

New Perspectives on
Ezra–Nehemiah

*History and Historiography, Text,
Literature, and Interpretation*

Edited by
ISAAC KALIMI

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Part One

History and Historiography



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Ezra's Use of Documents in the Context of Hellenistic Rules of Rhetoric

LISBETH S. FRIED

The literary and historical problems concerning Ezra 1–6 have plagued readers and exegetes since antiquity. These chapters are ostensibly about the construction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem and culminate in the temple's dedication in the sixth year of Darius I. The source of the difficulty is the inclusion in chap. 4 of a letter to King Artaxerxes I, the grandson of Darius I. Though in canonical Ezra the letter to Artaxerxes has nothing to do with the story of the Temple's construction but is only about building Jerusalem's city wall, the author of 1 Esdras adds the statement that the Jews who had arrived in Jerusalem were not only rebuilding that rebellious city but were also "laying the foundations of the temple" (2:17).¹ Thus, 1 Esdras explains the inclusion of the letter by putting it in the context of temple building. It is clear not only from this addition to the letter but also from 1 Esdras's arrangement of the chapters that its author assumes that the Darius under whom the temple was dedicated must have followed Artaxerxes. The chapters in 1 Esdras about the three youths and the return to Judah under Zerubbabel follow the letters to and from Artaxerxes and precede the letters to and from Darius. This is 1 Esdras's attempt to make sense out of the confusing array of narrative and letters in Ezra.²

Josephus deals with the confusion by changing the names of both Xerxes and Artaxerxes (of Ezra 4 = 1 Esdras 2) to "Cambyses" and

Author's note: This essay is indebted to the work of Sylvie Honigman in *The Septuagint and Homeric Scholarship in Alexandria: A Study in the Narrative of the Letter of Aristeas* (London: Routledge, 2003) and to her comments and those of H. Williamson on an earlier draft of the essay.

1. It is not likely that the author of our canonical Ezra would have *removed* this statement from his text or even that it dropped out.

2. For a discussion of the relative priority of 1 Esdras versus canonical Ezra, see *Was 1 Esdras First? An Investigation into the Priority and Nature of 1 Esdras* (ed. L. S. Fried; *Ancient Israel and Its Literature* 7; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011).



merging their letters into one (*Ant.* 11:22). Thus, he puts everything into its correct chronological order. The commentary ascribed to Rashi³ makes sense of these chapters by concluding that Artaxerxes was the throne name of all the Persian kings. Artaxerxes to whom the letter was sent in Ezra 4 was in fact the throne name of Cyrus, and Artaxerxes under whom Ezra and Nehemiah served was the throne name of Darius (ascribed to Rashi on Ezra 4:7).

Modern commentators are equally mystified. Batten moves his discussion of the Aramaic letters in chap. 4 to follow his discussion of the Aramaic letters to and from Darius, thereby putting them in correct chronological order.⁴ Torrey (followed most recently by Edelman) concludes that the documents are wholesale forgeries, but that they follow the order of the Persian kings that was assumed in Jerusalem at the time—Cyrus, Xerxes, Artaxerxes, and Darius II.⁵ Most commentators conclude the documents are genuine, however. Had they been forgeries, the author would have made Cyrus or Darius the addressee, rather than Xerxes and Artaxerxes, so that the chronology would make sense.

Like Torrey, however, most commentators agree that the letters are included to serve a literary purpose. Porten argues that the author arranged the three letters in Ezra 4–7 from the most negative to the most positive for literary effect.⁶ Clines suggests that these letters in chaps. 4–6 function to illustrate the methods of the provincial government in resisting the plans of God and to fill the gap between 538 and 520.⁷ Williamson suggests that, because the author had just recorded a harsh rejection by Zerubbabel and his colleagues to the offer of these enemies to participate in temple building, he used these letters to demonstrate that his assessment of them as enemies later proved to be correct. This is close to the position suggested in this essay.⁸ Eskenazi argues that the

3. See I. Kalimi, *The Retelling of Chronicles in Jewish Tradition and Literature: A Historical Journey* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009) 189–242.

