

The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures

ISSN 1203-1542

<http://www.jhsonline.org> and

<http://purl.org/jhs>



Articles in JHS are being indexed in the ATLA Religion Database, **RAMBI**, and **BiBIL**. Their abstracts appear in Religious and Theological Abstracts. The journal is archived by *Library and Archives Canada* and is accessible for consultation and research at the Electronic Collection site maintained by *Library and Archives Canada* (for a direct link, click [here](#)).

VOLUME 8, ARTICLE 23

**ANDREW E. STEINMANN, LETTERS OF KINGS ABOUT
VOTIVE OFFERINGS, THE GOD OF ISRAEL AND THE
ARAMAIC DOCUMENT IN EZRA 4:8–6:18**

LETTERS OF KINGS ABOUT VOTIVE OFFERINGS, THE GOD OF ISRAEL AND THE ARAMAIC DOCUMENT IN EZRA 4:8–6:18

ANDREW E. STEINMANN

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

RIVER FOREST, IL

Scholars have long noted the Aramaic narrative in Ezra 4:8–6:18 has a number of peculiarities that make understanding its purpose for inclusion in a book written primarily in Hebrew a challenge. Two characteristics of this section seem to be most difficult to explain. First is that the section seems to have three introductions:

A notice in Ezra 4:7 (in Hebrew) of a document written by Bishlam, Tabeel and Mithredath to Artaxerxes noting that it was written in Aramaic and translated.

A notice in Ezra 4:8 (in Aramaic) of a document written by Rehum and Shimshai to Artaxerxes.

A second notice about a document written by Rehum, Shimsai and their associates (Ezra 4:9–10).

Secondly, while this section is often characterized as official letters and documents, it also contains connecting narrative. Because of these challenges, this Aramaic section of Ezra has spawned a number of recent literary studies attempting to explain its literary structure and methods as well as its origins.¹ The most ambitious of these are the recent studies of Joshua Berman, based on the theory developed

¹ Bill T. Arnold, “The Use of Aramaic in the Hebrew Bible: Another Look at the Bilingualism in Ezra and Nehemiah,” *JNSL* 22 (1996), 1–16.”; Joshua Berman, “The Narratorial Voice of the Scribes of Samaria: Ezra iv 8–vi 18 Reconsidered,” *VT* 56 (2006), 313–26; Berman, “Narratological Purpose of Aramaic Prose in Ezra 4.8–6.18,” *Aramaic Studies* 5 (2007), 165–92; Blane Conklin, “The Decrees of God and of Kings in the Aramaic Correspondence of Ezra,” *Proceedings of the Eastern Great Lakes and Midwest Biblical Societies* 21 (2001), 81–89; Hans H.-Mallau, “The Redaction of Ezra 4–6: A Plea for a Theology of Scribes,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 15 (1988), 67–80; Stefan C. Matzal, “The Structure of Ezra IV–VI,” *VT* 50 (2000), 566–69; 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,” *JBL* 125 (2006), 641–85; H. G. M. Williamson, “The Aramaic Documents in Ezra Revisited,” *JTS NS* 59 (2008), 41–62.

by Bill Arnold, that the author of Ezra is deliberately switching to Aramaic in order to allow a non-Judean voice to speak to the reader. In effect, the author/editor is “handing over the microphone” to his opponent as a rhetorical strategy. According to this theory, the author allows an outside voice to prove his point, thereby making it all the more convincing. Key to Berman’s analysis is the presence of a first person plural verb form in the connecting narrative at Ezra 5:4: אֲנִי וְעַמִּי —“We also asked....”² The “we” of this statement, according to Berman, reveals an outside narratorial perspective of Samaritan scribes. Thus, according to Berman, the narrator adopts a Samaritan view, one who begins with hostility toward the Judeans in Jerusalem but gradually comes to appreciate the Judean accomplishments due to the divine assistance of their God.³ While remaining Samaritan in outlook, the inclusion of this Samaritan viewpoint helps the reader learn that the foes of the Judeans are not as formidable as they may seem.

As creative as this thesis is, it does not adequately explain the presence of several pro-Judean features of the narrative sections, nor does it explain the strange triple introduction of the Aramaic text (Ezra 4:7–10). In order to arrive at an explanation to all of these features, one must first isolate the narrator’s words from the embedded documents and then analyze his method in producing the narrative that connects the documents into a coherent narrative. While along the seams, the transitions between narrative and document may at times be difficult to detect, a reasonable case can be made for the following division between narrative and embedded document:

² Berman, “The Narratorial Voice of the Scribes of Samaria,” 322–326; *idem*, “The Narratological Purpose of Aramaic Prose in Ezra 4.8–6.18,” 187.

