

A CHRONOLOGICAL NOTE: THE RETURN OF THE EXILES UNDER SHESHBAZZAR AND ZERUBBABEL (EZRA 1–2)

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The text of Ezra is replete with chronological information, beginning with the first chapter's reference to Cyrus's first year (538 BC; Ezra 1:1) and ending with the last chapter's reference to the first day of the first month of what is apparently Artaxerxes' eighth year (March 27, 457 BC; Ezra 10:17).¹ Between these are sixteen other references to specific years, months, or days (Ezra 3:1, 6, 8; 4:24; 5:13, 6:3, 15, 19; 7:7, 8, 9 [2x]; 8:31, 33; 10:9, 16). Despite this seeming wealth of chronological data, the date of the first major event in the book following Cyrus's decree—the return of exiles under the leadership of Zerubbabel—is not recorded. The closest that the writer comes to dating this event is Ezra 3:8:

In the second year of the coming to the house of God, to Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak with the rest of their brothers, the priests and the Levites and all who came from the captivity of Jerusalem, began. They appointed the Levites from twenty years old and older to supervise the work on the house of Yahweh.

Apparently the events of Ezra 2:1–3:7 took place in the first year of “the coming to the house of God, to Jerusalem.” But this does not answer the question of when the exiles first returned to Jerusalem. It had to have happened sometime after Cyrus's decree in his first year (538 BC), but sometime before the end of his reign (530 BC),² since Ezra 4:5 indicates that the effort to build the temple in Jerusalem was stalled during the reign of Cyrus. However, the return does not seem to have taken place extremely late in Cyrus's reign, since work on the temple was stopped “all the days of King Cyrus of Persia” (כל-ימי כורש מלך פרס), a phrase that seems ill suited for a return to Jerusalem during the last year or two of his reign. Since no date is given in Ezra for Zerubbabel's mission to Jerusalem, the date is usually given as

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¹ Conversion to Julian calendar dates is made by reference to Richard A. Parker and Waldo H. Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology 626 B.C.–A.D. 75* (Brown University Studies 19; Providence, RI: Brown University, 1956).

² Cyrus was killed in battle at the end of July 530 BC, and Cambyses probably assumed the throne in August 530 when his father's death was reported in Babylon (Parker and Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology* 14; Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990) 92).

537 BC by those who accept Ezra's chronological statement as accurate, but this date is usually offered with some reservation.³

Moreover, Ezra also indicates that another leader was in charge of the return: Sheshbazzar. This man was entrusted by Cyrus with the vessels that were captured by Nebuchadnezzar from Solomon's temple (Ezra 1:7–11), and Sheshbazzar is credited with laying the foundation of the temple according to the letter of Tattenai to Darius (Ezra 4:14–16). Moreover, Sheshbazzar is called *governor* (פֶּחָה)⁴ whom Cyrus appointed (Ezra 4:14), and the claim is made that the temple has been under construction (מִתְבְּנֶה) since Sheshbazzar's day (Ezra 5:16).

I. DID SHESHBAZZAR AND ZERUBBABEL COME TO JERUSALEM AT DIFFERENT TIMES?

1. *Do Haggai, Zechariah, and 1 Esdras relay more reliable information about Zerubbabel?* Some hold that the chronological information in Ezra is suspect, and that the books of Haggai and Zechariah are more reliable indicators of the time of Zerubbabel's return.⁵ The prophecies in Haggai and Zechariah that take place in 520 BC (Hag 1:1, 15; 2:10; Zech 1:1, 7) and mention both Zerubbabel and the high priest Joshua are taken as an indication that Zerubbabel had only recently led exiles to Jerusalem. Since it is noted that neither prophet mentions earlier work on the temple, and that it still lies in ruins (Hag 1:9), assumedly the statement in Ezra would be an error. Zechariah also seems to contradict Ezra in that Zerubbabel is credited with laying the foundation of the temple (Zech 4:9; cf. Hag 2:18; Zech 8:9). Moreover, 1 Esdras 5:1–3 places Zerubbabel's return under Darius. Since Darius's reign officially began in 521 BC, Zerubbabel would have led a contingent to Jerusalem in that year. The returnees built houses after they arrived (Hag 1:4, 9), but did not begin to build the temple until the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah in 520 BC (Ezra 5:1; 6:14).

