

Article

Between History and Theology—Zerubbabel and Nehemiah as Governors of Judah from the Perspective of Literary History

Sarah Schulz 

Department of Theology, Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nuremberg, 91054 Erlangen, Germany; sarah.schulz@fau.de

Abstract: Hag/Zech 1–8 and Ezr/Neh have in common that they are often rated as primary sources when it comes to the development of Second Temple Judaism(s). Consequently, it is mostly assumed that the Persian governors of Judah (like the Persian kings) significantly contributed to the (re-)formation of the Jewish community in Jerusalem after the exile: Zerubbabel built the temple, Nehemiah the wall of Jerusalem. As a rule of thumb, literary analysis within these books, if applied at all, is less critical than elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. However, a literary critical approach gives rise to serious doubts about the historic reliability of these accounts. Based on a literary critical analysis of the relevant texts from Hag/Zech 1–8 and Neh, this article aims to show that it is only in the course of redaction history that the office of governor of Judah is ascribed to both individuals. Thus, the attribution of the office of governor to them reflects theological interests and concerns in the early Second Temple Period rather than the historical reality. As the texts not only attribute aspects of royal leadership to Zerubbabel and Nehemiah as governors of Judah, but also present the holders of a Persian office as custodians of Jewish interests (temple and Torah), it will be argued that the texts contribute to the political and religious reorganization of Judaism and, thus, to the formation of a collective Jewish identity.

Keywords: book of Haggai; book of Zechariah; book of Nehemiah; Zerubbabel; Nehemiah; Persian offices; Second Temple Judaism(s)



Citation: Schulz, Sarah. 2023.

Between History and Theology—Zerubbabel and Nehemiah as Governors of Judah from the Perspective of Literary History. *Religions* 14: 531. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14040531>

Academic Editors: Anja Klein and Christoph Berner

Received: 15 March 2023

Revised: 8 April 2023

Accepted: 12 April 2023

Published: 14 April 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Eduard Meyer argued in 1896 that the emergence of Judaism was a product of the Persian Empire (Meyer 1896, p. 71). This belief stems from a conviction that certain Persian documents in Ezra are authentic. That the task of proclaiming the Torah to all Jews was imposed on Ezra by the Persian Great King Artaxerxes, Meyer considers a plausible explanation for the existence of the Torah. According to him, the Jews of the province of Yehud would never have considered enacting such an “impractical” and inconsiderate law on their own (Meyer 1896, p. 71).

Notwithstanding the anti-Jewish attitude toward the Torah underlying the dictum, the thesis is questionable today from a historical perspective. Research is rightly disputing whether the documents are authentic and, relatedly, whether the Persians took an active part in the enactment of the Torah, for which the Swiss scholar of ancient history Peter Frei (Frei 1995) coined the term “Persian imperial authorization” (among others, Grabbe 2001; Grätz 2004; Bortz 2019).

Even if an active intervention of the Persians in matters of Jewish religion can no longer be assumed without further ado today nor the emergence of the Torah traced back to the external influences of the Persian power, that Persian rule greatly influenced the development of Judaism in the province of Yehud cannot be denied.

For the reconstruction of the political and social developments in the province of Yehud, exegetes often refer to some biblical texts that are narratively situated in the Persian period, especially Hag and Zech 1–8 and Ezr/Neh. In comparison with other parts

of the Hebrew Bible, these texts seem to be far less critically viewed. Biblical accounts are generally believed to be historically reliable, and direct conclusions about historical developments and events are often drawn.

Besides the above-mentioned reports about certain Persian Great Kings, those about the Persian governors of the province are of significant importance. The Hebrew Bible reports about two governors in some detail, namely, Zerubbabel who, according to Hag and Zech 1–8, was responsible for the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple, and Nehemiah who, according to the book named after him, was responsible, as governor, for the building of the Jerusalem wall. As a rule, this information is considered historically reliable (e.g., Schaper 2000) and, indeed at first glance, there are not many reasons to doubt its historicity.

The governor (סָרִיס) held the highest Persian administrative position at the provincial level and, as can be safely inferred from extrabiblical sources,¹ the most politically influential office in the province of Yehud. Hence, he represented the main point of contact between Judeo-Jewish life and Persian rule. In extra-biblical sources, some governors are documented by name.² From an onomastic point of view, it can be assumed that the office was mostly, but not always, held by Judeans.³ The biblical governors Zerubbabel and Nehemiah are not documented outside the Bible, but this does not in itself have to be overestimated; it could simply be due to a gap in the tradition.