³ Berman, “The Narratological Purpose of Aramaic Prose in Ezra 4.8–6.18,” 190–91.

Connecting Narrative and Embedded Documents in the Aramaic Text of Ezra 4:8–6:18

Narrative material	Embedded document
Introduction to first letter (Ezra 4:8)	
Editorial notice (Ezra 4:11a)	Letter of Rehum (Ezra 4:9–16)
Connecting notice (Ezra 4:17a)	
	Letter of Artaxerxes (Ezra 4:17b–22)
Result and connecting notice (Ezra 4:23–24)	
Narrative introduction to the third letter (Ezra 5:1–5)	
Introduction to the third letter (Ezra 5:6–7a)	
	Letter of Tattenai (Ezra 5:7b–17)
Connecting notice (Ezra 6:1)	
	Letter of Darius (Ezra 6:2–12) (Embedded: Memorandum of Cyrus; Ezra 6:3–5)
Result and concluding narrative (6:6–18)	

Once the narration is separated from the letters and examined by itself as well as in comparison with the letters, a few of patterns emerge:

A good portion of the narration appears to be drawn from the letters themselves.⁴

Much of the narration that is not drawn from the letters appears to demonstrate intimate knowledge of the Judeans and appears to have a decidedly pro-Judean bent.

The letters appear to show signs of editing to make the story told in this Aramaic text flow smoothly into a single account.

Before we examine the letters, we should note the discussion of their authenticity, especially as raised by Schwiderski, who holds them to be inauthentic, Hellenistic compositions.⁵ He assembles evidence for pre-exilic, Achaemenid and Hellenistic-Roman epistolary forms in both Hebrew and Aramaic (and a few Greek examples), and also includes earlier comparisons from Mesopotamian and Egyptian sources. Schwiderski's conclusion about the letters' inauthentic character is based on three arguments:

⁴ Williamson, "The Aramaic Documents in Ezra Revisited," 48.

⁵ Dirk Schwiderski, *Handbuch des nordwestsemitischen Briefformulars: Ein Beitrag zur Echtheitsfrage der aramäischen Briefe des Esrabuches* (BZAW, 295; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2000).

1. During the Achaemenid period addressees of letters are introduced by the prepositions **ל** or **ע** (cp. Ezra 4:11, 17). However, in one instance, Ezra 5:7, the addressee is introduced with the preposition **ל**, which Schwiderski holds to be Hellenistic usage.

2. One of the letters in Ezra uses the simple greeting **שְׁלָם** (Ezra 4:17), said to be Hellenistic under the influence of Greek *χαίρειν*, whereas Achaemenid letters always use fuller greetings (e.g., **שְׁלָמָא כְּלָא**, Ezra 5:7).

3. Other various problems with the way the addressees or senders are introduced in the letters.

However, Schwiderski's arguments have been effectively refuted by Lund and by Williamson.⁶ The argument concerning the preposition introducing addressees is particularly weak. As Lund has demonstrated, there are several examples of Achaemenid letters introducing their addressees with **ל**, which Schwiderski either ignores or summarily dismisses.⁷ Secondly, the use of the short greeting **שְׁלָם** is attested on several Achaemenid period letters written on ostraca, evidence which Schwiderski also summarily dismisses. Moreover, if the letters in Ezra were consistently edited when included in the Aramaic document of Ezra 4–6, then the greeting in Ezra 4:17 may have been abbreviated by the redactor when the letter was incorporated into his composition (see discussion below). We should also note De Vaux's argument, recently revived by Steiner, which turns Schwiderski's contention about problems with the addressees, senders and other epistolary formulas back on itself:

Darius' reply to the governor, Tattenai, would naturally have begun with the usual address and formulas, but they are omitted here, which is something a forger would have been careful not to do. The historian Josephus, who understood nothing of this section of Ezra and who confused the two edicts and inserted apocryphal letters of Cyrus and Darius, never failed to attach to his documents, whether true or invented, an introduction couched in appropriate terms.⁸

Finally, we should note that both Williamson and Steiner had observed that Schwiderski, despite knowledge of the transition markers from a letter's introductory formula to their body, ignores the evidence he himself compiled.⁹ Achaemenid letters mark the transition with words such as **כַּעַן**, **כַּעַת** or **כַּעֲנַת** as also exhibited in Ezra 4:11, 17 (see also Ezra 4:13, 14, 21; 5:16; 6:6 for the use of these as transition markers within the body of these letters). However, Schwiderski himself notes that in Hellenistic letters the transition marker in Aramaic is **דַּ**—and we should note that this word is never used as transition marker in the Aramaic

⁶ Jerome A. Lund, "Aramaic Language" in Bill T. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson, (eds.) *Dictionary of the Old Testament Historical Books* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 50–60; Williamson, "The Aramaic Documents of Ezra Revisited," 57–62.

