

Article

Yehudite Imaginations of King Darius and His Officials: Views from the Province beyond the River

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Abstract: This article analyzes representations of the Persian king Darius and his officials in the Books of Haggai, Zechariah 1–8, and Ezra 4–6 in the current Hebrew Bible. These writings, produced in the Persian period or somewhat later, portray these literary characters in various ways in relation to the restoration of the community, city, and temple of YHWH in Jerusalem. In biblical scholarship, the main interest has been to scrutinize the conditions behind the textual representations of Darius, related to dating the selected texts and the temple restoration, as well as Darius's role as the central supplier of Achaemenid imperial ideology. The current study suggests refocusing by highlighting the historical significance of the literary imaginations of this monarch. What is at stake is not the historical Darius or the officials Zerubbabel, Sheshbazzar, and Tattenai, but rather literary representations of them suiting the needs of those who produced them. In Haggai and Zechariah 1–8, Darius's role in the temple restoration is downplayed, while in Haggai, Zerubbabel is represented by a blend of Yahwistic and imperial signs and symbols, and in Zechariah 1–8, the imperial connotations are toned down. This is while Zerubbabel is decisive for authorizing both the temple community and the prophet. In Ezra 4–6, Darius is one of many Persian kings engaged in the restoration of the temple and the city of Jerusalem. While Zerubbabel gains support from the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, Sheshbazzar brings the vessels back to Jerusalem and lays the foundations of the temple on King Cyrus's command. At the same time, Tattenai gets Cyrus's order confirmed and, apart from that, is asked to stay away from the works of the Yehudites. By analyzing the representations of Darius and other Persian officials through a cultural-historical lens, selection and perspectivization are stressed. The selected writings convey local negotiations of power relations with the empire in terms of keeping a position in the imperial hierarchy while, at the same time, cultivating the identity of their subaltern group through certain symbols, institutions, and practices.



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1. In the Reign of King Darius

Persia was part of the cultural repertoire that was expressed through writings in the current Hebrew Bible. The time of the Achaemenid Empire (ca. 550–330 BCE) is regarded as a matrix of the production of many of these writings, as they were either composed or edited during this period or somewhat later.¹ Plenty of Persian kings are referred to in various literary genres, such as prophetic and apocalyptic writings, storytelling, and historiography.² The current contribution analyzes representations of King Darius, the officials Zerubbabel, Sheshbazzar, and Tattenai, and others in the prophetic writings of Haggai and Zechariah 1–8 and the diplomatic correspondence of Ezra 4–6. Here, Darius and other Persian authorities are related to the restoration of YHWH's temple in Jerusalem in various ways: in Haggai and Zechariah 1–8, Darius's role is downplayed, while in Haggai, Zerubbabel is represented by a blend of Yahwistic and imperial signs and symbols, and in Zechariah 1–8, the imperial connotations are toned down, while Zerubbabel is decisive for authorizing both the temple community and the prophet. In Ezra 4–6, Darius

is one of many Persian kings engaged in the restoration of the temple and the city of Jerusalem. While Zerubbabel gains support from YHWH's prophets Haggai and Zechariah, Sheshbazzar brings the vessels back to Jerusalem and lays the foundations of the temple on King Cyrus's command. At the same time, Tattenai gets Cyrus's order confirmed and, apart from that, is asked to stay away from the works of the Yehudites. In all these instances, the building of the temple is presented as a collective effort, with many sorts of contributors, supporters, and opponents.

In biblical scholarship, the references to Darius are commonly interpreted out of an interest in dating the selected writings and the completion of the temple restoration. While most scholars identify Darius referred to in the Books of Haggai, Zechariah, and Ezra as Darius I (522–486 BCE), some take these references to be Darius II (424–405 BCE) (Dequeker 1993; Hallaschka 2010; Becking 2018). The accounts of the celebration of the dedication of the temple in the sixth year of Darius's reign in Ezra 6:14–15 and 1 Esdras have been applied as an argument for the conventional dating of its completion to 515 BCE (e.g., Halpern 1990, pp. 103–229; Hensel 2016, pp. 283–302; Fried 2015, pp. 18–45; Tiemeyer 2017, pp. 40–44). Hag 2:18 describes how the temple's foundations were laid in the second year of Darius, but neither Haggai nor Zechariah 1–8 mentions the completion of the temple. For that reason, many have concluded that these writings must be dated before 515 BCE (Ristau 2016, p. 119). Edelman (2005, pp. 8–9) represents a minority view, arguing that the work of the temple took place in the early reign of Artaxerxes I (464–424 BCE) or the very late reign of Xerxes (486–465 BCE). She claims that the rebuilding of the temple and the wall of Jerusalem was undertaken jointly due to Achaemenid imperial policy, strengthening the integration of Yehud into the empire's economic and military concerns (Edelman 2005, pp. 332–51). The restored temple in Jerusalem is well known from writings of the Hebrew Bible, but not from, for instance, Persian imperial texts (Moore and Kelle 2011, p. 430). Focusing on representations of Darius in Haggai, Zechariah 1–8, and Ezra 4–6 is particularly interesting as this Persian king plays a decisive role in scholars' writing of the history of the Achaemenid period. In addition to associating this royal figure with the dating of the completion of the temple of YHWH in Jerusalem, Darius is also regarded as the central supplier of what has been called Achaemenid imperial ideology (cf. § 4). No known inscriptions of Darius I mention YHWH, Jerusalem, or Yehud.

While the main interest of Darius in biblical scholarship is to scrutinize the historical conditions behind the textual representations of this Persian royal figure,³ the current study is part of a reorientation in scholarship, characterized by a move away from detailed inquiries of the political history behind the text to an interest in the meaning production taking place in the literary representations (Tobolowsky 2018; Wilson 2018). As Hasler (2020a, p. 3) phrases it, it is a "question of where we locate meaning within [the] text". After presenting some theoretical reflections on cultural historiography and cultural imagination as meaning making (§ 1.1.), I analyze various representations of Darius and other Persian authorities in Haggai, Zechariah 1–8, and Ezra 4–6 (§§ 2–3). In this regard, I ask what these representations do for the stories told rather than what may be behind them. I also highlight the imperial context of the texts. The imaginations of Darius are produced by agents who are in an intermediate position between the imperial administration and the local group, illustrating a composite relationship between the Persian Empire and subaltern Yehudites living within its borders. The different images of Darius represent the various needs of those who created them. The analysis of the literary representations of these Persian authorities in Yehud is followed by a comparison of other kinds of representations of such imperial figures, shedding light on the historiographical significance of selectivity and perspectivity related to the empire and its provinces (§ 4). While much Achaemenid material (e.g., monumental and minor royal inscriptions, imperial art, imperial conventions for letter writing) emphasizes issues of imperial power and is commissioned for an imperial audience, Haggai, Zechariah 1–8, and Ezra 4–6 deal with provincial concerns. Due consideration has to be given to the significant differences between the comparative materials in terms of genre, selectivity, and perspectivity towards the empire, including

the various target audiences. This study concludes by showing how asking different sorts of questions illuminates the complex representations of the imperial encounter of Darius and his officials in the stories told in Haggai, Zechariah 1–8, and Ezra 4–6, and how these writings play with the literary characters having them suit their own needs (§ 5).