Thus, from a historical perspective, it does not seem implausible to entrust the biblical reports with a certain historical reliability. From the perspective of literary history, however, a completely different picture emerges, as I will try to show in this essay. If the complex literary character of the texts is taken seriously and interpreted consistently in terms of literary history, it becomes apparent that Zerubbabel and Nehemiah were not governors in the early stages of the respective texts, but were made so only in the course of the texts' literary history. Furthermore, it seems that this may have been done with programmatic intent, rather than as a subsequent historical correction.

This perspective thus reveals the character of the texts: it is not a matter of writing history, but of "writing the history of theology": the texts do not want to reconstructively depict the status quo of a past or of the present, but constructively point out options for interpreting the present.

In the following, I will demonstrate this by providing an overview of the literary history of the relevant passages from Hag and Zech as well as Neh and then asking about the theological-historical implications of the literary-historical findings and the theological agenda of the programmatic governor texts. First, however, we must provide a brief historical background for the texts in the Persian period.

2. The Historical Context: Jewish Constitution and the Persian Period

In 587 BCE, the Babylonians ended Judah's kingdom, resulting in an identity crisis for Judeans. Soon after the Persians seized power in 539 B.C., quite a few Judeans returned from Babylonia to their old homeland; soon after, the Jerusalem Temple was rebuilt. Beyond the monarchy, as a province integrated into the Persian empire, Judeans had to reorganize themselves religiously and politically. The social and societal conditions in the province of Yehud were complex: There were tensions between those who stayed at home and those who returned from Babylonian exile. The priestly and laic circles also had conflicting interests. With regard to the formation of a collective Jewish identity, a process that is reflected and carried out in the biblical texts, the Persian period was, thus, an extraordinarily productive phase.

The variety of constitutional drafts in the Hebrew Bible, developed from the Persian period onwards, shows that the question of what an ideal form of a Jewish religious and political order might look like was heavily debated. They range from aristocratic to hierarchical to restorative messianic drafts. Since they are theological-political programmatic texts, they do not reflect the political or social constitution of Israel, but the confrontation with this question at the time of their creation. As a rule, the drafts do not want to describe

what is but reflect on what should ideally be, in the eyes of their authors. In other words, these drafts have a normative character.

In this situation, the confrontation with Persian rule was both an opportunity and a challenge for the identity-building process: The confrontation with the Persians' new universal claim to rule and being integrated into the Persian multiethnic empire challenged the inhabitants of the province of Yehud's understanding and interpretation of their own lifeworld and religious beliefs within this new context.

These reflections are particularly visible in the way Persian ruling offices are recorded in biblical texts. While the office of the Persian Great King is generally acknowledged to have profound theological relevance in biblical texts,⁴ the office of the Persian governor has so far received little attention in research (cf., however, [Karrer 2001](#); [Wright 2004](#); [Kratz 2004](#)). Yet its theological reflection in the biblical texts is only more discreet, not less elaborate, as the following literary-historical overview of the relevant passages from Hag and Zech 1–8 and Neh attempts to show.

3. The Persian Office of Governor in the Context of Jewish Tradition

3.1. Zerubbabel as Governor in Hag and Zech 1–8

In order to evaluate what historical or theological conclusions can be drawn from the mentions of Zerubbabel in Hag and Zech, we need to delve a little into the redactional history of the book of Two Prophets. In Hag and Zech 1–8, the governor Zerubbabel is closely associated with the high priest Joshua over the issue of temple construction. The narrative passages of Haggai, which frame the prophetic sayings (Hag 1:1, 14, 2:2), are especially notable. They name Zerubbabel and Joshua, each with a title and filiation (Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah; Joshua son of Jehozadak, high priest) as the prophet's common addressees and those responsible for building the temple. Hence, both the persons and the offices they represent are considered equal in these framing verses. The joint appearance of both persons, as well as the titles and filiations they bear, are usually judged by scholars to be historical ([Kratz 2004](#), p. 69). With regard to the political situation in Yehud, it has sometimes been inferred that the province was initially organized as a dyarchy. In this context, the shared political responsibilities of governor and high priest are considered a sign that the high priest was becoming a political leader ([Bevan 1904](#), p. 5; [Grabbe 1994](#), p. 607; [Wöhrle 2006](#), p. 319f.; [Cataldo 2009](#), p. 176).

In light of the presumed literary history of the text, however, a completely different interpretation emerges. The recurring mention of Zerubbabel, the governor, and Joshua, the high priest, as the prophet's addressees and jointly responsible for the construction of the temple in the framework of the book of Haggai only superficially gives the impression of a unified composition. In various other places in Hag and Zech 1–8, the two protagonists are mentioned independently of each other and given quite different responsibilities and tasks (cf. Hag 2:20–23; Zech 3; Zech 4; Zech 6:9–15). In addition to the great variety of functions and tasks attributed to Joshua and Zerubbabel, it is especially the irregular distribution of the filiations and titles of the two figures that provides evidence that the concepts of leadership in Hag and Zech 1–8 developed successively.