4. L. Batten, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1913).

5. C. C. Torrey, *Ezra Studies* (New York: Ktav, 1970) 140–57; D. Edelman, *The Origins of the ‘Second’ Temple: Persian Imperial Policy and the Rebuilding of Jerusalem* (London: Equinox, 2005) 180–208.

6. B. Porten, “The Documents in the Book of Ezra and the Mission of Ezra,” *Shnaton* 3 (1978–79) 194 [Hebrew].

7. D. J. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 76.

8. H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* (WBC 16; Waco, TX: Word, 1985) 57. Williamson does not clarify, however, that, unless the king under whom the temple is dedicated is Darius II, the “enemies” who are shown bribing officials



letter to Artaxerxes regarding the wall is germane to temple building.⁹ To the biblical writer, the temple includes the entire city, and the temple and the city would not be complete until Nehemiah comes in the 20th year of that same Artaxerxes to build the wall. The dedication of the house of God in Ezra 6:14–21 is only cursorily described because the city itself is not yet built. Japhet suggests that the biblical author wrote according to what she terms “the documentary imperative.”¹⁰ This “imperative” led him to employ source material even out of context. When he has no source to prove a point he’s made for one historical context, he takes a document from another time period and uses that.¹¹ Bedford suggests that the controversy between the returnees and the “peoples of the lands” was created simply to explain the delay in temple building.¹²

Recently, Steiner argued that the core of Ezra 4–6 is one archival document, with the letters to and from Darius I incorporated as an appendix at the end of the letters to and from Artaxerxes I. This explains the reverse chronological order of the letters, that is, why the letters to and from Darius I come after the letters to and from Artaxerxes I. The biblical author stuck the document into his text in its entirety.¹³ According to Steiner:

The biblical author . . . was fully aware of the correct order of the Persian kings and the reverse chronological ordering of his Aramaic source. He was consequently faced with an unusually difficult literary problem: how does one insert such a document into a chronologically ordered narrative? He hit upon a solution of extraordinary ingenuity. First he created a digression about attempts to thwart Jewish plans for reconstruction. He began the digression in 4:4–5. . . . In 4:6 he transformed the digression into a flashforward [into the reign of

to prevent the temple being built cannot be the same “enemies” who write to Xerxes and Artaxerxes to prevent the wall from being built.

9. T. C. Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra–Nehemiah* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988) 56.

10. S. Japhet, “‘History’ and ‘Literature’ in the Persian Period: The Restoration of the Temple,” *From the Rivers of Babylon to the Highlands of Judah: Collected Studies on the Restoration Period* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006; repr., 2011) 162.

11. This is also close to the view suggested here.

12. P. R. Bedford, *Temple Restoration in Early Achaemenid Judah* (Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism; Leiden: Brill, 2001) 112.

13. R. 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,” *JBL* 125 (2006) 641–85.



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Xerxes]. . . . In 4:7, he extended the flashforward into the reign of Artaxerxes.¹⁴

Thus, to Steiner, the biblical writer created the dissension in order to incorporate the document. Steiner does not say exactly why the author was so intent on incorporating the letter, and why it was so necessary for him to keep it intact when the author of 1 Esdras saw no problem in splitting it into its component parts. Steiner argues that the document was from Nehemiah's archive, that it originated as a response to Nehemiah's request to Artaxerxes to rebuild Jerusalem's city wall. Unfortunately, Steiner does not tell us why that crucial bit of information is absent from our text, nor does he explain why the document shows up here, in chaps 4–6 of Ezra in the context of temple building, and not in the context of the wall-building in the book of Nehemiah itself.

As noted in this brief overview, writers both ancient and modern have been baffled by the inclusion of the letter to Artaxerxes in Ezra 4, and much ink has been spilled accounting for it. Modern commentators generally assume that the controversy depicted in Ezra 4:1–5 was created to explain the letters that the biblical author had at hand. Few explain why the author felt it necessary to include the letters even if he had them.

Torrey argues, in contrast, that “from the literary point of view . . . this is all according to rule. . . . At first the villain triumphs, not by fair means, but through misrepresentation; but in the end he is overwhelmed.”¹⁵ In his view, the author created the controversy not in order to include the documents but to create drama in the story. He then used the fictional letters to prove the veracity of the controversy he created. The order of the letters is according to the order of the kings as it was known in the early Hellenistic period when the book was written.