Representations of Darius: Selectivity and Perspectivity

Scholars exhibit an ambivalence when interpreting Haggai, Zechariah 1–8, and Ezra 4–6 in terms of their historical reliability. On the one hand, many of the narratives are unanimously taken to be historically inaccurate. On the other hand, scholars have sought as much historical accuracy as possible. To prove the historicity of the events told in the texts, other kinds of material from the Achaemenid period are frequently referred to (cf. § 4). The present study aims, in some ways, to release the representation of Darius in these selected writings from their “literary-critical shackles”. In this regard, I apply representation as a cultural historiographical lens, highlighting agency and the diverse forms of symbolic or meaning-generating activity (Gunn 2006; Hall and Birchall 2006; Bachmann-Medick 2016). It is beyond question that Darius I was a Persian king. His ascendance to the throne in 522 BCE was characterized by usurpation, as he defeated his rival Bardiya (Briant 2002, pp. 97–138). Darius I is represented in different kinds of material from the time of the Achaemenid Empire and onwards, both by himself and others. The various representations are expressions of different perspectives. As opposed to the attention which has been paid to the historical significance of Darius in “conventional” Achaemenid historiography, I explore what the near absence, or at least the minor presence, of Darius and his officials Zerubbabel, Sheshbazzar, and Tattenai in these writings means. The questions I am asking have certainly been part of historical-critical scholarship. However, this has not been the primary interest, but rather an interest supplement to larger historiographical goals. Haggai, Zechariah 1–8, and Ezra 4–6 are undoubtedly historically embedded texts. Still, my interest is not to attempt to map the historicity of any events depicted in the narratives themselves but rather to offer an unpacking of cultural understandings—and rhetorical significance—in these writings.

When asking how those who produced these texts perceived themselves and others, I especially highlight the imperial setting. In this regard, I elaborate on a concept of cultural imagination, which concerns how a group is constructed through stories, symbols, memories, and imaginary worlds of objects, people, or events. The concept is commonly applied to the imaginations of people who see themselves as part of that group (e.g., Hall 1997). However, when using the concept in relation to subalterns’ imagination of the empire, this cultural repertoire is a space of interpretative struggle as well as interconnectedness within the imperial setting. The Yehudite imaginations of Darius and his officials relate to how those who produced them position themselves towards the empire and their local group. The variety of subaltern reactions to the empire is conceptualized as their agency by distinguishing and distancing themselves from others, through a broad repertoire of acknowledging, accommodating, reminiscing, resisting, etc. (e.g., Bhabha [1994] 2004). Thus, cultural imagination is a productive concept for meaning making which underlies the various Yehudite reactions, transformations, and reconfigurations of the empire in general and the Persian king Darius and his officials in particular.

While subaltern is often used as a term denoting those who in various ways are socially, politically, or geographically outside the center of power (e.g., Spivak 1988; Sugirtharajah 2002; Perdue 2015), I explore different agencies as entangled in an imperial setting. As such, I relate to a more complex definition of empire in antiquity than what is currently offered, including the attention paid to the composite relationship between subaltern groups and larger empires (Rollinger et al. 2020; in relation to writings from the Hebrew Bible, see Stone 2018; Hasler 2020b; Joachimsen 2022). I seek to identify a resilient field of forces in which agents communicate with each other in disparate ways within the imperial setting. The identity of members of Yehudite subaltern groups is composite, relational, and situational. This implies, for instance, that identity—and loyalty—is negotiated,

both with the empire and concerning their local group. The analysis of Haggai, Zechariah 1–8, and Ezra 4–6 highlights which identity is foregrounded in the various portrayals of the participants in constructing YHWH’s temple and the relationship between diverse forms of power and authority communicated in this regard. I focus on the titles, positions, and relationships between the various literary characters.

Cultural imagination is not a concept for reconstructing a “conventional” history of Yehud but rather for exploring how the Persian king Darius and his officials are represented. While representations of others are necessarily mediated by the perceptions of an individual or a group, one might ask whether such representations would imply a lesser degree—or at least a different kind—of historical reliability. In a recent study on cultural history and the Hebrew Bible, [Wilson \(2018\)](#) scrutinizes theoretical tools fit for unpacking and understanding the significance of the narrativity of our material for historiography. Thus, he asks which histories we are able to tell. By focusing on the role of culture, narrative, and memory, he opts for a reorientation towards meaning production and a more dynamic and multi-dimensional understanding of historical processes. In this regard, he highlights selectivity and perspectivity ([Wilson 2018](#), p. 23). These narratives and memories do not correspond to what “happened”; they are certainly biased. And this is the default, not the exception, something that is well illustrated by [Grabbe’s](#) words concerning an attempt to harmonize the historical succession of Persian kings with the account offered in Ezra 4, which is “complete nonsense” ([Grabbe 1998](#), p. 21)⁴, and [Kratz’s](#) claim that Ezra 4–6 “paint an inconsistent picture” of the reconstruction of the YHWH temple in Jerusalem ([Kratz 2006](#), p. 258). Narratives and memories are adopted in and shared by a community not because they correspond to some historical fact, but because they reflect and reinforce the telling or remembering of a community’s culture and associated ideologies or worlds ([Ben Zvi 2014](#)). By asking different questions, the current study contributes to invigorating Achaemenid historiography. It is assumed that we can write histories that account for how and why those who produced Haggai, Zechariah 1–8, and Ezra 4–6 wrote about Darius and his officials the way they did.

2. The Imaginary of Resilience and Prosperity of Yehud in the Reign of King Darius According to Haggai and Zechariah 1–8

In Haggai and Zechariah 1–8, Darius is mentioned in relation to the restoration of the community, city, and temple of YHWH in Jerusalem, together with the local Yehudite leadership of the governor Zerubbabel and the high priest Joshua, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, the people, and YHWH. The two prophetic writings are contemporary and have some common themes but differ in style and structure.⁵ Both date the beginning of their prophetic oracles to the second year of the reign of Darius (Hag 1:1, 15, 2:10, Zech 1:1, 7, 7:1), in which he is identified as monarch, but not as Persian. The current king of Yehud is Persian, while the Persian part of his identity is downplayed. These dating formulas are commonly taken to be “real ones” (e.g., [Kessler 2002](#); [Ristau 2016](#), p. 141; [Silverman 2020](#)), while some dispute their reliability (e.g., [Edelman 2005](#), pp. 80–159; [Jonker 2015](#), pp. 201–2). While most scholars take this Persian king to be Darius I, [Dequeker \(1993\)](#), [Hallaschka \(2010\)](#), and [Becking \(2018\)](#) represent a minority view, identifying this monarch as Darius II. Zerubbabel is also mentioned in both books. In Haggai, this character is labeled governor, identified patronymically, and called YHWH’s servant and signet ring. As such, he is represented by a blend of Yahwistic and imperial signs and symbols, while in Zechariah 1–8, this is toned down, as Zerubbabel is neither labeled by an imperial title nor a patronym.

2.1. The Governor Zerubbabel, the High Priest Joshua, and the People as Temple Builders in the Book of Haggai

The oracles in Haggai aim at motivating Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the people of Yehud to unite around the construction of the temple of YHWH (1:14). By building the temple, the deity will be pleased and glorified (1:8) and the people will gain peace (2:9, cf. 2:7). Zerubbabel and Joshua are mainly mentioned together (1:1;12;14, 2:2;4; only in 2:20–23

is Zerubbabel addressed alone). Zerubbabel is called the governor of Yehud, and Joshua is labeled as high priest. Moreover, both are identified patronymically: Zerubbabel as Shealtiel's son⁶, and Joshua as the son of Jehozadak. In addition, Zerubbabel is called YHWH's servant and signet ring (2:23). In the final oracle, the restoration of the temple is not mentioned. Rather, YHWH's election of Zerubbabel here follows expressions of the divine overthrow of the thrones of kingdoms of the peoples (2:22).

In all instances but one in which Zerubbabel and Joshua appear together, the rest of the people are also included (1:12;14, 2:2:4, cf. Ezra 3:2:8), in which their joint work of constructing YHWH's temple is stressed. Thus, the building of the temple is presented as a collective effort. The temple restoration also has a wider impact: in 2:7, it is stated that YHWH promises to shake the heavens, the earth, and all the peoples—and that the peoples will contribute to the work by bringing their treasures to Jerusalem and the temple; the last oracle of the book, 2:20–23, echoes the previous one, with the deity claiming that he will shake the heavens, earth, and the thrones of kingdoms of the peoples. This will take place through Zerubbabel in an imagined future (2:23).