The finding is far more complex in the case of Zerubbabel than in the case of Joshua. All passages that mention Joshua identify him as high priest: Haggai 1:1, 12, 14; 2:2, 4; Zech 3:1, 8; 6:11. In addition, the filiation of Joshua is mentioned in all instances except in Zech 3.

Zerubbabel, on the other hand, is mentioned only by his proper name in Hag 2:4 and Zech 4:6, 9f. Haggai 1:12; 2:23 additionally mention the filiation without the governor's title, Hag 2:21 the title without the filiation, and in Hag 1:1, 14; 2:2 there are filiation and governor's title.

Since neither a systematic nor an intention behind the deviations can be detected, it is reasonable to explain these irregularities, which have not been explicated in research so far, in terms of literary history.⁵ Thus, I assume that the mentions of the two persons scattered

throughout the book of Two Prophets did not occur simultaneously, but were successively added to and expanded. I will now outline what I have discussed in detail elsewhere.⁶

Already in the oldest parts of Hag and Zech 1–8, which were probably written at the time of the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple in the 6th century BCE, a certain Zerubbabel is mentioned in two instances. Strikingly, in both cases only the proper name is mentioned, and both title and filiation are missing. It can thus be assumed that the addressees were familiar with the person mentioned.

The prophet Haggai addresses Zerubbabel and the people in his second prophetic saying, Hag 1:15b–2:9.⁷ Haggai 2:3f. read in their original form:⁸ “Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? And how do you see it now? Is it not like nothing in your eyes? And now be strong, Zerubbabel, declares Yahweh, and be strong, all the people of the land, declares Yahweh, and work, for I am with you, declares Yahweh of hosts”. In view of the present desolate state of the Jerusalem Temple under reconstruction, the prophet encourages Zerubbabel, the project leader, and the builders to continue their work and assures them of Yahweh’s assistance.

A very similar idea is behind the passage Zech 4:6aβ–10a*(without שבעה-אלה), which contains two sayings about Zerubbabel and was added later into the context of the vision of the golden candelabrum.⁹ Verses 7ff. read: “Who are you, great mountain? Before Zerubbabel become a level ground! And he will bring out the initial stone out with shouts, ‘Mercy, mercy on him!’ And the word of Yahweh came to me: The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house, and his hands shall finish it. And you will know that Yahweh of hosts has sent me to you. For who has despised the day of small things? And they will rejoice and see the stone of tin (?) in the hand of Zerubbabel”.

Zerubbabel, here again only mentioned by his proper name, stands as the person responsible for the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple in front of its ruins, here described as a great mountain, which he must remove in order to bring forth the initial stone guaranteeing the continuity to the predecessor sanctuary.¹⁰

In the oldest literary-historical stages of the book of Two Prophets, Zerubbabel is, thus, not known as the holder of the governor’s office, but only as the building commissioner for the temple. Joshua, on the other hand, is encountered in the literary history of the book of Two Prophets from the very beginning as the holder of the high priestly office. Already, the oldest mention of the figure in the context of a vision in Zech 3 refers to Joshua as high priest. Verse 1 reads: “And he let me see Joshua the high priest standing before the messenger of Yahweh”. The basic layer of Zech 3 beginning with v.1 offers a kind of etiology of the high priestly office, communicating the atonement of the high priest defiled by exile and defining his duties and privileges.¹¹ Thus, it was likely written around the time of the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple.

At this stage of the redactional history of the book of Two Prophets, Zerubbabel and Joshua the high priest stand side by side as two prominent figures in the context of the temple restoration, but they remain factually unconnected. Zerubbabel is responsible for the construction work, Joshua for the worship at the rebuilt temple.

Compared with the framework in Haggai previously mentioned, it is also apparent that both figures lack a filiation on this early redaction-historical level. Apparently, it was added only later, namely, in the context of Hag 1:12a, which links Zerubbabel directly with Joshua for the first time: “Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Joshua the high priest, the son of Jehozadak, and all the rest of the people, listened to the voice of Yahweh their God and to the words of Haggai the prophet, just as Yahweh their God had sent him”.¹² The singular combination of information about Zerubbabel and Joshua offered by this verse can again be explained in terms of literary history: Haggai 1:12a takes the information previously known about both individuals—the names and, in the case of Joshua, the title—and adds a filiation to each.

The two individuals, mentioned independently in the considered earlier passages of the book, are now presented together, at the beginning, as protagonists. This gives the book of Two Prophets a sense of self-containedness. The filiations presumably originate

in 1 Chr 3 and 1 Chr 5, respectively (Schulz 2023, p. 75f.), and in this context serve to characterize both figures as persons firmly rooted in Israel's history.

