s Old?,” 65–73.

telling the story based on scriptural templates, without direct citation. The importance of Cyrus's edict to temple and city in Ezra 4–6 is anticipated by the context in Isaiah. The prophet refers to Cyrus as Yahweh's "messiah" (45:1) and has Yahweh address his anointed one "in order that you will know that I am Yahweh, the one who calls you by your name, the God of Israel" (45:3). While auditors may be taken aback by hearing a foreign ruler referred to as "his messiah," it seems, in the case of this remnant-friendly ruler, less jarring than the tyrannical Nebuchadnezzar directly being called "my servant" (Jer. 25:9 MT; 27:6 MT; in both cases, the LXX lacks "my servant") for his terrifying conquest, or inferring that Nero is "God's servant" (Rom. 13:4). In Ezra 1, Cyrus's edict is a function of Yahweh's sovereign will to accomplish his word through the prophets.

The jussive verb forms of 1:3, inviting God's people to "go up" to Jerusalem and "to rebuild" the temple, provide basic structure to the first major section of narration. Ezra 1–3 narrates the returning exiles and 4–6 tells of overcoming obstacles to rebuild the temple.³⁰ Both phases of restoration begin with Yahweh's word and are empowered by his spiritual work upon Cyrus. Those who build the temple look back to the edict to explain themselves to their opposition. Zerubbabel and company claim that Cyrus has "commanded us" (*šūwwānû*, 4:3) to build the temple. The emphasis for Zerubbabel is not on the directive so much as on the addressees, "commanded *us*." The majority of God's people who remained in diaspora permanently were in no danger of punishment for disobeying the king's orders. The jussive expresses wish or desire, but it leaves room for response by auditors.

Cyrus's invitation begins with God's people in diaspora. Appealing to the remnant accents continuity and fits with the narrated events as fulfillment of the prophetic word. The use of the expression "go up" (*lh*) also echoes the first exodus (cf. Exod. 3:8, 17).³¹ The exiles are the remnant of God's people to whom he spoke his word through Jeremiah. The lengthy list of returning exiles in Ezra 2 who prove their descent from their ancestry in the Davidic kingdom underlines the author's concern for verifiable fulfillment. Cyrus's invitation does not stop with the returning remnant but includes their associates, wherever they are across the empire. They are to provide precious metals and livestock for the temple in Jerusalem. Cyrus may be emphasizing that the expenses for the building project should not come from royal funding but from private sources.³² These are to be given along with freewill offerings. Interpreters often see exodus typology in Ezra 1 extending to the similar plundering of the Egyptians in Exod. 12:35, 36.³³ This fits in a general way

30. See Lortie, "These Are the Days."

31. So Japhet, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 58.

32. See Japhet, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 58.

33. See Thambyrajah, "'Exodus' in Diaspora," 7; McConville, "Fulfillment of Prophecy," 208n12; Japhet, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 59.

because of other exodus typology even while emphasis here falls on freewill offering and worship, not plundering.³⁴

1:5. The divine initiative among the remnant in Ezra 1:5 matches the divine initiative of v. 1. God “stirs up” (*ʿwr*) the spirits of the leaders of tribes of the former kingdom of Judah in the same way Cyrus’s spirit was stirred up. Narration of the interior view—God’s view of things, so to speak—is essential to interpreting the restoration. Cyrus’s edict is framed as an effect of God’s moving upon his spirit rather than a shrewd political maneuver to trade leniency and tolerance for submissive loyalty, even if that is what Cyrus had in mind. Likewise, the inception of the impulse for the captives to return stems not from nostalgia, fortune seeking, patriotism, or even a commitment to God’s word. Restoration begins with God’s work on the spirit.

The author’s choice of the term “stir up” (*ʿwr*) in v. 5 may have been motivated especially by the programmatic use of “stir up” (*ʿwr*) in Hag. 1:14. There Yahweh is the subject who stirs up the spirits of Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the remnant to build the temple (cf. Zech. 2:13[17]).³⁵ Using this term to initiate the return to build the temple nicely sets up continuity with the appearance of Haggai and Zechariah to activate the people by the prophetic word in Ezra 5:1 and 6:14.