Many scholars take the representation of Zerubbabel in the Book of Haggai to imply an anticipated political status, as one advancing from governor to king (e.g., [Ristau 2016](#), p. 132; [Knoppers 2021](#), pp. 365–66). Others claim that no royal assertion of authority is conveyed, as neither servant nor signet ring points unequivocally to a royal context ([Rose 2000](#)). In any case, Zerubbabel gains authority from YHWH and represents the deity in some fashion. The blend of Yahwistic and imperial signs and symbols might convey tension in the presentation of Zerubbabel, a subaltern Yehudite belonging to the people of YHWH and a Persian governor, representing the empire. The divine favor of Zerubbabel is expressed and his authority is derived and exercised on behalf of YHWH. He is an instrument of YHWH, but not the king of an independent kingdom, and his Davidic genealogy is toned down. However, the governor of Yehud is indeed chosen by YHWH. As a governor appointed by the Persian Empire, Zerubbabel's imperial authority of Yehud is also alluded to. The representation of Zerubbabel could be interpreted as resilience when encountering a disruptive constellation ([Kessler 2002](#), pp. 298–99; [Knoppers 2021](#), p. 363). The vagueness is certainly not about the fate of the historical Zerubbabel but concerns the symbolic vitality of the future of the community. Also, the relationship between the cohesion of the Yehudite community and the imperial authority is vague. Various attempts have been made to explicate the implications of YHWH's exaltation of Zerubbabel for the future, and, more generally, the future status of the temple community, as presented in Haggai. In this regard, not only Zerubbabel but also Joshua and the people embody the hope and prosperity of the community and the temple.

The temple restoration is not followed by an adjacent reinstitution of an independent kingdom. Haggai begins with a Persian king and ends with the promise of a future, but a new local, empirical monarchy is not articulated. Darius is the king, while both his Persian identity and potential role in the work on the temple are downplayed. Still, YHWH's chosen governor is an official of this Persian king. As such, YHWH works through Darius in the construction of the temple and the community. As the patron deity of the temple, the community, and the Yehudite leadership, YHWH is above King Darius, rhetorically speaking. It is not stated explicitly that YHWH will overthrow the Persian Empire, but that YHWH oversees the entire world.

2.2. *The High Priest Joshua, Zerubbabel, and the Sprout in Charge in Zechariah 1–8*

The main bulk of Zechariah 1–8 envisions various preparations for how Jerusalem, the temple, and the community will be rebuilt, in which the local leaders Joshua, Zerubbabel, and a figure called *šemah* “sprout” play particular roles in relation to the temple. Both in Zech 3:1–10 and 4:1–14, some kind of dual leadership is described, while their relationship is unstable. In 3:1–10, Joshua is given a special role, associated with the purification of the land and the people, and responsibility towards the temple. Moreover, in 3:8, the high priest and other priests are called a sign of things to come, as YHWH will bring a figure called his

servant and sprout; the role of this figure is not spelled out. In 4:1–14, Zerubbabel is made responsible for the building of the temple. Here, he is neither identified by an imperial title nor a patronym. However, he is decisive for authorizing both the temple community and the prophet. The messengers of YHWH empower Joshua by instructing him in his role as high priest (3:7), while the prophet Zechariah is empowered by Zerubbabel in his role in the temple construction (4:9).

Zech 6:9–14 conveys an oracle pointing to an imagined future, where things become even more blurred. The high priest Joshua is identified patronymically as Jehozadak's son and will wear a crown, a sign of wealth and elite status (6:11, Silverman 2020, p. 156), while the sprout will be responsible for building YHWH's temple (6:12). The sprout shall bear royal honor as he sits on his throne, with a priest seated on a throne by his side, and there will be peace between the two (6:13). The crowns and thrones made for Joshua, the sprout, and the priests indicate who will rule in the restored community and the completed temple (6:15).

Various interpretations of the sprout have been offered. Typically, the figure has been identified as a person, whether Zerubbabel, a messianic Davide, or the governor turned into a (Davidic) king (see Boda (2016, pp. 156–58) for an overview). The identification as Zerubbabel relates to the dual leadership of him and Joshua (Zech 4:13, 6:11) and his role as temple builder (4:7; 8;10, combined with the reference to YHWH's servant and signet ring in Hag 2:23, which, however, is not related to the building of the temple). Such identification has also been contested. For instance, in Zechariah 1–8, Zerubbabel is neither called governor, king, nor anointed, and no Davidic patronym is mentioned, while it is the high priest Joshua who becomes crowned. Recently, Silverman (2020, p. 158) has suggested that *šemah* "growth" is "a ruler whose job is to build the temple," and whose legitimacy will be supported by the priest. Since the role of this growth is to fulfill the traditional Ancient Near East kingship roles of prosperity in the land and temple building, Silverman (2020, p. 206) claims that "in the second year of Darius, the only logical candidate for this role is Darius himself."⁷ In my view, Zechariah 1–8 is intentionally vague, ambiguous, and multivalent. It is not about the historical fate of the sprout, and also not about Darius or Zerubbabel.

The scenes in Zech 3, 4, and 6 envision the establishment of YHWH's rule through Joshua, Zerubbabel, and the sprout in an imagined future. Concrete and symbolic issues are blended in the representation of people and events, and the distinctions between divine and human are blurred. Through divine authority, the restoration of the temple and the community will be completed, followed by prosperity (cf. the peace in Hag 2:7;9). To gain this, YHWH relies on the power of a governor of a Persian king. However, the designation of both Zerubbabel and Darius is toned down, as Zerubbabel is neither identified by Davidic genealogy nor labeled with any imperial title, and the king is not called Persian. Moreover, Zerubbabel is not a king and Darius is not Davidic. The Darius dating indicates the setting, but apart from that, the Persian king does not play an apparent role and there are no other direct references to Persia.⁸ These Yehudite scenarios of a future reign do not focus on the basic structures of an earthly world empire such as a central and regional administration, army, communication, and taxes (Ben Zvi 2014). YHWH's rule and the temple will be established through Joshua, the sprout, priests, YHWH's messengers, and prophets. Due to being significant for authorizing both the temple community and the prophet, Zerubbabel might be more closely associated with YHWH than with Darius. The vagueness of the representations of these figures might relate to desires for cohesion, in which neither the Yehudite leadership nor the Persian hegemony is directly challenged. Still, in the entanglement of imperial and local discursive strategies, Yehud and YHWH are envisioned pre-eminent among the peoples in an imagined future commonality, with a restored temple of YHWH in Jerusalem at the center.

3. The Building of YHWH's Temple in Jerusalem: A Question of Loyalty to the Persian King and/or YHWH in Yehud in Ezra 4–6

While Darius is the only king mentioned in Haggai and Zechariah 1–8, he is one of many Persian kings referred to in the Book of Ezra⁹, together with Cyrus, Xerxes, and Artaxerxes. While Darius's Persian identity is downplayed in the two prophetic writings, he is called the king of Persia in Ezra 4:5 and 6:14.¹⁰ As in Haggai and Zechariah 1–8, Zerubbabel is mentioned (Ezra 2:2, 3:2;8, 4:2;3, 5:2) and presented jointly with Jeshua¹¹ and both are identified patronymically (cf. endnote 6 below). As opposed to in Haggai, Zerubbabel is not labeled governor in Ezra, and as opposed to both Haggai and Zechariah 1–8, Jeshua is not called a priest. Moreover, two others who are related to the building of the temple of YHWH in Jerusalem in this diplomatic correspondence are identified as governors: Sheshbazzar (Ezra 5:14–16, also called leader in 1:8, cf. 1:11), and Tattenai (5:3;6, 6:6;13). These two governors are not labeled by patronyms.¹²

Ezra 4 introduces a brief dialogue concerning a dispute related to the endeavor to build the temple. Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the heads of the families of Yehud decline an offer from certain opponents to assist in the project (4:1–3). They will build alone, and they appeal to the command of the Persian king Cyrus on this (cf. Ezra 1:1–4, 5:13–15), and not to YHWH. In light of the subsequent events, the dispute on the cooperation of the work on the temple appears to be ironic, as the continuation concerns opposition to the restoration of the temple. The opponents of the temple builders manage to bribe counselors, who generally work in the interest of the empire, but who here contribute to hindering the work by opposing the command of King Cyrus (4:5). The work is delayed until resumed under Darius's reign (cf. 4:24). More resistance follows through diplomatic correspondence between Persian officials and kings. By engaging the king, the conflict is brought to another level. No Yehudites are directly involved in this correspondence, despite being the main topic of the content of the letters.