It is not necessary, however, to read Haggai 1:9 as if the temple work had not begun. Instead the temple could be said to still "lie in ruins" because only the foundation had been laid before the work was interrupted. That Haggai does not mention the foundation laid in Sheshbazzar's day is no proof that it was not in place. His concern is not with what had been begun

³ E.g. Edwin M. Yamauchi. "Ezra-Nehemiah" (*EBC* 6; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988) 595. To express his uncertainty Yamauchi gives the date as "537?"

⁴ This is the word consistently used for the governors of Yehud in the Aramaic portions of Ezra. In the Hebrew portions of Ezra and in Nehemiah, the word for governor is the Persian word תִּרְשָׁתָא.

⁵ Frank Moore Cross, "A Reconstruction of the Judean Restoration," *JBL* 94 (1975) 4–18, Baruch Halpern. "A Historiographic Commentary on Ezra 1–6: A Chronological Narrative and Dual Chronology in Israelite Historiography," in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Interpreters* (ed. William Henry Propp et al.; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990) 81–142.

a decade or more earlier, but what was not being done: the temple project was halted, though the people had by now built themselves “paneled houses” (Hag 1:4). That description in itself indicates that the prophet was not speaking to residents who had recently arrived, but to those who had lived in the land long enough to furnish their homes with a measure of luxury.

In addition, the mention of laying the foundation in Haggai’s prophecy in Hag 2:10–19 delivered on 24 Kislev, 520 (December 18, 520) is not a contradiction of the assertion in Ezra that Sheshbazzar laid the foundation of the temple. Note that Hag 2:15 speaks of “laying one stone upon another,” which is the process of building the temple itself, not the foundation. The statement of Hag 2:18 is particularly important to understand correctly: “Consider from this day forward, from the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month. Since (למן) the day that the foundation of Yahweh’s temple was laid, consider. . . .” It should be noted that “the day that the foundation of Yahweh’s temple was laid” is not a reference to the activity begun three months earlier on 24 Elul, 520 (September 21, 520; Hag 1:15). The compound preposition למן when used temporally is always used in Biblical Hebrew to refer to an event from the past (Exod 9:18; Deut 4:32; 9:7; 2 Sam 19:25; Jer 7:7, 25; 25:5; 32:31; Hag 2:18). The beginning of construction on 24 Elul was not described as “laying the foundation” (יסד), but in more general terms: “they did work on the house of Yahweh of Hosts, their God” (ויעשו מלאכה בבית־יהוה) (צבאות אלהים). The texts that mention the laying of the temple’s foundation are all in Ezra 3 and refer to the activity led by Zerubbabel under the governorship of Sheshbazzar (Ezra 3:6, 10, 11, 12; see the discussion below). Thus Haggai does not offer more reliable information than Ezra, but rather complements his account. As I will argue below, neither does Zech 4:9 contradict Ezra 4:14–16, since Zerubbabel was in charge of the construction of the foundation under Sheshbazzar and served as governor when the temple was completed.

As for 1 Esdras 5:1–3, it should be noted that it is set after a very fanciful tale about a wisdom contest held in Darius’s presence and involving royal bodyguards (1 Esdras 3–4). This particular story about Zerubbabel is inserted into 1 Esdras 2–7 which is otherwise a close retelling of Ezra 1–6 (though with some rearranging of the order of the material in Ezra). Zerubbabel, who is presented as one of Darius’s bodyguards, wins the contest and as his prize requests that Darius keep the promise made by Cyrus to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Zerubbabel is then commissioned to rebuild the temple. Given this setting, it is difficult to understand 1 Esdras 3:1–5:3 as an accurate portrayal of historical events. This is confirmed when the material in 1 Esdras 2–7 is compared to its parallels in Ezra 1–6:

1 Esdras 2:1–15	Ezra 1:1–11	Cyrus’s decree and preparations to return to Jerusalem
1 Esdras 2:16–30	Ezra 4:7–24	Letter to Artaxerxes and the reply
1 Esdras 3:1–5:3		Zerubbabel wins the wisdom contest and claims his prize

- 1 Esdras 5:4–73 Ezra 2:1–4:5 The return to Jerusalem, laying the foundation of the temple and opposition to the building project
- 1 Esdras 6:1–7:14 Ezra 5:1–6:22 Resumption of building, the letter of Tattenai and the reply, the completion of the temple, the dedication and the Passover celebration

Clearly, the author of 1 Esdras has rearranged the material in Ezra to accommodate the story about the wisdom contest and its consequences. He moved the letter to Artaxerxes to follow Sheshbazzar's return to Jerusalem in order to explain why the temple restoration was not started in his day, creating a glaring anachronism and destroying the integrity of the Aramaic document of Ezra 4:8–6:18.⁶ Then he inserted the account of the wisdom contest in order to create a second return of exiles under Zerubbabel. Next he placed remaining material in Ezra 2–6 that spans the laying of the foundation to the eventual completion of the temple. In the process, he had no place for the opposition under Xerxes in his scheme, so he simply omitted Ezra 4:6. The entire account in 1 Esdras 2–7 is a rearrangement of Ezra 1–6 in order to accommodate the implausible account of the wisdom contest and its aftermath.

In addition, it should be noted that 1 Esdras 6:17 makes Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar contemporaries in coming to Jerusalem instead of leading separate groups at different times, contradicting 1 Esdras 5:1–3. Also, the vessels of Jerusalem's temple are returned from Babylon by Sheshbazzar in 1 Esdras 2:10–15, but according to 1 Esdras 4:57 they are to be returned by Zerubbabel. However, these contradictions disappear without the account concerning Zerubbabel and his wisdom in 1 Esdras 3:1–5:3. This is further demonstration that 1 Esdras 2–7 is not historically reliable, but a purposeful rearrangement of Ezra 1–6 in order to accommodate a fictional story.

2. *Attempts to reconcile the information about Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel.* Some have attempted to reconcile these two seemingly contradictory views of the return. Medieval rabbis simply equated Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel, claiming that these were two names for the same person, but this view has few, if any, more recent advocates.⁷ A more common explana-

⁶ I would argue with Steiner that this is a composite document made up of both letters and some narrative so as to produce a report to Artaxerxes about the situation in Jerusalem in his day and under previous kings. Richard C. Steiner, "Bishlam's Archival Search Report in Nehemiah's Archive: Multiple Introductions and Reverse Chronological Order as Clues to the Origin of the Aramaic letters in Ezra 4–6," *JBL* 125 (2006) 641–85.

⁷ F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 46; Jacob M. Myers, *Ezra, Nehemiah: Introduction, Translation and Notes* (AB 14; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964) 9; R. J. Coggins, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978) 13. See also the discussion in Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1979) 139–42. One of the few

tion is to posit that there are two returns implied by the first chapters of Ezra: one led by Sheshbazzar in the reign of Cyrus and a later one led by Zerubbabel in the reign of Darius.⁸ This seems to solve the problem until one turns to Neh 7:5–7. Here we find a list, similar to the one in Ezra 2:1–70, of those who returned to Judah and Jerusalem. Moreover, this list is said to contain the names of those who “came back first . . . with Zerubbabel, Jeshua [and others]. . .” Thus Zerubbabel’s return was the first return according to Nehemiah 7. Either one has to discount Ezra’s statement about a return under Sheshbazzar as inaccurate, or another explanation is needed.