⁷ Among the Achaemenid letters Lund cites are documents C1.1.101 and D7.33 in Porten and Yardeni, *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt* (4 vols.; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1988–1999). Hereafter *TAD*.

⁸ Roland DeVaux, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972), 93. See Steiner, "Bishlam's Archival Search Report," 681. Steiner also notes similar arguments by P. S. Alexander, B. Porten and J. Fitzmyer.

⁹ Steiner, "Bishlam's Archival Search Report," 681–82; Williamson, "The Aramaic Documents in Ezra Revisited," 57–58; see Schwiderski, *Handbuch*, 155–64.

should note that this word is never used as transition marker in the Aramaic letters in Ezra.

Turning now to the letters themselves, we can note signs of editing to fit them into the context of the narrative. The first of these is Ezra 4:9–10, which appears to have been the postscript to the letter, moved to the beginning for the purposes of the report.¹⁰ Such postscripts were common, as is shown by the fifth century Aramaic letters from Egypt.¹¹ They were often placed on the back of the papyrus, making them visible on the outside of the letter when it was rolled up into a small scroll. This would, then, be the first thing a reader saw, although it was at the end of the letter. (Sometimes the ending of the letter would run over and be written on the back of the papyrus, followed by the postscript.)¹² Some postscripts contain the name(s) of the author(s) and the date, whereas others omit the date as is done here.

That Ezra 4:9–10 is a postscript moved to this position by the editor is signaled in two ways. First, it is directly preceded and followed by two transition markers: the words וְדָא (“then”) and וְכַעְנָת (“and now”). Secondly these transition markers are preceded and followed by editorial comments: Ezra 4:8, which introduces the letter and Ezra 4:11a which notes that the actual letter is to follow.

The postscript in this letter is not simply used to identify the authors, but is also designed as political propaganda. It identifies a number of groups—mostly from the east—who were settled in Samaria some two centuries earlier. The list appears designed to appeal to Artaxerxes’ ethnic loyalties as it lists Persians, people from Susa—an important Persian administrative center, and people from Elam. It also was designed to demonstrate the loyalty of the authors to the Persian crown.¹³

The postscript also tells how these groups came to be inhabitants of the west. They were brought to Samaria by the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal (669–631 B.C.). While there is no other record of Ashurbanipal deporting peoples to Palestine, we know that he conquered Babylon (648 B.C.), Elam (642 B.C.) and Susa (641 B.C.), so there is no reason to doubt the accuracy of the letter’s claim. The rather overblown description of the Assyrian king as “the great and glorious Ashurbanipal” may also be political rhetoric designed to show that these groups have demonstrated loyalty to their imperial overlords and are not like the “rebellious and wicked” Judean inhabitants of Jerusalem (Ezra 4:12) whose ancestors caused so much harm to imperial interests in the past (Ezra 4:15).

A final rhetorical flourish is the claim that the supporters of Rehum and Shimshai come from “the rest” of the province (Ezra 4:10). This is most certainly an exaggeration, but it is designed to pit the majority of the province against the Judeans.

¹⁰ Williamson agrees, but incorrectly refers to verse 8 when he apparently means verse 9. Williamson, “The Aramaic Documents in Ezra Revisited,” 51. See also Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988), 112.

¹¹ See the many letters in *TAD* Volume 1: Letters.

¹² E.g., Letters A2.1, A2.3, A2.4 and A2.5 in *TAD*.

¹³ Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (NAC 10; Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 102–3.

Ezra 4:11 begins with a short editorial notice designed to let the reader know that the actual beginning of the letter is now being presented. In the letter's superscription the addressee is mentioned first, followed by the authors of the letter, as is common in fifth century Aramaic letters. However, this letter, like the following ones in this Aramaic report, shows signs of having been edited. This letter does not contain the customary greeting wishing good health or the favor of gods to be bestowed on the recipient. If this greeting was prolix, thereby heaping several blessings on the monarch, it was omitted so that the subject of the letter would be more prominent. Moreover, the letter's senders are simply "your servants, men of Across the River" a strangely abbreviated note that lists no names. This was shorted by the editor when he incorporated the letter into his narration, since he had already given a very complete list when he included the letter's postscript. At this point the editor wanted to speed the narrative flow, and so he excised the names of the senders.

The reply of Artaxerxes appears also to have been edited, as again demonstrated by its superscription. It mentions the addressees, but does not mention the sender, Artaxerxes. Again, the prolixity of the description of the king and his titles could have motivated the excising of this portion of the letter, given that the narrator has already identified him as the sender (Ezra 4:17a).