Ezra 4–6 is a composite of references to and quotation of letters, decrees, archival proofs, prophetic words, dialogue, and narrative. Besides this, it switches between Hebrew and Aramaic, as well as some Persian words. The letters are written in Aramaic, the language of the empire, and in a genre belonging to the imperial discourse. A large and diverse person gallery is present, in which many people, to a large extent, are featured as either supporting or opposing the building of YHWH's temple in Jerusalem. Both in terms of chronology, actors, themes, and languages, Ezra 4–6 is topsy-turvy. Various attempts have been made to explain this presentation, e.g., by dividing the text into various historical layers, which are related to different historical events (most recently, Hensel 2016; Fried 2015; Knoppers 2021)¹³, or by reading a common literary theme out of the three chapters (Siedlecki 2010; Hasler 2020a). Ezra 4:8–6:18 is written in Aramaic and has been analyzed from the point of view of voicing, vocabulary, and perspective.¹⁴

The diplomatic letter writing might be divided into two, in which both the correspondence between the Persian official Rehum and Artaxerxes (4:8–24) and that between Tattenai and Darius (5:6–6:12) turn out to be a question of loyalty, where each part tries to demonstrate that it is the most loyal subject—to the king and/or YHWH. The letters are surrounded by a narrative frame which brings up topics such as the stoppage of the rebuilding of the temple (4:24), Haggai and Zechariah prophesying to the Yehudites and encouraging Zerubbabel and Jeshua to start working on the temple (5:1–2), Tattenai investigating Yehud and Jerusalem (5:3–5), and the completion and dedication of the temple (6:13–18). In the following, I will analyze these various parts of Ezra 4–6, with a particular focus on the roles of Darius and his officials Zerubbabel, Sheshbazzar, and Tattenai.

3.1. The Letter Writing between the Persian Official Rehum and Artaxerxes (4:8–24)

The Persian official Rehum and his colleagues write a letter to King Artaxerxes (4:8–16), in which they claim that the Yehudites' rebuilding of the city will harm the king through a cessation of tax payments, dishonor, and loss of the province Beyond the River (4:13–16). They advise the king to investigate the memorandum of the fathers, which will confirm

Jerusalem as a rebellious city from early times (4:15–16). The letter writers succeed in stopping the work of the temple, which began during the reign of Cyrus (4:17–24) and is resumed in the reign of Darius (4:5;24). Their letter is, however, not addressed to Cyrus or Darius, but to Xerxes (4:6) and Artaxerxes (4:7).¹⁵ Artaxerxes responds by confirming the accusations against the Yehudites and orders the rebuilding to be stopped (4:17–23) during Cyrus’s reign. The work ceases until Darius.

Many scholars (e.g., Grabbe 1998; Siedlecki 2010; Becking 2018) stress that Rehum and his colleagues’ claim that the Yehudites’ restoration of Jerusalem is a plot against the Persian king is taken out of the blue and makes the officials seem ridiculous. From a rhetorical point of view, however, it is significant that the officials appear as loyal subjects of the Persian king, as opposed to the Yehudites. As opposed to Cyrus’s decree, Artaxerxes’ order to stop the building of the city (4:21–22) is not charged by YHWH. However, in 4:20, it is stated that mighty kings have ruled over the city, governing all the provinces Beyond the River, and that tribute, custom, and toll were paid to them. As such, parts of the Yehudites’ version of the past are being confirmed by the empire.

3.2. Narrative Frame: Haggai, Zechariah, Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and Tattenai Engaged in the Temple Restoration (5:1–5)

In 5:1, new actors appear. Haggai and Zechariah prophesied to the Yehudites in Yehud and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel (cf. 6:14). Additionally, some former actors are back in the narrative: Despite King Artaxerxes’ command to let the work stop (4:21–24), Zerubbabel and Jeshua resume the work on the temple, supported by the prophets of God (5:2). Moreover, Tattenai investigates the restoration of the temple (5:3–5, cf. 4:3), where Zerubbabel and Jeshua do not appear, but rather the elders of Yehud, who keep going on their work, with the eye of God watching over them (5:5;9).

3.3. The Letter Writing between Tattenai and Darius (5:6–6:12)

Governor Tattenai and his colleagues write a letter to King Darius, in which they tell him how they went to Yehud to investigate who authorized the work on the temple (5:8–10, cf. 5:3–4). A central part of the letter consists of the temple builders’ reply (5:11–16). They tell about the Babylonian exile—why, by whom, and how it ended (5:12, cf. 9:7–9): with Cyrus ordering the temple to be rebuilt (5:13–14, cf. 4:3) and the governor Sheshbazzar to bring the vessels back to Jerusalem (5:15, cf. 1:8–10) and lay the foundations of the temple (5:15).¹⁶ Their letter ends by requesting King Darius to investigate the royal treasures in Babylon and whether Cyrus ordered to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem (5:17, cf. 7:17). Darius confirms what Tattenai had come to know: that the construction of the YHWH temple in Jerusalem was authorized by King Cyrus (6:3–5, cf. 4:3). Moreover, Darius commands Tattenai and his colleagues to stay away from the work on the temple and allows the restoration to resume by the elders and the governor of the Yehudites; the latter is not clearly identified (6:6–7).

In the first correspondence, Rehum and his colleagues claimed that the building project of the Yehudites will make them stop paying tax, and King Artaxerxes responded by stopping the work, which was against Cyrus’s order and which was not charged by YHWH. While financial resources are no issue in Tattenai’s letter to Darius, the topic appears twice in Darius’s reply. He refers to Cyrus’s claim that the costs shall be provided by the king (6:4), and he orders that all the expenses of the work of the elders of the Yehudites shall be paid from the tax of the king (6:8). Not only are the accusations against the Yehudites that they will not pay tax to the king ridiculous, but money would flow in the opposite direction, that is, from the Persian king to the temple of YHWH in Jerusalem (cf. Hag 2:7, § 2.1. above). Darius also requires that sacrifices and prayers be made for the royal family and mandates that anyone who does not keep his order should be impaled on a beam from his own home. The punishment will come not only from Darius but also from YHWH “who caused his name to dwell there” (6:10–12, cf. v. 14).

In the first correspondence, the officials insinuate that Jerusalem was destroyed because the city was disloyal to kings, while in the second one, it is claimed that the city and temple were destroyed because Israel offended its deity (5:11–12, cf. 9:7–9, and Janzen 2016, p. 37). Thus, the smearing of the Yehudites in the first correspondence harms Rehum, his colleagues, and Artaxerxes in the end. While they present the Yehudites as rebelling against the king, both Tattenai and Darius confirm that Cyrus had ordered the temple to be rebuilt, so by doing this work, the Yehudites are, in fact, loyal both to the king and to YHWH.