Ezra 1:5 refers to Judah, Benjamin, and Levi. The ancient kingdom of David had originally been made up of twelve tribal groups who represented the descendants of each of Jacob’s sons. The short-lived Israel-wide kingdom ended when some of the tribal groups seceded to form a competing kingdom centered on the dominant tribe of Ephraim (see 1 Kings 11–12). Several tribes remained with Judah and the Davidic king: Benjamin, Levi (at least those who lived in the Judean region and served at the temple in Jerusalem), and, presumably, Simeon, the southernmost tribe (actually situated within Judah). The Chronicler makes the point that Yahwistic Israelites from every tribe permanently immigrated into the region of Benjamin and Judah when Jeroboam set up golden calves in Bethel and Dan (2 Chron. 11:3, 13, 16; cf. 15:9). In that sense Benjamin and Judah represent all Israel.³⁶

God’s working on the spirits of the returning exiles led them to arise, return to their homeland, and rebuild a shrine for their God. Notice the active verb in v. 5 (“[they] arose”) in contrast to the passive verb in v. 11 (“were brought up”; see comments on 1:11 below).

1:6. The author uses language to connote continuity with Cyrus’s edict. The author reports that those from among whom the remnant were leaving “freely offered” gifts (see the noun from the same root in Ezra 1:4). On one hand, the reuse of the same or similar terms may point to a conservative style

34. See the comments on Ezra 1:6; and Knowles, “Pilgrimage Imagery,” 58–60.

35. See OTUOT 640–41.

36. See OTUOT 776–77.

of narration, sticking closely to the sources, in this case arguably the edict in vv. 1–4.³⁷ On the other hand, the resultant story demonstrates substantial continuity by reusing language similar to the edict in the subsequent narrative. The implication is that the restoration starts with and unfolds according to the powerful and reality-shaping word of God.

The imagery of collecting offerings before setting out on a journey to the homeland may also make a subtle, indirect allusion to their ancestors leaving Egypt.³⁸ After the series of cosmic terrors, the Egyptians are depicted as delighted to be plundered and give much to see the Israelites on their way out of Egypt (Exod. 12:35–36). The psalmist celebrates that God brought them out with silver and gold and the Egyptians were glad when they departed (Ps. 105:37–38). The present narrative does not simply echo the exodus but transforms it in accord with Cyrus's edict and the restoration of the temple. It is typology with a twist. Some go further and see this as the beginning of a series of exodus-conquest allusions, including Ezra departing in the first month (Ezra 8:31) and the people intermarrying with the "Canaanites" (9:1).³⁹

1:7–8. The return of the temple vessels serves as a tangible symbol of God's faithfulness. The passage narrates that Cyrus personally brought out the vessels in v. 7, but this is in an instrumental sense, since it is enacted by his delegates in v. 8. Framing this as direct action by Cyrus illuminates fulfillment by narrative continuity, not that Cyrus personally helped with unloading the temple.⁴⁰ In this way, even when narration speaks directly, v. 7 with v. 8 trains readers to understand delegation and instrumentality, accenting covenantal and theological continuity. Many times the author and the persons in the narrative attribute actions and outcomes to God immediately after explaining a human subject of the actions (see the long list of references in the comments on 1:1).

These vessels are artifacts that signal tangible continuity between the First Temple and the restoration. The vessels are simultaneously a fixed entity and a fluid symbol. First, as a fixed entity the prophets and biblical narrators make much of the removal and return of the temple vessels (Isa. 39:6; 52:11–12; Jer. 27:21–22; 2 Kings 20:17).⁴¹ Relative to the vessels removed in 597 BCE when Jehoiachin was exiled (2 Kings 24:13; 2 Chron. 36:7, 10), Jeremiah countered the optimism of the false prophets, assuring the Jerusalem court that they would not be back anytime soon (Jer. 27:16; contra 28:3, 6; cf. Dan. 1:2).