Having explored the origins of the editing history of Hag and Zech 1–8, we can now assess the meanings of the framing verses mentioned at the beginning. For the first time, they provide the complete set of information and, thus, are likely to have been written yet again later. Only a literary-historical perspective can reveal the innovative moment of these verses. As opposed to the earlier mention of the two protagonists, Zerubbabel is now mentioned as the governor. Therefore, the literary-historical findings contradict the common belief that the framework establishes or reflects a dyarchic ideal and/or upgrades the high priestly office. It is probably more about making a statement about the Persian office of governor here.

The Persian office of governor is equated with the Jewish high priestly office. Alongside the high priest, the governor becomes an equal addressee of Haggai's prophecy, as Hag 1:1 indicates: "In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of Yahweh came through Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest". Both together, high priest and governor, moreover, become responsible for building the temple, as Hag 1:14 states: "And Yahweh stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people, so that they came and set to work on the house of Yahweh of hosts, their God". Thus, the framing verses evoke the impression that Zerubbabel is given the responsibility for temple construction, which he also already had in the older stages of the book, *qua office*. They make the governor of Yehud a messenger of Yahweh, who commissions him to build the temple, just as he had done with King Solomon. By doing so, the Persian governor takes over a task previously handled by the Judean king.¹³ By this, the historical situation, according to which a certain Zerubbabel played a prominent role in the rebuilding of the temple, is reinterpreted and becomes a historical fiction that integrates the new political circumstances into Jewish tradition: the governor of Yehud takes the place of the former Davidic king, the office of governor is, therefore, in the true sense of the word, *nostrified*.

3.2. Nehemiah as Governor in Neh 5 and Neh 13

A similar governor programmatic, which profiles the office even more comprehensively as a leadership office, can be found in two passages in Nehemiah, namely, in Neh 5 and Neh 13. In the first-person account in Neh 1–7 and 11–13, these two chapters hold a distinctive position. The central theme of the book, the rebuilding of the Jerusalem city wall, which Nehemiah initiated and was responsible for, is absent from these chapters. Instead, they address socioeconomic and religious issues. The Samaritan opponents of Nehemiah, who repeatedly undermine the wall construction in the surrounding chapters, are nowhere to be found. Instead, surprisingly, the "nobles" (חֲרִים) and "rulers" (סִגְנִים) of the province, who support the project elsewhere (cf. Neh 2:16ff.; 4:8, 13), are criticized.

Moreover, the four passages of which Neh 5 and Neh 13 consist (5:1–19; 13:4–14; 13:15–22; 13:23–31) are strikingly parallel in structure. At the beginning, Nehemiah notices a grievance in each case, which is expressed with a verb of perception (5:6; 13:10, 15, 23). He then calls those responsible to account, in each case expressed with the verb רִיב ("to dispute"), which is used in Ezr/Neh only in these passages (5:7; 13:11, 17, 25). Then he asks a question that convicts them (5:9; 13:11, 17, 26) and, in response, he resolves the issue (5:10; 13:11, 19, 28). In the end, the success of the action is noted (5:12; 13:12, 21, 30) and a prayer concludes the passage (5:19; 13:14, 22, 31).

Due to the similarity and coinciding divergence with the wall-building narrative, as well as the parallel construction of the passages, it is reasonable to assume that Neh 5 and Neh 13 together were subsequently incorporated into the Nehemiah account.¹⁴

Most revealing now is the fact that Nehemiah again appears only in these redactional passages of the book as holding the office of governor. Nehemiah 5:14 names him in this

role: “from the day the king commissioned me to be their governor in the land of Judah”.¹⁵ The original wall-building narrative, on the other hand, mentions Nehemiah at first only as a pious exiled Judean who rises to the position of cupbearer in the king’s court and is sent to Jerusalem with the mission of rebuilding the wall. The king’s question about the date of Nehemiah’s return in Neh 2:6 clearly proves that, originally, no permanent delegation as governor was intended (Wright 2004, p. 172).

From the point of view of Neh 5:14, the entire report is now subjected to a rereading. The dating to the 20th year of Artaxerxes goes back to the time of Nehemiah’s sending and implies that he had been governor all the while. From this perspective, all of Nehemiah’s previous deserving deeds are thus attributed not only to his pious enthusiasm but also to the authority vested in him qua office.

Moreover, Neh 5:14ff. themselves contribute significantly to the profiling of the office of governor as an office of leadership. For Nehemiah, like Zerubbabel in Haggai, is also drawn here as a leader who bears royal traits.

The focus of Nehemiah’s actions is solidarity with his fellow people: By supporting the people’s project of building the wall and by renouncing the tribute due to him, the governor’s bread, he acts as *primus inter pares*. Therefore, his conduct in office conforms to the ideal of royal rule outlined in Deut 17, according to which the king should come from among his brothers and ensure that his heart does not exalt itself above his brothers (Oswald 2009, p. 237).