3.4. Narrative Frame Concerning the Completion and Dedication of the Temple (6:13–18)

In 6:13, it is told that Tattenai and his colleagues implemented Darius's order, followed by a dense summing up of the authorization of the temple restoration: the elders of the Yehudites continued the work with the support of YHWH, Haggai, and Zechariah, and the Persian kings Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes (6:14). Again, as opposed to the accusations in the first correspondence, the Yehudites' restoration project is not at all a threat to the king but is indeed a fulfillment of the royal order. The work on the temple was completed in the sixth year of the reign of Darius (6:15). The temple is dedicated, in which the people of Israel—the priests, Levites, and other returnees—take part. No governor is mentioned, and neither Zerubbabel nor Jeshua is referred to by name in this sequence.

3.5. The Roles of the Persian King Darius and the Officials Zerubbabel, Sheshbazzar, and Tattenai in the Temple Restoration in Jerusalem

Ezra 4–6 might work as a prime illustration of a literary pastiche, as well as how the narrative has an episodic character. A large and multifarious person gallery is present, in which the actors are featured as supporting (e.g., the returned exiles, heads of the families, the elders of the Yehudites, Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Sheshbazzar, Tattenai, Haggai, Zechariah, Cyrus, Darius, Artaxerxes) or opposing (e.g., opponents of Yehud and Benjamin, the people of the land, Rehum and his colleagues, Artaxerxes) the building project.

In Ezra 4–6, Zerubbabel, Sheshbazzar, and Tattenai are involved in the work on the temple in various ways, but their roles are somewhat downplayed. Zerubbabel, who is not labeled governor and appears jointly with Jeshua, is involved in the initial dispute (4:2), where he belongs to the group of those who decline the offer from others to participate in the work. In the middle of the diplomatic correspondence, Zerubbabel and Jeshua appear in a narrative sequence in which they are encouraged by Haggai and Zechariah to begin rebuilding the temple (5:2), despite King Artaxerxes' command to stop the work. While Zerubbabel gains support from YHWH's prophets, the governor Sheshbazzar brings the vessels back to Jerusalem and lays the foundations of the temple on King Cyrus's command (5:14–16). After these brief episodes of Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar, both disappear from the scene, taking part neither in the completion nor dedication of the temple.

Tattenai initiates the second correspondence, where he writes to Darius about an investigation concerning who authorized the rebuilding of the temple. Darius confirms what Tattenai had come to know: that the construction of the YHWH temple in Jerusalem was authorized by King Cyrus, and Darius adds an order of the same. Also, Darius commands Tattenai and his colleagues to stay away from the work and allows the restoration to resume by the elders and the governor of the Yehudites (6:6–7). According to Darius, he and Cyrus shall both provide the funds for the cost of the work (6:4;8).

Darius and other Persian kings have a much more prominent role in the Book of Ezra than in Haggai and Zechariah 1–8, while Zerubbabel is more significant in the two prophetic writings than in Ezra. Many scholars have presented nuanced and multifaceted interpretations of both the diplomatic correspondence and the orders of the Persian kings in the Book of Ezra. At the same time, there is a tendency to claim that “[the] depiction of Persia is . . . entirely positive in Ezra-Nehemiah” (Siedlecki 2010, p. 69; Silverman 2020, pp. 114–15). Knoppers (2021, p. 384) emphasizes that YHWH's driving force for the temple restoration in Ezra 1–6 is made through the Persian king, who is the key royal figure and temple sponsor, while in Haggai, it happens through the prophet, who speaks

to Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the people, and where Darius is downplayed. According to Knoppers, the Persian kings replace the previous Davidic king in some ways, while in other instances, members of the Yehudite community take a lead: “Within the Judean polity imagined by the writers, different individuals and groups (Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, Jeshua, the priests, Levites, elders, and populace) have their roles to play, but they are all ultimately responsible to their imperial overlord . . . [T]he foreign king appears neither as an oppressor nor as an instrument of divine anger, but rather as a benefactor and source of blessing . . . ” (2021, pp. 382, 391). Knoppers certainly highlights the imaginary qualities of these literary representations of the various characters. Still, when it comes to his conclusions, it is somewhat unclear whether he is talking about conditions behind the text or meaning within the text:

“Operating within the periphery of a huge multinational realm, the Judeans successfully rebuild the altar, offer sacrifices, and convince the reigning emperor to (re)authorize the temple project and direct state resources to the betterment of those living in the Second Commonwealth. The ability of the Judean elders to prevail where Sheshbazzar had failed marks the sanctuary reconstruction and dedication as one of the highlights of the Persian period” (Knoppers 2021, p. 391).

Regardless of whether Knoppers refers to historical conditions or literary representations, he directs the attention to what I have previously referred to as selection and perspectivization. While Darius and other Persian kings certainly have a more prominent role in Ezra, and the roles of the officials are downplayed when compared to the Books of Haggai and Zechariah 1–8, as well as in comparison with other temple builders in the Book of Ezra, from the “cultural imagination” perspective stressed in this study, it is important to observe that Darius is portrayed from a subaltern point of view. While the picture is not painted from a Persian hegemony, in the complex diplomatic correspondence, the interest of YHWH and the Yehudites is dressed in imperial discourse. The letter writing plays with the imperial discourse that the king rules while, at the same time, challenging this hegemony by “Yehudizing” it, making the kings work in the interest of YHWH.¹⁷ In the second correspondence, the will of the Persian king and the will of YHWH are almost coincidental, and a contrast to the first correspondence, in which YHWH is not mentioned at all. For everybody involved, the test of loyalty turns out to be related to the building of the YHWH temple in Jerusalem, in which Yehud—a margin of the empire, and an economic and politically insignificant place—becomes a center.

In this complexity of acknowledgment, accommodation, reminiscing, and resilience towards the empire, Ezra 4–6 is neither pro- nor anti-Persia or Darius, but pro-YHWH and his temple in Jerusalem, with the Yehudites in a more mixed position. Taking the composite relationship of the empire and the province as presented in Ezra 4–6 further into consideration, the empire both supports and hinders the Yehudites, who are both loyal and rebellious towards their deity. In the end, Darius and the other Persian kings are placed under the authority of the deity of the Yehudites. First and foremost, this turns out to not be about how the Yehudites are loyal to the Persian kings as much as about how the Persian kings are presented as—more or less—subjected to YHWH and Yehud. In this regard, Darius is used to providing (additional) legitimacy to YHWH and Yehud, in which the power of the Persian king is not imperial power but comes from YHWH, and not Marduk or Ahuramazda, while the center of the discourse is Yehud, Jerusalem, and YHWH’s temple, not Persepolis or Babylon. Neither Darius, Zerubbabel, Sheshbazzar, nor Tattenai is an empirical figure in this narrative but is voiced by Yahwists in Yehud. The three Persian officials are “faded out of the story”; in the end, it is not Darius or his officials, but rather the Yehudites who carry out YHWH’s order, supported by the empire. By rebuilding the temple, the Yehudites are loyal to YHWH, and so is the Persian king.

4. King Darius as Represented by the Empire and the Provinces

The analysis of the representations of Darius, his officials, and others in Haggai, Zechariah 1–8, and Ezra 4–6 relates to structural features well known from the Ancient

Near East, such as the king as a deputy of the patron deity, and the monarch as present through local officials, and as one who is both restoring and destroying cities and buildings, including temples (Pongratz-Leisten 1999; Boda and Novotny 2010). Scholars have applied various comparative materials to explain the historical reliability of Haggai, Zechariah 1–8, and Ezra 4–6. Such approaches aim at identifying how these selected writings have adopted traits associated with the Persian context. Some juxtapose the diplomatic correspondence in Ezra 4–6 and imperial Achaemenid or Hellenistic conventions for letter writing (Williamson 2008; Siedlecki 2010; Kratz 2011; Moore 2021); others highlight the question of loyalty to the empire by comparing them with Achaemenid monumental or minor royal inscriptions (Boda 2006; Siedlecki 2010; Janzen 2016, 2021; Fried 2015; Becking 2018; Jones 2018; Silverman 2020). Prominent in this regard is also a concept called Achaemenid imperial ideology, which is mainly associated with Darius I. Kratz (2020, p. 158) claims that “[d]ocumentation of the ideology and practice of Achaemenid rule is only attested from Darius onwards” (cf. Lincoln 2012).¹⁸ Such studies risk reductionist interpretations by searching for a one-to-one relationship between variegated and fragmented Achaemenid materials and their assumed use in the Hebrew Bible. Due consideration has to be given to the significant differences between the comparative materials in terms of genre, selectivity, and perspectivity towards the empire. I will give a brief illustration of this with some material that is frequently referred to in this regard: the various versions of Darius I’s Bisitun Inscription as well as more material from Elephantine.