Turning to the letter of Tattenai and Shethar Bozenai to Darius, we find similar reworking of the superscription (Ezra 5:7b). In this case once again the superscription of the letter is missing the customary list of senders following the addressee.¹⁴ The list of senders was likely omitted because it was excessively long, since it was a report not only from Tattenai and Shethar Bozenai, but also "their associates." In addition, though the letter reports asking for the names of the men supervising the work on the temple, no such list of workers is included in the letter. The list may have originally been included between Ezra 5:16 and 5:17.

Finally, the most obvious case of editing is the reply of Darius to Tattenai and Shethar Bozenai. The beginning of this letter is difficult to identify, since there is no superscription at all. Certainly, Ezra 6:6 is part of this letter, since it begins the instructions to Tattenai and Shethar Bozenai. However, I would argue that the letter actually begins at Ezra 6:2 and that Darius' reply included the text of Cyrus' memorandum (Ezra 6:3–5). There is an obvious signal that identifies Ezra 6:2 as the beginning of the text of Darius' reply. This is the notice that the memorandum was found at Ecbatana, although Tattenai and Shethar Bozenai had suggested searching the archives in Babylon (Ezra 5:17), and the editor of the Aramaic narrative connecting text of Ezra 6:1 assumes that the search was made in Babylon. That fact that the memorandum was found in Ecbatana would have been an unlikely invention of the narrator who strung together these letters into a continuous narrative. It, instead, comes from the letter of Darius, which then leads to the conclusion that the text of the memorandum was originally embedded in the letter of Darius before Darius' letter was embedded in the Aramaic text incorporated into the book of Ezra.

¹⁴ The standard order in the header was: "To X [from] Y" where X is the recipient of the letter and Y is the writer or writers. See Ezra 4:11 and the letters in *TAD* 1: Letters.

There is a feature in the memorandum itself that may well confirm this: the dimensions of the temple that Cyrus commanded to be built in Jerusalem. It mentions only the height and the width of the temple, omitting its length (Ezra 6:3). This anomaly appears in all traditions, including both Greek versions (1 Esd 6:24; 2 Esd 6:3).¹⁵ This could easily have been a simple case of parablepsis by the scribe who wrote Darius' letter. The most reasonable explanation is that the scribe's eye accidentally skipped from one mention of cubit to another.¹⁶ For instance, if the memorandum originally read: רומה אִמִּין שְׁתֵּין פְּתִיָּה אִמִּין עֶשְׂרִין אֹרְכָה אִמִּין שְׁתֵּין,¹⁷ the scribe's eye merely skipped from the second occurrence of אִמִּין to the third, accidentally omitting the intervening words. Since this apparent error occurs throughout the Ezra traditions, it is possible that it originated with the scribe who wrote Darius' letter and miscopied the memorandum, and it has been perpetuated ever since.

All of the apparent signs of editing of the letters embedded in the Aramaic account of Ezra 4–6 argue that the writer of the Aramaic narrative that combines these letters had these documents before him.¹⁸ If he were inventing documents in an attempt to create an aura of authenticity for his narrative, he certainly would not have omitted the obvious conventions of letter writing. He would have slavishly adhered to them. He would have given complete superscriptions and would have placed any postscripts at the end of the letters where, by convention, they would have belonged.

However, there is further evidence that the scribe had these letters in front of him: much of his connecting narrative was drawn from the letters themselves.¹⁹ The first evidence of this is in the introduction to Rehum and Shimshai's letter, where the narrator simply drew the names and title of the letter's senders from the letter's postscript and then added a very brief summary of its contents ("a letter concerning Jerusalem to King Artaxerxes"; Ezra 4:8):

רְחוּם בְּעַל־טֵעַם וְשִׁמְשַׁי סִפְרָא "Rehum the chancellor and Shimshai the scribe" (Ezra 4:8; narrative introduction)

רְחוּם בְּעַל־טֵעַם וְשִׁמְשַׁי סִפְרָא וְשָׂאֵר כְּנֻתְהוֹן "Rehum the chancellor and Shimshai the scribe and the rest of their associates" (Ezra 4:9; letter's postscript)

Following the letter the narration reflects the narrator's view of the consequences of Artaxerxes' orders. The authorities to whom Artaxerxes wrote are repeated from the superscription of Artaxerxes' letter:

רְחוּם בְּעַל־טֵעַם וְשִׁמְשַׁי סִפְרָא וְשָׂאֵר כְּנֻתְהוֹן (Ezra 4:17; letter's superscription)

¹⁵ Both 1 Esd 6:24 and 2 Esd 6:3 match the MT by reading ὕψος πῆγχεις ἐξήκοντα πλάτος αὐτοῦ πήγχεων ἐξήκοντα.