Further, concrete references to kingship exist in Nehemiah’s exorbitant household—daily, an ox, six choice sheep and poultry, and, furthermore, every ten days the abundance of all kinds of wine—which is enumerated in a similar way in 1 Kgs 5:2f. among the merits of King Solomon. And also hospitality—Nehemiah invites Judeans and strangers to his table generously—often symbolizes royal beneficence (e.g., in 2 Sam 9:7).

Similarly, Neh 5:1–13 and Neh 13 add to the profile of the office by emphasizing Nehemiah’s leadership.¹⁶ Besides affecting internal Judean fields of operation and Jewish interests, all of his activities (social reforms, temple economy, mixed marriages and sabbath observance) have counterparts in the Torah!

In Neh 5:1–13, Nehemiah fulfills the remission year provisions of Deut 15:2. There, the demanded remission of debts among fellow peoples is theologically justified—it is a remission of debts to Yahweh. Likewise, Nehemiah’s demand for debt relief also explicitly emphasizes ethnic solidarity—Nehemiah notes that the Judeans are practicing usury with their brethren—and it is theologically motivated: debt relief among brothers demonstrates the fear of God.

In collecting tithes, Nehemiah in Neh 13:4–14 fulfills the practice of tithing required in the Torah, e.g., Deut 14:22ff. In both cases, moreover, the provision for the Levites is singled out as a special problem.

In Neh 13:15–22, Nehemiah enforces the sanctification of the Sabbath among Judeans and strangers, which corresponds exactly to the practice required by the Decalogue.

And the action against intermarriage in Neh 13:23–29 also has a legislative analogy in the Torah: Deuteronomy 7:3f., among others, prohibit intermarriage with foreign peoples, since the foreign wives might turn the hearts of the Judeans away from Yahweh and toward their gods. As a warning, Nehemiah also refers to the example of King Solomon, whose many foreign wives became his downfall at the end of his life.

Therefore, the governorship is very specifically profiled in these texts as a leadership position compatible with Jewish tradition. Nehemiah, like Zerubbabel, acts as a king toward the people; he also conducts his office in a Torah-centered manner, which in fact results in Torah fulfillment (Oswald 2009, p. 236).

4. The Persian Governorship and Jewish Identity

From a literary-historical perspective, it becomes very clear that both Hag and Zech as well as Neh cannot be understood as historical accounts about the deeds of individual Persian governors. Or, put the other way around: only from a literary-historical perspective

does the specific theological profile of the texts become discernible. The historical tradition linked with both persons, Zerubbabel and Nehemiah, is recontextualized in the course of the texts' redaction history, and in doing so it becomes a piece of "history of theology".

Originally authorized for limited projects (building the temple, building the wall), the two people became governors of Yehud through the literary history of the biblical texts. This aims to substantiate and legitimize the office of governor as a Judean political office of leadership and, thus, to compensate for the "legitimation deficit" (Oswald 2009, p. 239) that was inherent in it as a foreign office of leadership.

Just like the office of the Persian Great King, for example in Isa 45, the office of governor, too, was integrated into the Jewish tradition by transferring aspects of the traditional Judean royal ideology to it. That the Persian rule guarantees law and order in the land is a basic assumption underlying and connecting all these texts. However, they are not merely concerned with legitimizing the Persian leadership and the order represented by it. Rather, they also contribute to the political and religious reorganization of Judaism and, thus, to the formation and sharpening of a collective Jewish identity. To conclude, I would like to elaborate on this by addressing two points.

We can see from these two examples that political-pragmatic aspects of royal rule are prominent in the texts concerning the office of governor. Zerubbabel and Nehemiah act toward the people as royal rulers. The biblical reflection on the office of governor, thus, bears traits of a constitutional draft. In the question of from which figure one should derive the political, legal and ethical foundations of Jewish polity post-monarchically, these texts vote for the Persian governor. The draft, thus, no longer holds on to national self-determination and political sovereignty as elements of collective Jewish identity. It contrasts with the aristocratic, priestly, and restorative messianic designs mentioned above, which operate with autochthonous offices and functions and, therefore, are likely to imply, at least in part, a more critical attitude toward power relations in the Persian Empire.

Despite its pragmatic nature, as it recognizes the de-facto power of the governor in Yehud, it is not simply an affirmation of the status quo. The normative or instructive character is evident from the fact that the focus is clearly on the governor's meritorious commitment to the religious interests of the Jewish people, specifically, the temple and the Torah. Implicitly, the foundations of a good governance are formulated here.