Thus, there are two competing hypotheses regarding the inclusion of the correspondence with Artaxerxes: (1) the controversy in Ezra 4:1–5 was created to explain the genuine letters that predated the book, and (2) the controversy and the letters were both composed to create drama in the text.

Neither of these provides a satisfactory explanation, to my way of thinking. Neither explains why a controversy about wall building should be included in a story that seems to be at heart about temple building. It

14. *Ibid.*, 674.

15. Torrey, *Ezra Studies*, 160.



is the purpose of this paper to examine these hypotheses and to investigate the reason behind the peculiar literary composition of Ezra 1–6.

The Framework of Ezra 1–6

I have argued elsewhere that Ezra 1–6 is based on the Second Temple's actual bilingual building inscription.¹⁶ It is clear, however, that these chapters in Ezra are not just a simple building inscription. They are a hodgepodge: they are in both Hebrew and Aramaic, they include letters to and from a series of different Persian kings, they include a narrative segment about squabbles between various groups of peoples, they include lists of vessels and lists of returning residents, none of which belongs to the building-inscription genre. Why was all this extraneous material included? If the purpose of Ezra 1–6 was to tell the story of the temple's construction, why was not the building story itself sufficient? That it was obviously not sufficient implies that the story of the temple's construction, or even of its legitimacy, is not the purpose of Ezra 1–6. The goals of this essay are to understand the organization of these chapters, to try to arrive at the reason for including the lists, the narrative, and the letters, and to understand the purpose of these chapters.

Date of Composition

Williamson has argued that Ezra 1–6 was composed after Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13 was already completed.¹⁷ Further, both James VanderKam and I have independently tried to show that the reference to Darius the Persian in Nehemiah (Neh 12:22) is a reference to Darius III, not Darius II, and that the list of high priests mentioned in that verse is complete.¹⁸ If so, then Ezra 7–Nehemiah 13 was written in the Hellenistic

16. L. S. Fried, "The Land Lay Desolate: Conquest and Restoration in the Ancient Near East," *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period* (ed. O. Lipschits and J. Blenkinsopp; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003) 21–54; idem, *The Priest and the Great King: Temple-Palace Relations in the Persian Empire* (BJSUCSD 10; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004) 158–77.

17. H. G. M. Williamson, "The Composition of Ezra i–vi," *JTS* n.s. 34 (1983) 1–30.

18. L. S. Fried, "A Silver Coin of Yoḥanan Hakkôhen," *Transeuphratène* 26 (2003) 65–85, pls. II–V; J. C. VanderKam, "Jewish High Priests of the Persian Period: Is the List Complete?" *Priesthood and Cult in Ancient Israel* (ed. G. A. Anderson and S. M. Olyan; JSOTSup 125; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press,



period, after Darius III and after the advent of Alexander the Great, and Ezra 1–6 was also written in the Hellenistic period, under either Alexander or under the Ptolemies at the end of the 4th century.

Hellenistic Rules of Rhetorical Composition

If Ezra–Nehemiah was composed in the Hellenistic period, we may reasonably expect Hellenistic influences on the text.¹⁹ It may not be anachronistic therefore to compare the text to Hellenistic ideals of rhetorical composition. Rhetoric is the art of persuasion, and rhetorical composition spans the genres: speeches, histories, tragedies, comedies, all seek to persuade the audience.²⁰ Interpreting Ezra 1–6 according to rules of rhetoric may help us understand what the reader is to be persuaded of, and why the lists, the narrative, and the documents were included in the temple-building story.

According to Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.), texts have three ways to persuade (*Rhetoric* 1356a1). The first is by the personal character of the author—readers are more likely to be persuaded when they trust the author. The second depends on eliciting a positive emotional response from the reader, one disposed in favor of the writer (when the author writes in a forensic or historiographic context, the author must also elicit in the reader a positive emotional response toward the people he defends and a negative one toward the people he attacks). The third route to persuasion is the most important: the proof or apparent proof of the truth of the claim being made. Aristotle describes two types of proofs, internal and external. The internal proof is the argument and may either be deductive (by syllogisms) or inductive (by examples). External proofs are provided by witnesses, documents, written contracts, letters, and so on.