Darius I’s Bisitun Inscription (DB) is a multilingual inscription (Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian) and a rock relief on a cliff at Mount Bisitun in western Iran, in which Darius promulgates himself as the legitimate king.¹⁹ In this inscription, issues of the power of the empire are emphasized, while at the same time, imperial and local discursive strategies are entangled (Rollinger 2016a). In DB 6–8, the Achaemenid king describes himself as installed in his office by the patron god Ahuramazda, “the great god,” in order to establish cosmic order out of chaos. In this self-presentation, Darius lists 23 named peoples/countries who obey him “by the favor of Ahuramazda” (DB 5–9) and enumerates the rebelling kings (DB 52–53). Moreover, Darius also represents himself as a deputy of various other deities (Lincoln 2012). In the Old Persian version, Darius says that “Ahuramazda, and the other gods who are, bore me support” (DB 4.60–61, 62–63). Additionally, two instances of local distribution of this inscription are known, dated to around 400 BCE, that is, around a hundred years after Darius’s reign. One version found in Babylon (DB Bab) is a fragmentary stela with text and relief in Babylonian designed for a Babylonian audience. Here, Darius is presented as a legitimate Babylonian king, in which his patron god is not Ahuramazda, but the Babylonian Bel, while only two rebel kings are depicted, both identified as Babylonian usurpers, Nidintu-Bel and Arkhaha. Thus, in this version, local traditions are adapted. Another version is found on a very fragmentary papyrus scroll (DB Aram, in Aramaic, dated to Darius II) in Elephantine, and connected with a Yehudite community, one among many ethnic groups in this island in Upper Egypt.²⁰ This version follows the order of the Old Persian and Elamite text, with a few differences: it is not accompanied by the relief of Darius, and a passage is inserted toward the end which has textual links with Darius I Naqsh-e Rostam (DNa) as well as another ascribed to Xerxes (Becking 2020, pp. 109–11). This Achaemenid imperial text which the Yehudites kept is commonly regarded as being part of the scribal curriculum. According to Wigand (2018, pp. 145–46), the additional passage frames the Aramaic Bisitun so that the scribes at Elephantine have to read it through a lens of loyalty. While the versions of Darius I’s Bisitun Inscription emphasize issues of imperial power, at the same time, imperial and local discursive strategies are entangled, as both local deities and rebellious kings are presented from an imperial point of view, and used according to the needs of the Persian king. The two distributed versions of Darius I’s Bisitun Inscription illustrate how the Empire disseminated its ideology among subaltern groups in Babylon and the Elephantine Island in Upper Egypt.

Another fragment from Elephantine illuminates the question of positionality differently than the Aramaic Bisitun Inscription, both in terms of the kind of material it represents

and how it conveys interferences from the Persian authorities. This is a fragmentary letter, dated ca. 419 BCE, written in Aramaic by Hananiah, a Yehudite in the Persian administration, and apparently approved by Darius II (423–404 BCE).²¹ It is addressed to his brothers, Yedaniah and his colleagues, in the Yehudite garrison. The letter refers to a message from King Darius to Ar[sames], an Egyptian satrap, followed by information from Hananiah to the Yehudites in Elephantine concerning the celebration of a feast.²² A few years later, ca. 407 BCE, the Yehudite community in Elephantine addressed a letter to the leadership of both Yehud and Samaria. Two versions of the letter are found, written by Yedaniah, a leading Yehudite from Elephantine, to Bagohi, a high-level Persian official of Yehud, requesting support for rebuilding the temple of Yaho in Elephantine. This local temple had been destroyed by the priests of Khnum in 410 BCE (Porten et al. 1996, pp. 139–47). While the destruction of this temple is part of a greater tension between local Egyptians and the Persian administration (Becking 2020, pp. 138–45), Yedaniah focuses on what happened to the temple, for which he offers a detailed description. If Bagohi responds in a supportive manner, this Persian authority will receive offerings in his name made in the rebuilt temple. A joint memorandum by Bagohi and Delaiah, the latter a high-level Persian official of Samaria, permits rebuilding the temple and the resumption of meal offerings and incense (Becking 2020, pp. 148–49).²³ Yet, another memorandum by a group of leading Yehudites commits them to giving silver if the temple is to be rebuilt and meal offerings and incense, while there will be no animal offerings in this temple. The Yehudites' request for permission to reconstruct the temple in Elephantine is embedded in a question of loyalty.²⁴

A comparative study of the Elephantine material and Ezra 1–6 by Kratz (2006) might work as an illustration of a scholarly ambivalence when interpreting the various kinds of material in terms of their historical reliability. His main interest seems to be the historical reality of the temple restorations in both instances, Elephantine and Jerusalem. Kratz (2006, p. 248) introduces this study by stating that “[t]he Egyptian Jews probably had much more in common with the historical Israel of the pre-and post-exilic age in Palestine than do the biblical Jews.” He claims that “the conflict [in Ezra 4–6] is essentially an internal one, and one has the impression that it owes more to a theological construct than historical reality,” characterizing Ezra 4–6 as “a historical fiction in which the political and diplomatic practices of the Achaemenid Empire and of the later Hellenistic-Roman Period undergo a kind of literary transformation,” containing “little in the way of historically analyzable material” (Kratz 2006, pp. 256, 258). Notably, these claims are coupled with an effort to map the historicity of—at least bits and pieces of—the narrative of Ezra 4–6. As Kratz claims: “Of course this does not mean that the entire event is made up” (Kratz 2006, p. 258). A comparison of the Elephantine material and Ezra 4–6 offers a splendid opportunity to ask, with Wilson: which histories are we able to tell from these various kinds of material?

From a historiographical point of view, comparing Achaemenid imperial material and Ezra 4–6 requires a high degree of awareness in not blending a question of meaning making with a pursuit of historical veracity. One obvious difference between the various materials is the target audience. In the various versions of Darius I's Bisitun Inscription, issues of the power of the empire are emphasized, while at the same time, imperial and local discursive strategies are entangled; Ezra 4–6 is basically dealing with internal issues addressed to a Yehudite community, with the Yehudite material from Elephantine in a more mixed position. While the Aramaic Bisitun text which the subaltern Yehudites kept in Elephantine and the Yehudites' request for permission to reconstruct the Yaho temple there might be embedded in a question of loyalty, in Ezra 4–6, Darius and his officials are represented from Yehudite subaltern points of view, as supporters of the Yahwistic hegemony and temple building project, rhetorically speaking