At the same time, however, and this is the second aspect to be emphasized, the literary recontextualization of the Persian governorship also legitimizes central elements of the Jewish religious order. By Zerubbabel building the temple and Nehemiah aligning his office strictly with the Torah, the temple and Torah appear as state-authorized entities. A similar dynamic can be found in the Persian documents mentioned in the book of Ezra, which can also be considered historical fiction.¹⁷ According to Ezr 1, the Persian Great King Cyrus, awakened by Yahweh, devotes the first year of his reign to rebuilding the Jerusalem Temple. According to Ezr 7, the Persian Great King Artaxerxes, as we have already heard, initiates the public announcement of the Torah among the Jews. In this view, the Persian Great Kings likewise promoted the temple and Torah, like the Persian governors.

Jewish religious interests are, thus, literarily placed within the horizon of Persian politics. In the overall view (which can be taken from a canonical perspective, without it necessarily having been intended by the authors of the texts), central aspects of a collective Jewish identity—rite (temple) and ethos (Torah)—thus appear in historical fiction as doubly politically legitimized factors. They were initiated by the Persian Great King and implemented in the province by the Persian governor. In concrete terms, this means: whoever opposes the temple and Torah opposes not only Yahweh, but also Persian rule. This strategy shows that the temple and Torah were not simply set as normative parameters for Judaism in the Persian period (and beyond),¹⁸ but still required legitimation. They developed only in literary discourse into essential anchor points of biblical Judaism, which could create identity in a world that had become larger and more complex.

This again clearly shows that these texts do not intend to reproduce history but rather to produce history, i.e., they must not be labeled as "history" but as "history of theology".

Thus, a literary critical approach to these biblical texts dealing with Persian offices reveals that, unlike Eduard Meyer argued, Judaism is not a product of Persian rule, but the result of critically reflecting on it.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data was created in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ In addition to seals and coins from Yehud that bear the inscription “governor” and prove that the governor controlled the Judean economy, the correspondence between the Diaspora Judeans on the Nile peninsula Elephantine and the authorities in the home provinces is instructive in this regard (esp. TAD A4.7//A4.8). In it, the Judeans from Elephantine address the authorities in Yehud and the neighboring northern province of Samaria with the request that they send a letter to the responsible Persians in Egypt recommending the rebuilding of the Temple of Yahweh, which had been destroyed shortly before. While a first letter to the province of Yehud, mentioned in one of the documents but not preserved, had still gone to the governor Bagohi and a whole range of Jerusalem authorities, the Elephantine Judeans addressed their petition exclusively to the governor at the documented later stage of the proceedings. This proves that even in matters involving the Jewish cult, the governor ultimately had the greatest authority and decision-making authority.
- ² Besides the safe testimonies of a governor of Yehud in the Elephantine correspondence (Bagohi) and on some of the so-called Yehud coins (Yehezkiya), which date back to the advanced Persian period and the early Hellenistic period (TJC 22–25), respectively, the stamp seals from Yehud should be mentioned. They can be divided chronologically into three groups, whereby already in the group of the oldest seals, from the late 6th or early 5th centuries BCE, three types bear the inscription “governor.” Two of the governors are even attested by their names: Achzai and Yehoezer. Cf. [Lipschits and Vanderhooft \(2011\)](#); [Kratz \(2004, p. 99\)](#).
- ³ Certainly of non-Jewish origin is the name of the governor Bagohi mentioned in the Elephantine correspondence.
- ⁴ Particularly prominent is the statement in Isa 45 that the Persian king Cyrus takes the place of the former Davidic king as Yahweh’s anointed one. This transformation of Jewish royal ideology ensures the continuation of the relationship between Yahweh and his people beyond the end of the monarchy by adapting it to the new, universal context.
- ⁵ Elaborated literary-historical analyses were presented above all by ([Schöttler 1987](#); [Kratz 2004](#); [Wöhrle 2006](#); [Hallaschka 2011](#)).
- ⁶ Cf. the detailed analysis of Hag and Zech 1–8 in ([Schulz 2023, p. 21ff.](#)).
- ⁷ The basic layer of the second prophetic saying comprises Hag 2:3, 4*(, 5aβ, b?), 9a; (cf. in detail [Schulz 2023, p. 34ff.](#)).
- ⁸ The reference to Joshua in Hag 2:4 is a later addition. Already the mention of filiation and title in the address is strange. Structurally, the passage is also out of place because the formula “declares Yahweh” that otherwise structures the verse is missing. Joshua was added here to adapt the statement to the framing verses, according to which both Zerubbabel and Joshua are responsible for the building of the temple.
- ⁹ Despite its editorial character, there is nothing to prevent us from assuming an early development of this epexegetis. It could have arisen in the context of the connection of the thematically related, but literarily independent traditions in Haggai and Zechariah to a two-prophet book. It can be considered whether parts of the sayings, e.g., v.7, go back to an oral tradition. (Cf., in detail, [Schulz 2023, p. 49ff.](#)).
- ¹⁰ [הבן הראשה](#) means the initial and not the keystone; cf., most recently, ([Schott 2019, p. 26f.](#)), with reference to ([Rignell 1950, p. 157f.](#); [Laato 1994, p. 59.63](#); [Hanhart 1998, p. 248f.](#); [Pola 2003, pp. 118–122](#); [Hallaschka 2011, p. 225, note 425](#)). Against, for example, ([Wöhrle 2006, p. 339f.](#)).
- ¹¹ On the redactional history of Zech 3 and the literary-historical relationship to Zech 6:9–15, (see [Schulz 2023, p. 57ff.91ff.](#)). The basic layer of Zech 3 comprises v.1–4, 5bα², β, 6f. It was first supplemented by v.5a, bα¹, 9 (expansion of the political authority of the high priest) and then again by v.8 (correction of the idea of a politically oriented high priestly office by the promise of a Davidic sprout).
- ¹² Verse 12a distinguishes itself from v.12b, 13, which are coherent with the people’s fear and Yahweh’s promise of help; cf., also, the terminological differences: Verse 12a speaks of “all the remnant of the people” (כל שארית העם); v.12b, on the other hand, is content simply with “people” (עם). While Haggai in v.12a (as elsewhere) is Yahweh’s prophet, v.13 calls him a messenger of Yahweh. Verse 12a is also in tension with v.14. Verse 14 names Zerubbabel’s title of governor, which is odd following v.12a and cannot be explained intentionally. Verse 12a may be older than v.12b, 13 on the one hand and v.14 on the other. On the redactional history of Hag 1:12–15a (see in detail [Schulz 2023, p. 29ff.](#)).