According to the rhetorical handbooks, a text ought to consist of four parts: prologue, narration, proof, and epilogue.²¹ The prologue

1991) 67–91; idem, *From Joshua to Caiaphas: High Priests after the Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004) 85–99.

19. For Hellenistic cultural influences on the societies of the Levant, see most recently the articles in Y. Levin, ed., *A Time of Change: Judah and Its Neighbors During the Persian and Early Hellenistic Periods* (London: T. & T. Clark) forthcoming.

20. C. Pelling, *Literary Texts and the Greek Historian* (London: Routledge, 2000) 1–2.

21. J. Wisse, *Ethos and Pathos from Aristotle to Cicero* (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1989) 13. Although originally intended for the orator, with the progress of



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should laud the character of the author and, in a forensic or historiographic text, the character of the men being defended; the epilogue should put the reader in a positive frame of mind and arouse a positive emotion toward the writer and the men he defends. Between the prologue and epilogue fall the narrative and the proofs. In a forensic or historiographic context, the narration provides the version of events to be proved. The centerpiece of the entire text is the proof—either internal or external. It alone actually persuades.

If Ezra 1–6 was composed according to Hellenistic rules of rhetorical historiography, then the chapters ought to be divisible into these four components: prologue, narration, proofs, and epilogue.

Prologue

Does Ezra 1–6 contain a prologue, and, if so, which chapters are included in it? According to the hypothesis, the letters should function as external proofs offered to justify a narrative. Because the letters have only to do with the events in Ezra 4:1–3, these verses must form the narrative to be proved, and everything before them must be prologue. We can test the hypothesis. If chaps. 1–3 are prologue, they would have been written solely to increase readerly confidence in the author and in those he defends, in this case, Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and his colleagues. To Aristotle, these things inspire confidence: (1) the author's apparent knowledge of his subject and (2) his and his characters' high moral quality and the goodwill they display toward the community of the implied reader (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1378a6).

As noted above, I had previously assumed that the author based his text on the actual Second Temple's building inscription. Nevertheless, the list of temple vessels deposited by Sheshbazzar (Ezra 1:9–11) and the list of the returnees to Judah (Ezra 2) have no place within the temple-building-story genre. If the author is following Hellenistic rules of rhetoric, however, then he would have inserted both lists in his prologue to display his detailed knowledge of the subject under discussion. Thus, these lists may have been added, not because the author had them at hand, but to increase the reader's confidence in the historical reliability of the text and the author's access to privileged sources.

writing, the rules of rhetoric were quickly applied to written texts (T. Morgan, *Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998] 190–226).



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Indeed lists, whether genuine or fictive, were a favorite device used by Greek historians to bolster the credibility of their history. Ctesias, for example, presents his readers with a spurious list of Assyrian kings that he claims to derive from Persian royal archives. He created the list to increase his credibility.²² The fictive list of translators in the *Letter of Aristeas* 47–50 is another example of the addition of lists to increase the credibility of the text and to display the writer’s knowledge of his subject.²³ Herodotus’s provision of the minutest details of the peoples, places, and events that he describes are likely intended to persuade the reader of his access to the sources rather than to provide historical facts, because his statements and the facts often conflict.²⁴ To show their command of the subject matter, historians also included genealogies in their reports, avoiding gaps by filling in the genealogies with spurious names. Herodotus’s genealogies of the Spartan kings (7:204, 8:131), for example, is partly historical and partly fictive, reaching back to Heracles. The genealogies of Jesus (Matt 1:2–16, Luke 3:23–38) link Jesus to David for obvious reasons, but do not agree even on the name of his paternal grandfather.