Analyzing agency through writings such as Haggai, Zechariah 1–8, and Ezra 4–6 implies relating to a medium that allows for subtle transformations of the empire through literary and rhetorical features such as characterizations, stereotypes, clichés, ciphers, irony, and mimicry. By adopting and adapting elements from the imperial culture, the empire's authority might be both acknowledged and disrupted (Bhabha [1994] 2004). By analyzing

representations of Darius and other Persian authorities in Haggai, Zechariah 1–8, and Ezra 4–6, attention has been paid to the rhetoric of how the empire is subjected to the local–universal deity YHWH and his worshippers. The hegemonic discourse is Yahwistic, or Yehudite, not Achaemenid imperial. While the literary diplomatic correspondence of Ezra 4–6 is embedded in a broader literary context, the materials from Elephantine are fragments of a correspondence “on the ground,” which are interesting, but which one cannot generalize from. The playfulness of the diplomatic correspondence in Ezra 4–6 includes the kings, while in the Elephantine material, the empire is represented by deputies at a lower level. Generally, subalterns might have a broad repertoire of responding to the empire and cannot be categorized in reductionist manners as either pro- or anti-empire. The various responses might serve pragmatic or subversive purposes, which are episodic, related to local situations. The analyses of Haggai, Zechariah 1–8, and Ezra 4–6, the various versions of the Bisitun Inscription, relief, and text, and the fragmented correspondence from Elephantine and the imperial authorities in Yehud and Samaria represent a few snapshots, where the purpose is to provide an impression of the diversity of representations, positionalities, and genres in terms of the Persian king. While Darius has been significant for scholars’ dating of the completion of the temple in Jerusalem in 515 BCE, and the central supplier of what has been called Achaemenid imperial ideology, this Achaemenid king has a limited role in Haggai, Zechariah 1–8, and Ezra 4–6. The comparisons cannot lead to generalizations of fragments both in terms of the imperial and the Yahwistic material. I consider the comparative material as more pertinent to illuminating the differences in terms of selectivity and perspectivity.

5. When Yehud Talks Back in Haggai, Zechariah 1–8, and Ezra 4–6

What does the minor presence of Darius and his officials Zerubbabel, Sheshbazzar, and Tattenai in Haggai, Zechariah 1–8, and Ezra 4–6 mean and what sorts of meaning might have been produced by such literary representations? In this study, cultural imagination has been applied as a fertile tool in analyzing meaning making through a cultural historiographical lens. In the frame of cultural negotiation, interpretations of disparate representations of Darius and his officials are provided. The analysis has exposed a resilient field of forces in which agents communicate in disparate ways within the imperial setting. Representations of Darius and his officials in Haggai, Zechariah 1–8, and Ezra 4–6 illustrate positionality in between a local community and the empire.

Haggai, Zechariah 1–8, and Ezra 4–6 provide different pictures of who the community is in relation to the empire from different social locations and genres, offering different portrayals of the empire and community identity. At a first glance, the Persian Empire seems to be of less significance in the prophetic writings than in Ezra 4–6, where the patronage of the Persian kings is much more prominent. The blend of Yahwistic and imperial terms in Haggai and Zechariah 1–8 illustrates the composite and entangled identities and loyalties of those who wrote the books and their literary representation of Darius, Zerubbabel, Joshua, the sprout, and the people of Yehud. Both prophetic writings imagine a bright future and keep a low profile towards the empire. Nowhere is the temple construction explicitly legitimized by the Persian king, but rather through a prophet of YHWH. Except for the chronological reference, in Haggai and Zech 1–8, the Empire is almost nowhere to be seen, and when mentioned, it is only indirectly. In these prophetic writings, the temple restoration is related to internal issues, linking the governor, the high priest, prophets, and the rest of the people of Yehud to the project, while King Darius is primarily related to dating and governor. In Zechariah 1–8, Zerubbabel is decisive for authorizing both the temple community and the prophet, while in Ezra 4–6, Zerubbabel gains support from YHWH’s prophets Haggai and Zechariah. In Ezra 4–6, external intervention is referred to in terms of the restoration of the temple; it is investigated by Persian officials and supported by the Persian kings Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes, but officials such as Zerubbabel, Sheshbazzar, and Tattenai, as well as the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, and the elders of the Yehudites, are also involved. The three Persian officials are written out of the story,

neither taking part in the completion nor the dedication of the temple, and in the end, it is not Darius or his officials, but the Yehudites who carry out YHWH's order, while the Persian kings are presented as—more or less—subjected to YHWH and Yehud. By rebuilding the temple, the Yehudites are loyal to YHWH, and so is the Persian king.

By applying representation as a cultural historiographical lens, the present study has asked a different set of questions than what is common in Achaemenid historiography. As such, I have shown how an analysis of Darius and his officials in Haggai, Zechariah 1–8, and Ezra 4–6 complements studies of the empires of antiquity in a significant way. Among the many and diverse representations of Darius, that is, monumental and minor royal inscriptions, of various languages and places, including Egypt and Babylon (Rollinger 2016a), the selected writings from the Hebrew Bible portray this royal character, the governors Zerubbabel, Sheshbazzar, and Tattenai, and others according to local traditions, specific genres, and certain concerns. From a cultural analytical point of view, this enables illuminating ancient regional perspectives on the Achaemenid rule. By highlighting agency and the diverse forms of symbolic or meaning-generating activity, the selected writings offer other insights into how the Achaemenid king could be integrated into a religious group's self-definition, scrutinizing strategies of representing self and others.

A refined concept of cultural imagination is particularly productive for analyzing the entanglement of subalterns, local elites, and imperial agents towards the empire. The analysis of the cultural imaginations of Darius and his officials addresses the complexity of the material in both literary characteristics and positionality towards the empire. It is assumed that we can write histories that account for how and why those who produced Haggai, Zechariah 1–8, and Ezra 4–6 wrote about Darius and his officials the way they did. The statement at the end of the diplomatic correspondence that the second attempt to rebuild the temple was completed in Darius's sixth year of reign (6:15) has been applied as an argument for the conventional dating of the completion of the second temple in 515. Due to all the tensions, an analysis of the usage of this Persian king and his officials as an entry to understanding how the writers of the Book of Ezra worked shows that this "book" is not primarily imagined as pointing to Persia, but that the Persian kings are applied to tell something about YHWH, Yehud, and the YHWH temple of Jerusalem. This is not a facet of what happened, but a text to "think with." The current analysis has exposed tensions in the representations of the Persian kings, officials, and others. The writings display heterogeneous ideas of these Persian officials and their role in the building of YHWH's temple in Jerusalem, which include various interests, negotiations, and compromises. As such, they offer an entry to understanding how those who produced these writings worked. The empire with its kings becomes decentralized by being subjected to YHWH and Yehud. The material reflects various versions of center and periphery, with, for instance, Yehud, the broader Achaemenid Empire, or the heavens, earth, and the peoples as points of view. This is what is happening when "Yehud talks back" (Spivak 1988). And it is a different kind of history.