3. *Zerubbabel as a leader during Sheshbazzar’s tenure as governor.* A more likely scenario is that Zerubbabel was one of the prominent men in the return under Sheshbazzar and that Zerubbabel succeeded Sheshbazzar as governor.⁹ Note that he is at the head of a list of several leaders among the returning exiles in Ezra 2:2 (cf. Neh 7:7). This would explain why in Darius’s day Sheshbazzar is spoken of in distant historical terms (“King Cyrus gave them to a man named Sheshbazzar” [Ezra 5:14] and “this Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundation” [Ezra 5:16]). It would also explain why Sheshbazzar is called governor when the foundation is laid (Ezra 4:14–16). Under Sheshbazzar’s authority, Zerubbabel was placed in charge of the actual construction (Ezra 3:8).¹⁰ Thus Zerubbabel, too, as chief of construction could be said to have laid the foundation. A decade or more later he was promised that as governor he would also see to its completion (Zech 4:9).¹¹ It is noteworthy that in Ezra Zerubbabel is never called governor. All but one of the references to him in Ezra concern his work under Sheshbazzar (Ezra 2:2; 3:2, 8; 4:2, 3). The lone exception is Ezra 5:2 when Zerubbabel resumes the work on the

advocates of this view within the last century was Judah J. Slotki, *Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah: Hebrew Text and English Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (London: Soncino, 1951) 114.

⁸ Halpern. “Historiographic Commentary on Ezra 1–6,” 89; Sara Japhet, “Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel—Against the Background of the Historical and Religious Tendencies of Ezra-Nehemiah,” *ZAW* 94 (1982) 81–82, Anthony J. Tomasino, *Judaism Before Jesus: The Events and Ideas That Shaped the New Testament World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003) 48–58.

⁹ Kidner refers to Sheshbazzar as the “official leader” and Zerubbabel as the “unofficial leader.” Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah* 141–42. See also L. H. Brockington, *Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther* (NCB; Nashville: Nelson, 1969) 18.

¹⁰ Note Myers’s comment: “The tradition that as governor he [Sheshbazzar] led back a contingent of returnees and had something to do with laying a foundation of the temple is too strong to be disputed (cf. Ezra v 14–16), though attempts have been made to do so. In any case he appears to have been succeeded by Zerubbabel.” Myers, *Ezra, Nehemiah* 9.

¹¹ Thus it is not necessary to try to distinguish between the Akkadian loanword *šāḫā* (noun: “foundation”; Ezra 5:16) and the Hebrew *יָסַד* (verb: “to found”; elsewhere in Ezra and in Haggai and Zechariah) as if the Akkadian word signifies the “subfoundation” and the Hebrew word simply is a more general word, thereby claiming that Sheshbazzar had worked only on the subfoundation, but Zerubbabel on the rest of the foundation. See James VanderKam, *From Joshua to Caiaphas: High Priests after the Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004) 8–9. Instead, it is more likely that the Akkadian word is used, because it is in an official document of the empire written in Aramaic, whereas the Hebrew verb is used in the Hebrew texts of Ezra, Haggai, and Zechariah.

temple after it had been interrupted. The writer may not call him governor in this case under the influence of the previous passages. He simply continues his established pattern of not referring to any officials of Yehud by their name and official title simultaneously.¹² However, Haggai does tell us that Zerubbabel was governor in the second year of Darius (Hag 1:1, 14; 2:2, 21).¹³

This understanding of Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar as contemporaries is also stated in 1 Esdras. 1 Esdras 2:10–15 (cf. the parallel in Ezra 1:7–11) relates that the vessels from the temple in Jerusalem captured by Nebuchadnezzar were turned over to Sheshbazzar, and that he returned them to Jerusalem. However, 1 Esdras 6:17 says that they were turned over to Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar, making the two men contemporaries when the foundation of the temple was laid (1 Esdras 6:20). It should be noted that 1 Esdras 6:8–22 is parallel to Ezra 5:7–17, since both contain the letter of Tattenai to Darius. That 1 Esdras 6:17 mentions both Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar whereas Ezra 5:14, the parallel verse in Ezra, mentions only Sheshbazzar testifies that even in antiquity the narrative in Ezra 1:1–4:4 was understood as occurring under the governorship of Sheshbazzar with Zerubbabel, a scion of the house of David, as one of the prominent leaders of the Judeans.

Therefore, the most plausible understanding of Ezra 1–4 is that Zerubbabel returned with Sheshbazzar as one of the leaders of the exiles. He later replaced Sheshbazzar as governor. However, there is no need to posit a later date of return to Jerusalem for him than for Sheshbazzar.

II. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SHESHBAZZAR AND ZERUBBABEL

But what, exactly, was the relationship between Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel during Sheshbazzar's tenure as governor? Judgment on this matter is largely dictated by how Sheshbazzar is identified. His name is Babylonian, though its derivation is still a matter of conjecture and controversy. With a Babylonian name we are left with two options: he was a Babylonian appointed by Cyrus as governor over the Judeans¹⁴ or he was a Judean with a Babylonian name (as was Zerubbabel and many others of the exiles who came to Jerusalem). I would argue that he was a Judean, and that this is implied by Ezra 2:63 (cf. Neh 7:65). There we are told: "The governor told them that they should not eat any of the holy food until a priest would arise for Urim

¹² The only possible exception to this is Ezra 1:8 where Sheshbazzar is called הנשיא ליהודה (see the discussion below). In Ezra the narrator never refers to Joshua as high priest, nor does he refer to Sheshbazzar as governor. However, he does refer to "the governor" at 2:63 (התרושטא, apparently Sheshbazzar) and at 6:7 (פוחה, apparently Zerubbabel). It should be noted that the narrator does refer to people by their name and vocation simultaneously. Thus for instance Ezra is "the priest, the scribe" (Ezra 7:11; cf. 7:6, 12, 21; 10:10, 16) or Meremoth is "the priest" (Ezra 8:33).

¹³ Both Haggai and Zechariah refer to Joshua as high priest (Hag 1:1, 12, 14; 2:2, 4; Zech 3:1, 8; 6:11), though Ezra never explicitly connects him with that office.

¹⁴ This view is favored by Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah* 141–42.

and Thummim.” Since the governor is aware of Urim and Thummim and its use (Exod 28:30; Lev 8:8; Num 27:21; Deut 33:8), it is likely that he is a Judean, not a Babylonian. Whereas the only person Cyrus has given authority of any kind over Judah in Ezra 1–6 is Sheshbazzar, he is “the governor.”

In 1888 Imbert proposed the theory that Sheshbazzar was the same person as Shenazzar, a son of the exiled Judean king Jeconiah/Jehoiakim (1 Chr 3:18), and in 1921 W. F. Albright adopted this position as well.¹⁵ It is partly based on the description of Sheshbazzar as “the prince/leader of Judah” (הַנָּשִׂיא לַיהוּדָה; Ezra 1:8) and partly because the name Sheshbazzar sometimes appears in Greek as Σασσαβασ(σ)αρ but other times as Σαναβασσαρ. If this were the case, then Sheshbazzar was likely an old man when he returned to Jerusalem, and Zerubbabel would have been his nephew (cf. 1 Chr 3:19). This would offer an explanation for Zerubbabel’s prominence under Sheshbazzar as well as Zerubbabel’s longevity in Jerusalem as compared to Sheshbazzar. It would also provide a logical reason for Zerubbabel’s appointment as governor following his uncle’s term of office.

However, the term נָשִׂיא does not necessarily denote royalty (cf., e.g., Exod 16:22; 34:31; 35:27; Num 1:16, 44). Most scholars have abandoned the identification of Sheshbazzar with Shenazzar since Berger argued that the name Sheshbazzar could not be the same as Shenazzar, because Sheshbazzar was probably derived from *šaššu-aba-ušur* (“May Šaššu [the sun god] protect the father”).¹⁶ Therefore for linguistic reasons the name Shenazzar cannot be related to the name Sheshbazzar.

That simply leaves us with the designation of Sheshbazzar as “leader of Judah.” Since the narrator of Ezra nowhere else uses a person’s name and his official title simultaneously (see discussion above), the description of Sheshbazzar in Ezra 1:8 does not appear to be an alternate way of referring to him as governor of Yehud. Instead, it simply designates him as acknowledged leader of the Judean exiles who sought to resettle in Jerusalem and rebuild the temple.