37. See "Literary Artifacts and Narrative" in the introduction.

38. See OTUOTPL 2:137; OTUOT 641.

39. See Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, 363.

40. A near contemporary of the author of Ezra-Nehemiah, Aristotle (ca. 335 BCE) notes that ancient authors choose how to voice narratives (*Poetics* 1460a.7–8). For an example of direct discourse revoiced as narration, see 2 Kings 22:4//2 Chron. 34:9.

41. See OTUOT 884.

Nebuchadnezzar took additional temple vessels in 586 BCE when he destroyed Jerusalem (2 Kings 25:13–15; 2 Chron. 36:18; Jer. 52:18–20). Taking the temple vessels seems like a substitute for the standard “godnapping” by forced removal of divine statues since the temple in Jerusalem contained no image of God.⁴²

Second, as a fluid symbol the ancient function of the temple vessels needs to be appreciated over and against modern assessment of the material vessels themselves. The gap between modern interpreters and ancient narrators can be seen when trying to understand how Nebuchadnezzar can take temple vessels in 586 BCE (2 Kings 25:13–15) when he had already taken “all” (*kōl*) the temple treasures and chopped up “all the vessels of gold” (24:13, emphasis added). It can be argued the narrator is exaggerating⁴³ or mistaken.⁴⁴ Moderns may wonder how Nebuchadnezzar could take away all the vessels Solomon had made (24:13) after Jehoash king of Israel had long ago taken “all the vessels” (14:14) alongside similar temple lootings by Shishak, Asa, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (1 Kings 14:26; 15:18; 2 Kings 16:8; 18:15, 16).⁴⁵ Elsewhere the author of Kings says that Nebuchadnezzar took “all” the people of Jerusalem into exile but then follows up by acknowledging that the poorest people were left behind (24:14). The expression “all” in these cases seems to have an idiomatic rather than a literal sense.

The mention of vessels being entrusted to Sheshbazzar also instigates challenges.⁴⁶ Sheshbazzar has been mistakenly identified with two different biblical persons.⁴⁷ Some have wrongly identified Sheshbazzar (*šēšbaššar*) with Shenazzar (*šen’aššar*), fourth generation from Jehoiachin (1 Chron. 3:18). And, beginning at least with Josephus, Sheshbazzar has been identified with Zerubbabel.⁴⁸ This latter identification arises because both Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar are involved with establishing the temple foundation (Ezra 3:10; 5:16) as well as both being called “governor” (5:14; Hag. 1:1; 2:2, 21). This identification lacks evidence and seems unlikely based on Tattenai’s letter mentioning Sheshbazzar as a past figure and the testimony of Zerubbabel, who is present with Tattenai (Ezra 5:14–16; cf. 5:2). In short, Ezra 5:2, 14–16

42. See Holloway, *Assur Is King!*, 145–46; Newsom, “God’s Other,” 33.

43. See Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings*, on 24:13.

44. See Montgomery, *Books of Kings*, 556; Gray, *1 & 2 Kings*, 692.

45. Similarly, see all the vessels in 2 Chron. 28:24 and 29:18.

46. Sheshbazzar is a Babylonian name that may mean “Shamash protects the father” (see NET note; Shamash is the sun god). Sheshbazzar is here called “prince” (*nāšī*) of Jerusalem, using a royal term, but later he is referred to by a more administrative Aramaic term, “governor” (*pehā*, 5:14). “Governor” (*pehā*) is also used as a loanword in the Hebrew sections of the book (e.g., Neh. 5:14). See Ganzel, “Sheshbazzar and Nehemiah,” 606–8. Sheshbazzar should not be identified with Jehoiachin’s fourth son Shenazzar (1 Chron. 3:18).

47. See detailed discussion in Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 139–142, 153–57; Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 40–41, 85, 88–89; Talmon, “Ezra and Nehemiah,” 319–20.

48. See Josephus, *Ant.* 11.1.3 §§11–13. See also Ryle, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, xxxi–xxxii, 12–13; Japhet, *From the Rivers*, 53–84, esp. 76–77; Eskenazi, *Ezra*, 144–45.