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Notes

- 1 In the current study, the term Achaemenid is used, as is often the case, to cover both the Teispid and Achaemenid periods. Otherwise, Darius I is the first Achaemenid king, while Cyrus belongs to the preceding Teispid dynasty. Cf. n. 18 below.
- 2 For a brief overview of the mentioning of Persia in the Hebrew Bible, see (Gruen 2007); the Books of Haggai and Zechariah are mentioned only in passing in this study.
- 3 Silverman (2020, p. xiv) makes it clear that the primary interest of his study is not the literary texts but the social world “behind and around” them. Also, despite the paucity of sources, which are only biblical, attempts have been made to investigate the historic Zerubbabel, most recently by Knoppers (2021, pp. 353–89), which includes an overview of previous research on the topic.
- 4 Becking “erases the problem” by interpreting the reference to Darius here as Darius II, see n. 15 below.
- 5 Moreover, Zechariah is not mentioned in the Book of Haggai, nor is Haggai mentioned in the Book of Zechariah, while the two prophets are mentioned together in Ezra 5:1 and 6:14, more on this in § 3 below.
- 6 Zerubbabel is identified as the son of Shealtiel in Hag 1:1;12:14, 2:2;23, Ezra 3:2;8, 5:2, and Neh 12:1, while in 1 Chron 3:17–19, he is called the son of Pedaiah, Shealtiel’s brother—only the latter identifies him as a Davide. In both instances, Zerubbabel is the grandson of the Davidic king Jehoiachin of Judah, who was brought to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kgs 24:12).
- 7 Also, the identification of two figures called “two sons of oil” is debated. They stand beside “the master of all the world” (4:14, 6:5, cf. 5:3;6) and, as such, take part in the restoration of cosmic order from a local point of view. *šemen* “oil” sometimes carries associations of the anointment of kings (e.g., 1 Sam 9:16, 10:1, 16:3, 24:6, 1 Kgs 1:39, 2 Kgs 9:6) or priests (e.g., Exod 29:7, Lev 8:12, 21:10), but in Zech, the word is *yīshār* “freshly-pressed oil” (cf. Hag 1:11), which rather alludes to prosperity. The two sons of oil are interpreted as, for instance, Joshua and Zerubbabel, both already set apart as representatives of YHWH, see Wolters (2014, p. 154) for an overview of various interpretations of personal agents. When it comes to the representations of both the sprout and the two sons of oil, Zechariah 1–8 is intentionally vague. It is not about historical fates, but symbolic significances.
- 8 Mitchell (2016) claims that the Persian administrative building and its paradise in Ramat Rachel is behind Zechariah’s visions, while Silverman (2020, pp. 189–93) argues that in Zech 1–8, joint divine approval and imperial authorization make the reconstruction of the temple possible.
- 9 Darius is mentioned by name in Ezra 4:5;24, 5:5;6;7, 5:1;12;13;14;15. Most scholars identify Darius referred to in Ezra as Darius I, while some take these references to be Darius II, cf. §§ 1 and 2 above and n. 16 below.
- 10 Likewise for Cyrus in Ezra 1:1;2, 6:14, and 2 Chron 36:22, 23, and for Artaxerxes in Ezra 4:7, 6:14, 7:1.
- 11 Jeshua is mentioned in Ezra 2:2;6;40, 3:2;8;9, 4:3, 5:2, 8:33, 10:18.
- 12 Silverman (2015, p. 31) considers Sheshbazzar to be the last Babylonian governor of Judah, who was then appointed by Persian Yehud.
- 13 The letter writers are identified by various geographical belongings; they are from the Mesopotamian cities of Erech and Babylon and the Elamite city of Susa. Due to an association between the adversaries related to Esarhaddon’s deportation (Ezra 4:2) and those connected with Osnappar’s deportation (4:9), many highlight the opposition from Samaria in this instance. In 4:2, Esarhaddon is identified as an Assyrian king who deported people to “here”, without further specification, while in 4:10, Osnappar is depicted as great and honorable, one who resettled people in Samaria and Beyond the River. Hensel (2020, p. 1) dates the Book of Ezra–Nehemiah to the late fourth or early third century BCE and claims that it represents “a *shift* in the perception of Samaria in biblical literature, namely toward a polemical and unequivocally negative perspective attested to later in, for example, Josephus” (his italics). Despite the fluid image of the enemies in Ezra 4:1–5, 6–23, 24, Hensel regards all of them as Samaritans: the “adversaries of Judah and Benjamin” (4:1), “people of the land” (4:5), and the opponents in 4:6–23 (Hensel 2020, p. 8). He takes Ezra 5–6* to be an “earlier Persian period’s temple chronicle” (Hensel 2020, p. 9). See also Berman in n. 14 below. Becking (2018, p. 70), on the other hand, downplays the role of Samaritans in Ezra 4, claiming that their main role is that they are associated with how the opponents of Yehud come from elsewhere, while Knoppers (2013, pp. 135–40) argues that the Samaritan opposition is only a minor theme in Ezra 4. Still, the tension in the diplomatic correspondence of Ezra 4–6 might convey undertones of the resolution of a struggle between various subalterns (e.g., Yehudites and Samaritans) by appeal to the empire.
- 14 The Aramaic section in 4:8–6:18 has been explained as representing external perspectives, such as Samaritan (Berman 2006), or Persian (Edelman 2016 identifies this as the imperial Other). According to Hogue (2018), the transition from a diaspora community to a stabilized minority in Jerusalem is expressed by alternating between Hebrew, a vernacular variety of Aramaic, and Official Aramaic, in which various ideological negotiations are taken into consideration.
- 15 Hebrew Ahasuerus, 486–465 BC, and Artaxerxes I, 465–424 BC, or Artaxerxes II, 405–359 BC. Becking (2018, p. 92) refers to how scholars have problematized the presentation of Artaxerxes here, as this king reigned after the conventional dating of the dedication of the temple in 515 BCE. Becking (2018, p. 92) erases this chronological problem by interpreting Darius as Darius II (cf. n. 4 above). Cambyses (530–522 BC)—who was king between Cyrus and Darius I—Gaumata, and Bardiya are not mentioned in this correspondence.
- 16 In Ezr 1–6, the roles of Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel are mixed in terms of the work on the restoration of the temple. According to Ezra 1:7–11, in the first year of Cyrus, Sheshbazzar brought back from Babylon to Jerusalem the exiles together with the temple vessels carried off by Nebuchadnezzar. Zerubbabel and Jeshua are not mentioned in Ezra 1. However, Sheshbazzar is not

enumerated in the list of those returning to the province of Yehud in Ezra 2; Zerubbabel and Jeshua are among the leaders (2:2). In 5:14–16, Sheshbazzar brings the vessels back to Jerusalem and lays the foundations of the temple on King Cyrus's command, while in 3:2–3, Zerubbabel and Jeshua set up an altar, and then two years later, they lay the foundations of the temple (3:8–10, cf. 4:3, 5:2 (cf. Hag 1:4 and Zech 4:9).

¹⁷ In this regard, King Artaxerxes appears particularly ridiculous, as he becomes misled by the bribery of the Persian officials and gives a counter-order concerning the restoration work—a counter-order which is not charged by YHWH. As Clines (1984, p. 82) has shown, this ironic presentation of the king and the contradictory royal order reminds one of the Book of Esther, with its excessive use of documentation and exaggerations when it comes to royal orders, in which officials take the initiative and kings confirm the officials' claims.

¹⁸ Kratz adds: “[T]he few inscriptions written in the name of Cyrus are considered by experts to be retrojections from the Darius era.” According to Jacobs (2010), the claim that there is a sharp break in royal style between Cyrus/Cambyses and Darius is contested, cf. Rollinger (2016b). Also in Shayegan (2018), imperial ideology under the Teispid rulers is attested. This volume also offers the most recent translation and discussion of the Cyrus Cylinder. For a recent overview of imperial ideology, see Rollinger (2020).

¹⁹ For an English translation, see Kuhrt (2007, pp. 141–58). For a discussion of the various versions of DB, see Granerød (2013, 2020).
²⁰ Becking (2020) discusses the various ethnic communities at Elephantine and how they were instrumental in the imperial power maintenance.

²¹ For an English translation, see Porten et al. (1996, pp. 125–27, TAD A.4.1), see also Fitzpatrick-McKinley (2017).

²² The feast is not mentioned by any name; however, it is often taken to be the feast of Unleavened Bread.

²³ Porten et al. (1996, pp. 279–82) suggests that the tension between the Yehudite temple community and the temple community of the Egyptian deity Khnum was due the Yehudite festival which is mentioned in Hananiah's letter, for instance, because the celebration would imply the slaughtering of sheep and the enactment of the Exodus and victory over the Egyptians. Kottsieper (2002, p. 157) has explained the diplomatic correspondence and the tension between the local groups as due to Hananiah's success in getting the Yehudites recognized as “a Jewish garrison.” The document is so fragmented that it is hard to conclude.

²⁴ Yedaniah claims that the temple of Yaho existed in the days of the kings of Egypt and that this was the only temple which was not destroyed by Cambyses, as an expression of their long history of loyalty to the Persian Empire, cf. Granerød (2016, pp. 214–27).

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