Besides exhibiting his command of the subject, rules of rhetoric demand that the author use the prologue to convince his readers of his and his characters’ high moral character. He must also convince his audience of his own good will toward them. A reader will be more trusting of an author and of those he defends if their high moral character and good will are convincing. Chapter 3 begins by stating that as soon as the returnees were settled in their towns, they gathered as one man in Jerusalem to build the altar to the God of Israel according to the law of Moses. They kept the festivals as prescribed, and offered the number and type of sacrifices that were required. Not only did they carefully follow the laws of Moses, but they also dutifully obeyed the edict of Cyrus by laying the foundations of the temple according to his directions, by paying the carpenters and masons their correct fees, and by bringing cedar trees from Phoenicia by sea to Jaffa as Cyrus authorized. The concern shown by Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the returnees for the laws of both God and Cyrus testify not only to their own high moral quality but also to the high moral quality of the author. The enthusiasm

22. The list of kings is quoted in Eusebius’s *Chronici canones* and preserved in J.-P. Migne, *Collection Intégrale et Universelle Des Orateurs Sacrés Du Premier et Du Second Ordre* (Paris: Gaume, 1892) 19:325–28.

23. Honigman, *The Septuagint and Homeric Scholarship*, 72.

24. S. West, “Herodotus’ Epigraphical Interests,” *Classical Quarterly* 35 (1985) 278–305.



depicted in building the altar and laying the foundations as soon as they arrive in Judah not only testifies to their own good will toward God, toward the Persian king, and toward the Jewish community, to which the implied reader presumably belongs, but it also exhibits the good will of the author. The inclusion of these events are consistent with rhetorical rules of Hellenistic historiography.

I have argued previously that the altar is one of the last things constructed when a temple is being rebuilt.²⁵ According to Mesopotamian temple-building protocol, the description in Ezra 3 of the altar and the sacrifices made on it is out of place. This type of description is usually placed at the end of Mesopotamian temple-building stories. By moving the scene from the end to the beginning, the author immediately conveys the piety, the high moral standards, and the good will of both himself and of those he portrays. In doing so, he also reveals the Hellenistic origin of the text. In Mesopotamia and Egypt, the great temples were the gods' homes and the twice-daily sacrifices their food. Thus, the temple was built first and the god ushered into it in order for sacrifices to begin. In contrast, the ancient Greek sanctuary consisted simply of an altar with a surrounding fence marking out the sacred district. There was usually no temple present at all.²⁶ Only rarely and usually much later would a temple be built. This is the pattern we see in Ezra 3.

These results suggest that the first three chapters of Ezra were written to follow the structure and content prescribed by Hellenistic rules of rhetorical historiography. They do not follow the typical Mesopotamian temple-building-story genre. Looking at the text in this way provides a fresh understanding of these chapters.

Narrative and Proofs

If the first three chapters of Ezra provide the rhetorical prologue to Ezra 1–6, then the reader should now be convinced of the knowledge, high moral quality, and good will of both the author and of those he defends—Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the returnees in general. If the author continues to follow Hellenistic rules of rhetorical historiography, the second section should be a narrative followed by proof of the narrative's veracity. The goal of a rhetorical composition is to persuade the reader of the truth of the events as narrated and must, *ex hypothesi*,

25. Fried, "The Land Lay Desolate."

26. J. D. Mikalson, *Ancient Greek Religion* (Blackwell Ancient Religions 2; West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).



have been the goal of Ezra 1–6. Thus, the documents would have been included to prove the veracity of the narrative, rather than the narrative having been created as a context for the documents.

Part 1

The first part of the narrative begins in Ezra 4:1–5.

When the enemies (*šārê*) of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returnees were building the temple of YHWH the god of Israel, they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of the fathers' [houses] and said to them, "Let us build with you, for like you, we have been inquiring of your god and to him we have been sacrificing from the days that Esarhaddon king of Assyria had brought us up here.

But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of fathers' [houses] of Israel said to them, "It is not for you, but it is for us to build the house of our god for we alone will build to YHWH the god of Israel just as Cyrus king of Persia commanded us." Then the *'am hā'āreš* undermined the resolve [lit., weakened the hands] of the people of Judah, and made them afraid to build. They bribed ministers in order to thwart their plans all the years of Cyrus, King of Persia and up to the reign of Darius, King of Persia. (Ezra 4:1–5)

According to the events narrated here, the *'am hā'āreš* are the enemies (*šārê*) of Judah and Benjamin. The author accuses these "enemies" of hiring officials to prevent the Jews from building the Temple of YHWH from the years of Cyrus up to the reign of Darius.²⁷ According to the laws of rhetoric, the narration should now be followed by proofs, and it is. An accusing letter that these enemies sent to King Xerxes (4:6) and a second accusing letter that another group (of enemies) sent to King Artaxerxes are mentioned (4:8). A third letter was also sent to Artaxerxes by a third group of people. This last letter and the king's response to it (4:17–22) are incorporated verbatim into the text of Ezra.²⁸