- ¹³ The Davidic descent of Zerubbabel, already established in Hag 1:12a, may have favored this transmission.
- ¹⁴ These are certainly Fortschreibungen and not to be considered as originally independent texts. Cf., however, (Reinmuth 2002, p. 328ff.); against (Williamson 1985, pp. xxiv–xxviii; Wright 2004, p. 163ff.; Oswald 2009, p. 230f.; Rothenbusch 2012), denies an editorial character.
- ¹⁵ The title is otherwise encountered only in Neh 12:26 in the context of a list at the end of which Ezra, the priest and scribe, and Nehemiah, the governor, form a double leadership. On the secondary character of this verse, see, for example, (Kratz 2004, p. 104; Oswald 2009, p. 253ff.). In the similarly late chapters Neh 8–10, Nehemiah bears the (enigmatic) title הַהֲרַשְׁתָּה in two instances.
- ¹⁶ Sometimes further literary-critical distinctions are made within Neh 5:1–19. (Wright 2004, p. 171ff.), for example, considers 5:14ff. to be older than 5:1–13. The opposite view is taken by (Kratz 2000, p. 70), who assumes that the cancellation of the debt was added to the context of the memorandum “before or at the same time as 5:14–19.” The basis for this is the observation that the social reforms in vv. 1–13 are only loosely related to Nehemiah’s selflessness in the office of governor in vv. 14–19, and that the correspondences with Neh 13 within Neh 5 are conspicuously concentrated in vv. 1–13. The question of the literary history of Neh 5 can be left aside here, since it is not relevant to the assessment of the office of governor in Neh. In principle, all options are conceivable: Verses 14–19 may be of the same age, older, or even younger than v.1–13. In the case of a literary-historical differentiation, then, Nehemiah would either have been made governor first and subsequently the office would have been further idealized, or Nehemiah would have been more strongly idealized first and subsequently made governor. With regard to the profiling of the office of governor, the question is beside the point: in the end, Neh presents the office of governor as an ideal, Torah-compliant political leadership office.
- ¹⁷ On the Aramaic documents in Ezra and the question of their authenticity, see (Schwiderski 2000; Grabbe 2006).
- ¹⁸ While the governor texts in Hag and Zech as well as in Neh may have been written in the late Persian period, Ezr 1 and Ezr 7 are assumed to have been written in the Hellenistic period.