¹⁶ Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 115; H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* (WBC, 16; Waco: Word, 1985).

¹⁷ That is, "its height: sixty cubits, its width *twenty cubits and its length* sixty cubits."

¹⁸ Williamson, "The Aramaic Documents in Ezra Revisited," 49.

¹⁹ For similar observations see Reinhard G. Kratz, "Die Entstehung des Judentums: Zur Kontroverse zwischen E. Meyer und J. Wellhausen," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 95 (1998), 11; *idem*, *The Composition of the Narrative Books of the Old Testament* (transl. John Bowden; London: T & T Clark, 2005), 56; Eduard Meyer, *Die Entstehung des Judentums: Eine historische Untersuchung* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1896), 26–27; Williamson, "The Aramaic Documents in Ezra Revisited," 48–54.

רְחוּם בְּעַל-טָעִים וְשִׁמְשֵׁי סִפְרָא וּכְנֻתְהוֹן (Ezra 4:23; narrative conclusion)

Note that in both of these cases, the narrator's custom of editing his material is evident in small variations from his sources. The narrator's conclusion following Artaxerxes' letter also draws on the letter's instructions. Artaxerxes commands "issue a decree to stop (לְבַטְלָא) these men" (Ezra 4:21) and the narrative conclusion says they "stopped them" (וּבִטְלוּ הֵמוּ; Ezra 4:23).

Next the narration quickly transitions to recount the building of Jerusalem's temple instigated by the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah. Following this there is a brief account of the investigation of the construction project conducted by Tattenai and Shethar Bozenai. This account draws upon the contents of the letter of Tattenai and Shethar Bozenai to Darius and upon Darius' reply. The composition of the investigating commission is drawn from Darius' reply:

בְּהַזְמָנָא אֲתָא עֲלֵיהוֹן תַּתְנִי פַחַת עֲבַר-נְהַרָה וְשֵׁתַר בּוֹזְנִי וּכְנֻתְהוֹן

At that time Tattenai, governor of Across the River and Shethar Bozenai and their associates came upon them (Ezra 5:3; narrative; cf. Ezra 5:6)

תַּתְנִי פַחַת עֲבַר-נְהַרָה שֵׁתַר בּוֹזְנִי וּכְנֻתְהוֹן

Tattenai, governor of Across the River, Shethar Bozenai and their associates (Ezra 6:6; Darius' reply)

However, the account of the investigation reports two questions that are drawn from the letter:

בְּהַזְמָנָא אֲתָא עֲלֵיהוֹן תַּתְנִי פַחַת עֲבַר-נְהַרָה וְשֵׁתַר בּוֹזְנִי וּכְנֻתְהוֹן וְכֵן אֲמַרִין לְהֵם מִזְשָׁם לְכֵם טַעַם בִּיתָא דְנָה לְבָנָא וְאַשְׁרָנָא דְנָה לְשִׁכְלָלָה אֲדִין כְּנַמָּא אֲמַרְנָא לְהֵם מִזְאֲנוֹן שְׁמָהַת גְּבַרְיָא דִּי-דְנָה בְּנִינָא בְּנִין

At that time Tattenai, governor of Across the River, and Shethar Bozenai and their associates came upon them. This is what they said to them: "Who gave you an order to build this house and to finish this material?" Then we said this to them, "What are the names of the men who are building this building?" (Ezra 5:3–4; narrative)

אֲדִין שְׁאַלְנָא לְשַׁבְיָא אֲלֹד כְּנַמָּא אֲמַרְנָא לְהֵם מִזְשָׁם לְכֵם טַעַם בִּיתָא דְנָה לְמַבְנֵיהָ וְאַף שְׁמָהַתְהֵם שְׁאַלְנָא לְהֵם וְאַשְׁרָנָא דְנָה לְשִׁכְלָלָה

Then we asked those elders and said this to them, "Who gave you an order to build this house and to finish this material?" We also asked them their names ... (Ezra 5:9–10a)

Curiously the narration in Ezra 5:3–4 begins in the third person, but switches to the first person for the introduction to the second question (אֲמַרְנָא, "we said"). This item, which is so crucial to Berman's theory, is not the telltale sign that scribes of Samaria are now speaking, revealing the narratorial viewpoint of the author. Rather, the author of the Aramaic narrative lifted the quotation of the first question from the letter of Tattenai (Ezra 5:9b = 5:3b) and then, surmising the content of the second question, simply adopted the verb from the letter without adjusting its grammatical person to fit the new context of his narration (אֲמַרְנָא in Ezra 5:4, 10).²⁰ אֲמַרְנָא is simply a compositional mistake, not an item that reveals an underlying narratorial ideology.