In closing this section, the biblical writer repeats the final clause of Ezra 4:5 in 4:24. Both verses (4:5, 24) refer to King Darius of Persia. Ezra 4:4–5 states:

27. I discuss the identity of these *'am hā'āreš* in "The *'am hā'āreš* in Ezra 4:4 and Persian Imperial Administration," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period* (ed. O. Lipschits and M. Oeming; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006) 123–45.

28. The second letter may just have been written to quote the third letter. See Steiner, "Bishlam's Archival Search."



Then the *‘am hā’areš* undermined the resolve of the people of Judah, and made them afraid to build. They bribed ministers in order to thwart their plans all the years of Cyrus, King of Persia and up to the reign of Darius, King of Persia.

Ezra 4:24 concludes the first phase of the narrative:

Then the work on the House of God in Jerusalem stopped and remained in abeyance until the second year of the reign of Darius, King of Persia. (Ezra 4:24)

Commentators point out that the repetition of the final phrase of 4:5 in 4:24 signals that the intervening material is a digression.²⁹ A resumptive clause occurs when an author inserts material into a text and repeats the verse on either side of the inserted material to indicate the insertion. The resumption allows the reader to pick up the narrative where it had left off. The intervening material is regarded as parenthetical and the repeated verses as a set of parentheses. Although Ezra 4:24 does not repeat 4:5 exactly, it still serves as a *Wiederaufnahmen*, a resumptive clause. Ezra 4:4–5 states that the *‘am hā’areš* bribed officials and so frustrated the plans of the Jews from the time of Cyrus up until the reign of Darius. Ezra 4:24 states that building began again in the second year of that same Darius. The intervening verses, vv. 6–23, while parenthetical, are not irrelevant. They are meant to demonstrate exactly how *‘am hā’areš* frustrated the plans of the Jews during all these years: not only did they bribe officials but they also wrote accusing letters to the kings.

The resumptive clause, Ezra 4:24, brings the narrative back to the literary present, back to the second year of Darius when the second phase of the narrative begins. The proofs offered in this first phase of the narrative are, as noted, the letter to Xerxes and the letters to and from Artaxerxes. Private letters between individuals have been part and parcel of Greek history writing since Herodotus.³⁰ Van den Hout examines nine letters that Herodotus quotes in full and states in conclusion that “no one will doubt that Herodotus never saw the letters of which he presents the direct text.”³¹ Herodotus includes the letters not because the subjects of his history wrote them and he happened to have them but in part to enliven the story. Rosenmeyer suggests however that let-

29. J. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra–Nehemiah, a Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988) 111; Williamson, “The Composition of Ezra i–vi;” idem, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 57.

30. Herodotus’s letters have been cataloged by M. van den Hout, “Studies in Early Greek Letter-Writing,” *Mnemosyne* 4/2 (1949) 19–41, esp. pp. 25–28.

31. Ibid, 28. So also, West, “Herodotus’ Epigraphical Interests.”



ters in historical works play the same role as do reported speeches, and we are all familiar with Thucydides' famous explanation of the speeches he incorporates into his history (I:22). Letters were a device that allowed speeches to take place between people who were far apart.³² As Thucydides makes clear, however, the historian is obligated to make the speeches, and the letters reflect the gist of what was actually said or written to the best that he is able. Neither speeches nor letters should be the creation of the historian; rather, they should be the creation of the perpetrator, even though they may be expressed in the historian's words.³³