References

- Bevan, Edwyn R. 1904. *Jerusalem under the High Priests. Five Lectures on the Period between Nehemiah and the New Testament*. London: Arnold.
- Bortz, Anna Maria. 2019. Art. Reichsautorisation. *Das Wissenschaftliche Bibellexikon im Internet*. Available online: <https://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/stichwort/32990/> (accessed on 9 March 2023).
- Cataldo, Jeremiah W. 2009. *A Theocratic Yehud? Issues of Government in a Persian Province*. LHOTS 498. London and New York: Bloomsbury.
- Frei, Peter. 1995. Die persische Reichsautorisation. *Ein Überblick*. ZAR 1: 1–35.
- Grabbe, Lester L. 1994. *Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian*. London: SCM Press.
- Grabbe, Lester L. 2001. The Law of Moses in the Ezra Tradition: More Virtual than Real? In *Persia and Torah. The Theory of Imperial Authorization of the Pentateuch*. Edited by James W. Watts. SBLSymS 17. Atlanta: SBL, pp. 91–113.
- Grabbe, Lester L. 2006. The “Persian Documents” in the Book of Ezra: Are They Authentic? In *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period*. Edited by Oded Lipschits and Manfred Oeming. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, pp. 531–70.
- Grätz, Sebastian. 2004. *Das Edikt des Artaxerxes. Eine Untersuchung zum Religionspolitischen und Historischen Umfeld von Esr 7,12–26*. BZAW 337. Berlin and New York: De Gruyter. [CrossRef]
- Hallaschka, Martin. 2011. *Haggai und Sacharja 1–8. Eine Redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung*. BZAW 411. Berlin and New York: De Gruyter. [CrossRef]
- Hanhart, Robert. 1998. *Sacharja (1,1–8,23)*. BK.AT XIV/7.1. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Karrer, Christiane. 2001. *Ringgen um die Verfassung Judas. Eine Studie zu den Theologisch-Politischen Vorstellungen im Esra-Nehemia-Buch*. BZAW 308. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter.
- Kratz, Reinhard G. 2000. *Die Komposition der Erzählenden Bücher des Alten Testaments. Grundwissen der Bibelkritik*. UTB 2157. Göttingen: UTB.
- Kratz, Reinhard G. 2004. *Das Judentum im Zeitalter des Zweiten Tempels*. FAT 42. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Laato, Antti. 1994. Zachariah 4,6b–10a and the Akkadian Royal Building Inscriptions. ZAW 106: 53–69. [CrossRef]
- Lipschits, Oded, and David S. Vanderhooft. 2011. *The Yehud Stamp Impressions. A Corpus of Inscribed Impressions from the Persian and Hellenistic Periods in Judah*. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns. [CrossRef]
- Meyer, Eduard. 1896. *Die Entstehung des Judentums. Eine Historische Untersuchung*. Halle: Max Niemeyer.
- Oswald, Wolfgang. 2009. *Staatstheorie im Alten Israel. Der Politische Diskurs im Pentateuch und in den Geschichtsbüchern des Alten Testaments*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.
- Pola, Thomas. 2003. *Das Priestertum bei Sacharja. Historische und Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur Frühnachexilischen Herrschererwartung*. FAT 35. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck. [CrossRef]
- Reinmuth, Titus. 2002. *Der Bericht Nehemias. Zur Literarischen Eigenart, Traditionsgeschichtlichen Prägung und Innerbiblischen Rezeption des Ich-Berichts Nehemias*. OBO 183. Fribourg and Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Rignell, Lars G. 1950. *Die Nachtgesichte des Sacharja. Eine Exegetische Studie*. Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup.
- Rothenbusch, Ralf. 2012. “... abgeordnet zur Tora Gottes hin”. *Ethnisch-religiöse Identitäten im Esra/Nehemiabuch*. HBS 70. Freiburg i. Br.: Herder.

- Schaper, Joachim. 2000. *Priester und Leviten im Achämenidischen Juda. Studien zur Kult- und Sozialgeschichte Israels in persischer Zeit*. FAT 31. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Schott, Martin. 2019. *Sacharja 9–14. Eine Kompositionsgeschichtliche Analyse*. BZAW 521. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Schöttler, Heinz-Günther. 1987. *Gott Inmitten seines Volkes. Die Neuordnung des Gottesvolkes nach Sacharja 1–6*. TThSt 43. Trier: Paulinus-Verlag.
- Schulz, Sarah. 2023. *Joschua und Melchisedek. Studien zur Entwicklung des Jerusalemer Hohepriesteramtes vom 6. bis zum 2. Jahrhundert v. Chr.* BZAW 546. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter.
- Schwiderski, Dirk. 2000. *Handbuch des Nordwestsemitischen Briefformulars. Ein Beitrag zur Echtheitsfrage der Aramäischen Briefe des Esrabuches*. BZAW 295. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter.
- Williamson, Hugh G. M. 1985. *Ezra, Nehemia*. WBC 16. Dallas: Thomas Nelson Inc.
- Wöhrlé, Jakob. 2006. *Die frühen Sammlungen des Zwölfprophetenbuches. Entstehung und Komposition*. BZAW 360. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Wright, Jacob L. 2004. *Rebuilding Identity. The Nehemiah-Memoir and its Earliest Readers*. BZAW 348. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter. [[CrossRef](#)]

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.