²⁰ Williamson, "The Aramaic Documents in Ezra Revisited," 48.

Finally, we should note that the aftermath of Darius' letter once again demonstrates that it served as a source for the narration that follows.²¹ The end of the letter is matched by the beginning of the narrative:

אָנָה דָרְיוֹשׁ שְׁמָת טַעַם אֶסְפְּרָנָא יְתַעְבֵּד

I, **Darius**, have issued a decree. Let it be **carried out exactly**. (Ezra 4:12; end of letter)

אֲדִין תַּתְּנִי פַחַת עֲבַר־נְהַרָה שְׁתַּר בּוֹזַנַי וּכְנֻתְהוֹן לְקַבֵּל דִּי־שְׁלַח דָרְיוֹשׁ מְלַכָּא כְּנִמְא
אֶסְפְּרָנָא עֲבָדוּ

Then because King **Darius** had sent, Tattenai, governor of Across the River, Shethar Bozenai and their associates **did exactly** this.

From all of this evidence, we can conclude that the Aramaic of Ezra 4:8–6:18 is one composition that connects a number of pre-existing documents to form a single narrative.²² This conclusion accords well with the thesis of Richard Steiner that this Aramaic portion of Ezra is a document from Bishlam, Tabeel and Mithredath to Artaxerxes (Ezra 4:7).²³ It is a report written as the result of an archival search. This explains the mysterious “triple introduction” of Ezra 4:8–11 that has confused students of Ezra for generations. Ezra 4:8 (Hebrew) is a heading by the editor of Ezra that introduces the Aramaic report. Ezra 4:9–10 (Aramaic) is actually the postscript from the first letter discovered in the archival search. Ezra 4:11 is the superscription of the first letter.

This also explains the reverse chronological order of the letters—the account of the halting of construction on the walls of Jerusalem in Artaxerxes' day precedes the earlier account of the completion of the temple in Darius' day. Steiner, however, notes that it is not uncommon for ancient Near Eastern archival reports to proceed in this manner, since often the search of the archives started with the most recent documents on a subject and moved backwards to the oldest documents.²⁴ This is not unlike genealogical research and the resulting family trees, which most often work in the same reverse chronological fashion.

Thus, the Aramaic text of Ezra 4:8–6:18 is an archival report that links together official Persian documents relating to construction in Jerusalem. But what does this report attempt to accomplish? It is merely a “just the facts” report or is it something more? The key to understanding this is to note another feature of the narrative connecting the letters in this Aramaic report: while clearly not composed by Judeans, it contains pro-Judean rhetoric and information that could only have been obtained from Judeans in Jerusalem. The narrative of report itself shows indi-

²¹ Williamson, “The Aramaic Documents in Ezra Revisited,” 48.

²² A number of past studies have concluded that Ezra 4:8–6:18 is one document. Schaefer, based on a proposal of Klosterman, argued that it was a document composed by Tabeel, a Jew, in order to persuade Artaxerxes to allow the walls of Jerusalem to be rebuilt. See Hans Heinrich Schaefer, *Iranish Beiträge* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1930), 1.197–296. More recent studies that have treated this section as a single composition by a redactor who combined a number of source documents include H.-Mallau, “The Redaction of Ezra 4–6,” esp. 78–79; Matzal, “The Structure of Ezra IV–VI.”; Steiner, “Bishlam’s Archival Search Report in Nehemiah’s Archive”; Williamson, “The Aramaic Documents in Ezra Revisited.”

²³ Steiner, “Bishlam’s Archival Search Report in Nehemiah’s Archive,” 675–76.

²⁴ Steiner, “Bishlam’s Archival Search Report in Nehemiah’s Archive,” 650–65.

cations that the author(s) are not Judeans. For instance, the comment at Ezra 5:5 that “the eye of *their* God was on the Judean elders” indicates that the author is writing as a non-Judean. This is confirmed when one notes that God is never called by his name, יהוה, anywhere in the Aramaic text. A number of other indications that the author is non-Judean could also be adduced.²⁵

However, throughout the author’s connecting narrative there are signs that he is pro-Judean and has received much of his information from Judeans. The first of these is found in the first substantial connecting narrative, the one that follows Artaxerxes ordering the cessation of construction in Jerusalem. Artaxerxes’ letter orders that construction *in the city* be stopped (Ezra 4:21), whereas the following narrative says that “*work on the house of God*” stopped. This equating of Jerusalem with the house of God derives from a Judean Zion theology—God’s house in Zion where he dwelt with his people includes the city, not simply the temple (1 Kgs 8:1; 2 Kgs 19:21, 31; 1 Chr 23:25; 2 Chr 5:2; Ps 51:18; 102:21; 128:5; 135:21; 147:12; Isa 2:3; 4:3–4; 10:12, 32; 24:23; 30:19; 31:9; 33:20; 37:22, 32; 40:9; 41:27; 52:1–2; 64:10; Jer 26:18; 51:35; Lam 1:17; 2:10, 13; Joel 2:32; 3:16–17; Amos 1:2; Mic 3:10, 12; 4:2, 8; Zeph 3:14, 16; Zech 1:14, 17; 8:3; 9:9). This indicates that Judeans were serving as a source of information for the author.