The question at issue is exactly how does the correspondence with Xerxes and with Artaxerxes demonstrate the truth of the author's statement that the *'am hā'areš*, these enemies of the Jews, prevented them from building their temple in the time of Darius? The answer is they do not. The author seems not to have had direct evidence available to him to prove his contention that the *'am hā'areš* had bribed officials to prevent the temple from being built. Had he had direct proof, he would have provided it. Indeed, as commentators have long known, this is the greatest indication of the authenticity of the letters. If he had forged the letters, he would have placed them in the time of Darius. Why does he include the letters then? What do they prove? What the letters do is demonstrate not that these men in particular but that the *'am hā'areš* in general were the type of people who *would* write slanderous letters to prevent the temple from being built. They wrote slanderous letters in the time of Artaxerxes to prevent Jerusalem's city wall from being built, and so they were the sort who would write letters to prevent the temple from being built. According to Aristotle, when praising or accusing a man in a judicial proceeding, it is necessary to show that his acts are intentional, and this is all the easier if it can be shown that he is in the habit of doing such things (*Rhetoric* 1367b20). Aristotle advises that, "even if a man has not actually done a given good (or bad) thing, we shall bestow praise (or blame) on him, if we are sure that he is the sort of person who *would* do it" (*Rhetoric* 1367b33). By showing just what the *'am hā'areš* had done in the time of Artaxerxes, the letters demonstrate the character of *'am hā'areš* in general and show just what they are in the habit of doing. Once the devious character of this sort of person has been demonstrated, according at least to Aristotle's rules of foren-

32. P. A. Rosenmeyer, *Ancient Epistolary Fictions: The Letter in Greek Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 46.

33. C. W. Fornara, *The Nature of History in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) 142–45.



sic rhetoric, they can be blamed for other similar actions for which no actual external proofs are available. Part 1 of the narrative ends with the following verses:

When the copy of King Artaxerxes' letter was read before Rehum and the scribe Shimshai and their associates, they hurried to the Jews in Jerusalem and with the might of the troops made them stop. (Ezra 4:23)

It should be clear that the work that is referred to here, the work that was stopped by order of Artaxerxes and by the satrapal forces of Rehum and Shimshai, was the work on Jerusalem's city wall, not on the temple. Ezra 4:23 is followed by the resumptive clause:

Then the work on the House of God in Jerusalem stopped and remained in abeyance until the second year of the reign of Darius, King of Persia. (Ezra 4:24)

Because this is a resumptive clause, the "then" does not connect this statement to the verse immediately before it, but rather to verse 4:5. It is when the *'am hā'areš* bribed officials to try to prevent the temple being built that the work on the temple was stopped until the reign of Darius. We do not know when work on the temple was stopped. The stoppage is dated by 4:1 to the time of Zerubbabel, so also the time of Darius. Nor are we told how long the stoppage lasted; it may have been for the year or two at the beginning of Darius's reign. It may have only been for a few months. Ezra 5:8 records Tattenai's letter to Darius, written probably in that king's second year, that "the house of the great God is being built of hewn stone, and timber is laid in the walls; the work is being done diligently and prospers in their hands." Thus, work had progressed quite a bit beyond simply the foundations.³⁴

Part 2

The second phase of the narrative with its associated proofs begins in Ezra 5 in Aramaic:

Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them. Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua son of Jozadak set out to rebuild the house of God in

34. Hag 1:8 records Haggai's order to the Jews to collect wood for the paneling. If it was to build the actual structure they would have been told to quarry stones, not to cut wood (cf. 1:4, where the people have paneled houses, but God's house is still in ruins).



Jerusalem; and with them were the prophets of God, helping them.
(Ezra 5:1–2)

These verses echo Ezra 3:2, except for the addition of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah and the switch to Aramaic. Haggai and Zechariah's prophesying encourages Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and their colleagues to trust in God and to proceed with the work on the temple in spite of the attempts of the *'am hā'ares*. The narrative continues:

At the same time Tattenai the governor of the province Beyond the River and Shethar-bozenai and their associates came to them and spoke to them thus, "Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?" We [the Persian satrapal officials] also asked them this, "What are the names of the men who are building this building?" The eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them [from building] until a report reached Darius and then answer was returned by letter in reply to it. (Ezra 5:3–5)

The proof that Tattenai, governor of Beyond the River, wrote to Darius to investigate the Jews' authority to build the temple is contained in the letter incorporated in full into the text. The letter quotes the Jews as stating that Cyrus had given them permission to rebuild the temple and that he had also given them the temple vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had confiscated. Proof of the Jews' claim lies in the memorandum of Cyrus himself which is included in the document. Not only does Darius confirm the Jews' version of events, but he orders that temple building not be hindered and that the building costs and the costs of the temple sacrifices be paid out of the royal revenues. Moreover, he commands that anyone altering his decree, or caught trying to destroy the house of God, should have a beam pulled out of his own house, be impaled upon it, and his house made into a dunghill! (Ezra 6:11).