When the connecting narration moves on to speak of Haggai and Zechariah prophesying to the Judeans, one is almost inescapably driven to the conclusion that Judeans are the source of the author’s knowledge. The resumption of the work on the temple is credited to the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah. Haggai is called “Haggai the prophet” (Ezra 5:1; 6:14) even though he has already been characterized as a prophet with Zechariah at the beginning of Ezra 5:1. This may be the customary way to refer to him, and may testify to the writer’s familiarity with the book of Haggai, where this is the most common way to name him.²⁶ It also distinguishes him as a lay prophet in contrast to the priest and prophet Zechariah.

Zechariah is called בְּרֵעֲדוּא, “(grand)son of Iddo” in contrast to Zech 1:1 where he is called בְּוֹבֶרְכִיָּה בֶן־עֲדוּ, “son of Bereciah, (grand)son of Iddo.” The author may have chosen only to mention Zechariah’s grandfather, since Iddo was the family head of a clan of priests who came to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel (Neh 12:4, 16). This highlights Zechariah as a priest. During the high priesthood of Joiakim (c. 500–c. 470), Zechariah would become the head of his family of priests (Neh 12:16).

The response of Zerubbabel, the governor, and Jeshua, the high priest, matches the call of the prophets. Both leaders and prophets are a matched pair of one layman and one priest. Though the priests alone would officiate in the temple, the temple was for the benefit of all God’s people, and the pairing of lay and clerical leaders subtly signals this.

The content of the prophecy of Haggai and Zechariah is barely referenced. It is only stated that the prophets of God supported the leaders, a reference to the prophecies that mention one or both of these men (Hag 1:1, 12, 14; 2:2, 4, 21, 23;

²⁵ These are conveniently summarized in Berman, “The Narratorial Voice of the Scribes of Samaria,” 316–22.

²⁶ “Haggai the prophet” five times (Hag 1:1, 3, 12; 2:1, 10); “Haggai the messenger of Yahweh” (Hag 1:13); “Haggai” three times (Hag 2:13, 14, 20).

Zech 3:1, 3, 6, 8, 9; 4:6–7, 9, 10; 6:11). The phrase “who was over them” describing the God of Israel is ambiguous (Ezra 5:1). It could refer to God’s being over the prophets or over the Judeans as a whole. In either case, the narrator is emphasizing that Israel’s God was the ultimate mover behind this revival of temple construction.

After this point in Ezra neither Jeshua nor Zerubbabel is mentioned again as leading the Judeans. Some scholars have conjectured that Zerubbabel, a descendant of David was removed for sedition because of Messianic fervor surrounding him.²⁷ Others have conjectured that he may have died before the temple was completed.²⁸ The observation of others that the absence of Zerubbabel is a result of the narrator’s focus on the on the people as a whole throughout Ezra is correct only if one believes that this Aramaic document was a forgery by the author/editor of the book of Ezra.²⁹ Instead, the narrator in this Aramaic document wished to de-emphasize the Judean leaders in any report to Artaxerxes in order to emphasize the leadership of the God of Israel through his prophets and the Persian kings (Ezra 6:14). For this reason, everywhere else in the Aramaic report the leaders are simply “the Judean elders” (Ezra 5:5, 9; 6:7, 8, 14).

Thus, all of these details demonstrate the narrator’s knowledge of the books of Haggai and Zechariah: he knows the date of the initial prophecy (Ezra 4:24), the names of the prophets and the leaders of the Judeans, and can summarize the prophecies as support for the leaders. This, in turn, implies that Bishlam, Mithredath and Tabeel (Ezra 4:7) produced their Aramaic report to Artaxerxes with the help of Judeans from Yehud.

This conclusion is reinforced by the concluding Aramaic narrative (Ezra 6:13–18). Many details here indicate that they were supplied by Judeans: the date that the temple was completed (Ezra 6:15); the Judeans in Jerusalem are called *Israelites* and are classified as “priests, Levites and the rest of the exiles” (Ezra 6:16); the sacrifices at the dedication of the temple included twelve goats, one for each tribe of Israel (Ezra 6:18); the knowledge of priests organized in divisions and Levites in orders (Ezra 6:18); and knowledge of a book attributed to Moses (Ezra 6:18).

However, most important for determining the purpose of this Aramaic archival report is the statement of Ezra 6:14, “They built and finished by the decree of the God of Israel and by the decree of Cyrus, Darius and King Artaxerxes of Persia.” The house of God, we are told, was finished as the result of two decrees. One was the decree of God, the other the decree (singular!) of the Persian rulers Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes. Because the temple was finished in the reign of Darius, there has been much discussion about the inclusion of Artaxerxes, since he came to the throne thirty years after the temple’s completion.³⁰ However, once we real-

²⁷ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988), 117. Cf. Hag 2:6–7, 20–23.

²⁸ F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 78–79.

²⁹ Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, *In An Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah* (SBLMS, 36; Atlanta: Scholars), 1988, 48–53.

³⁰ Some commentators believe Artaxerxes was included because he gave support to the temple in his commissioning of Ezra (Ezra 7:15–27). See Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 83–84; Edwin Yamauchi, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, (Expositor’s Bible Comm-

ize that this is part of the larger Aramaic archival report that began at Ezra 4:8, it can be reasonably concluded that the document is designed to persuade Artaxerxes to allow the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls. Thus, Artaxerxes' name is included here for rhetorical effect:

1. Artaxerxes had stopped "the work on the house of God in Jerusalem" by stopping the work on the walls (Ezra 4:24).

2. God had decreed that the work on the house of God be completed (Ezra 6:14).

3. Artaxerxes is the greatest of the kings, since he is the only one called "King (singular) of Persia" (Ezra 6:14).

4. The author of the Aramaic report was urging that Artaxerxes would, like his noble predecessors, honor the singular decree of Persian kings to complete the house, thereby aligning himself with both God and his illustrious predecessors (Ezra 6:14).

Thus, the purpose of including the correspondence between Tattenai and Darius (Ezra 6:1–12) and its results (Ezra 6:13–18) in the Aramaic report is to demonstrate that Jerusalem is no longer the rebellious city portrayed in the correspondence of Rehum and Artaxerxes (Ezra 4:9–22) but is now the obedient, pious and industrious city of the men who carried out the order of Cyrus and Darius. They obey both God and the king.

Therefore, the report's original intent was to serve as an appeal to Artaxerxes to persuade him to allow the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls. However, its incorporation into the book of Ezra served another purpose—to show how God used Persian kings and Judean prophets, leaders and people to accomplish his goal—a rebuilt temple where his people could worship. Though the Judeans faced opposition and harassment, God had never forsaken them. In his time he overcame the forces that opposed him and his people, and they "built and prospered" as he willed. The author of Ezra included the Aramaic report as the climax to the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy (Ezra 1:1–4). However, this report helps emphasize another important point for the book of Ezra—prosperity ultimately comes from God, not from political, social or economic power.

Finally, we should note Steiner's contention that this Aramaic archival report was commissioned by Nehemiah and later placed by him in an archive in Jerusalem.³¹ This is based on 2 Macc 2:13:

The same things are reported in the public records and in the memoirs of Nehemiah, and also that he founded a library and collected the books about the kings and

tary, 4; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 645. Others believe that this is an acknowledgement of Artaxerxes' commissioning of Nehemiah to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. See Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 129; Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 119; Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 92–93; Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1979, 59). Still others believe it is an early gloss. See Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 92–93; Jacob M. Myers, *Ezra, Nehemiah: Introduction, Translation and Notes* (AB, 14; Garden City: Doubleday, 1964), 53.

³¹ Steiner, "Bishlam's Archival Search Report," 676.

prophets, and the writings of David, and *letters of kings*
about votive offerings.

Steiner contends that the reference to letters of kings about votive offerings is a reference to this Aramaic archival report (cf. Ezra 6:9; 7:22). The author of Ezra later incorporated this document from Nehemiah's archive into his book. Whether or not we accept Steiner's theory, he may be correct that 2 Macc 2:13 does understand the Aramaic archival report of Ezra 4:8–6:18 as a single document containing letters from Persian kings.

More importantly, we no longer need to look for a literary-critical reason the author/editor of Ezra placed an Aramaic section into Ezra 1–6. He simply incorporated a document originally written in Aramaic into his book. Thus, there is a kernel of truth in the Berman/Arnold theory: the Aramaic language does, indeed, bring the reader to view his world from the perspective of Persian imperial politics and internal struggles within the empire's administration. By allowing this document to remain in its original language, the author/editor of Ezra could make his point that the Judeans in Jerusalem ultimately prospered because their God controls the events of history—even events in the Persian court.