By providing these letters to and from Darius, the author demonstrates the authenticity of this aspect of his narrative. According to the letters brought as proof, Tattenai, the satrap over all of Beyond the River, came to investigate the temple-building project, most likely in the second year of Darius. Tattenai's investigation may have been in response to accusing letters sent to Darius by *'am hā'ares*, letters that unfortunately we do not have. In his response to Tattenai, Darius confirms the Jewish version of events, and temple building is able to continue. This portion of the narrative demonstrates that the Jewish version of events is confirmed and supported by Darius.

The pattern that is apparent in Ezra 4–6 (a narration and its associated proof, plus an additional narration and its proof) is the ap-



proach demanded by Aristotle when the narrative threatens to become too long. Aristotle states that it is sometimes desirable not to make the whole narrative continuous if the case thus expounded is hard to keep in mind (*Rhetoric* 1416b22). The author should present one set of facts and prove it, present another and prove it. This is the pattern we see here in Ezra 1–6.

If the biblical author is following Aristotle's rules of rhetoric, an epilogue should follow, which should create a positive mood in the reader.

Epilogue

According to the rules of rhetoric, the audience must be left at the end in a positive frame of mind, both toward the author and toward the heroes of the story. This seems to be the case:

Then, according to the word sent by King Darius, Tattenai, the governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their associates did with all diligence what King Darius had ordered. The elders of the Jews built and prospered, through the prophesying of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah son of Iddo. They finished their building by command of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes, King of Persia; and this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius. The people of Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy. (Ezra 6:13–16)

The epilogue continues for the remainder of chap. 6 in this same joyous spirit. The reader can now relax and rejoice with the Jews in the dedication of their temple and in the celebration of the Passover that follows (6:19–22).

Conclusions

These results permit the conclusion that the author of Ezra 1–6 was complying with the demands of Hellenistic rules of rhetorical historiography when he created his text. Ezra 1–3 forms the prologue, Ezra 4:1–6:15 forms the body of the text, and Ezra 6:16–22 forms the epilogue. The prologue sets the stage, introduces the characters and the author, and attempts to convince the reader of the author's knowledge of his subject, of his and his heroes' high moral qualities, and of their good will toward the implied reader. The list of temple vessels and the list of returnees were included in the prologue to convince the reader of the



author's knowledge of his subject and his access to the archives. This is essential in view of the fact that the body of argument depends for its proofs on archival information. The prologue's story about the haste and diligence of Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the returnees in obeying both the laws of Moses and of Cyrus is included to persuade the reader of the good will of both the author and the returnees. The epilogue also conforms to Hellenistic rules of rhetoric by attempting to leave the reader in a positive frame of mind.

The narrative and proofs contained in Ezra 4:1–6:15 also exhibit Hellenistic rules of rhetorical historiography in which a narrative is presented and proofs brought. The narrative accuses *'am hā'areš* of being the enemies of the Jews. They are accused of writing letters to the Persian king to convince him to prevent the temple from being built. The proof offered is the correspondence between *'am hā'areš* and Artaxerxes in which *'am hā'areš* try to convince the king to stop Jerusalem's city wall from being built. Bringing in this correspondence conforms to Aristotle's advice that, if no direct proof of a malfeasance is available, then one must prove that it is the sort of thing the man is in the habit of doing. That is what the letters to Xerxes and Artaxerxes do. They show that *'am hā'areš* are the sort of people in the habit of writing accusing letters to the king and the sort that *would* out of revenge and spite malign the Jews and attempt to prevent their temple from being completed. Examining these chapters through the lens of early Hellenistic rules of rhetorical historiography allows us to unravel the text, and to explain the reason behind the component parts. The purpose of Ezra 1–6 is evidently to persuade the reader that *'am hā'areš* are the enemies of the Jews. The next facet of study is to ask why the writer was so intent on convincing his readers of this. That is the subject of another paper.