But why does Sheshbazzar defer to Zerubbabel as the leader in charge of rebuilding the temple? Since Sheshbazzar is not one of the sons of Jehoiachin, he is not in the royal line of the last Judean king surviving into the captivity. However, Zerubbabel is of the proper lineage. God promised that it would be a son of David who would build the Lord’s house (2 Sam 7:12–13; 1 Chr 17:11–12). With the first temple this was fulfilled in Solomon. With the second temple, Sheshbazzar may have deferred to another “son” of David, Zerubbabel, in order to further emphasize that the second temple was a re-establishment of the temple worship that began under Solomon. Note the additional parallel: Solomon began building the temple in the second month (1 Kgs 6:1; 2 Chr 3:2), so also Zerubbabel laid the foundation in the second month (Ezra 3:8).

¹⁵ Yamauchi. “Ezra-Nehemiah” 605.

¹⁶ Paul Richard Berger, “Zu den Namen שֶׁשְׁבַצַּר und שְׁנַאצַּר ZAW 83 (1971) 98–100; Cf. Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* 46; Coggins, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* 13; H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* (WBC 16; Waco, TX: Word, 1985) 5.

Thus Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel worked together as the acknowledged leader and the Davidic leader of the Judeans. By virtue of his appointment as governor by Cyrus, Sheshbazzar was represented to Tattenai, a Persian official, as responsible for laying the temple's foundation (Ezra 5:14–16). However, as Davidic royalty, Zerubbabel was actively in charge of the project (Ezra 4:1–3), and the prophets refer to him as the builder of the temple from start to finish (Zech 4:9).

III. WHEN DID ZERUBBABEL COME TO JERUSALEM?

Having concluded that Zerubbabel came to Jerusalem with Sheshbazzar, we now need only to establish when the exiles first returned to Jerusalem. Since the biblical text gives no unambiguous statement about the date of this first return to Jerusalem, external evidence must be sought. I believe such external evidence exists in the form of the post-exilic cycle of sabbatical years. The law concerning sabbatical years is treated briefly at Exod 23:10–11, but more thoroughly at Lev 25:1–7. The beginning of the counting of years up to the first sabbatical year was to be “when you come into the land I am giving you” (כי תבאו אל-הארץ אשר אני נתן לכם). Therefore, if we can determine the sabbatical years in the post-exilic era, we can determine when during the reign of Cyrus the Judeans returned, since Cyrus's reign over Babylon and the Empire lasted only nine years (538–530 BC), and it is unlikely that the return took place in his first year or in the last year or two of his reign (see discussion above).

In 1857 Benedict Zuckermann published a schedule of sabbatical cycles based on *Seder 'Olam* 30 and statements of Moses Maimonides.¹⁷ This became the accepted theory, especially after it was adopted by Emil Schürer in his magisterial *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*.¹⁸ However, in 1973, Ben Zion Wacholder demonstrated that Zuckermann's schedule was incorrect by one year, making each sabbatical year one year later than in Zuckermann's schedule.¹⁹ More recently, Rodger Young has demonstrated that Zuckermann did not correctly understand *Seder 'Olam* 30, but that a correct understanding of it agrees with Wacholder's schedule of sabbatical years.²⁰ Key to Wacholder's schedule of sabbatical years are nine literary references to specific sabbatical years:

¹⁷ Benedict Zuckermann, “Über Sabbatjahreycyclus und Jubelperiode,” in *Jahresbericht des jüdisch-theologischen Seminars “Fränkelcher-Stiftung”* (Breslau: Korn, 1837). An English translation is available as A. Löwy, *A Treatise on the Sabbatical Cycle and the Jubilee* (New York: Hermon, 1974).

¹⁸ Emil Schürer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, 5 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1896).

¹⁹ Ben Zion Wacholder, “The Calendar of Sabbatical Cycles During the Second Temple and the Early Rabbinic Period,” *HUCA* 44 (1973) 53–196. See also Wacholder, “Chronomessianism: The Timing of Messianic Movements and the Calendar of Sabbatical Cycles,” *HUCA* 46 (1975) 201–18, Wacholder, “The Calendar of Sabbath Years During the Second Temple Era: A Response,” *HUCA* 54 (1983) 123–33.

²⁰ Rodger Young, “*Seder Olam* and the Sabbaticals Associated with the Two Destructions of Jerusalem: Part I,” *JBQ* 34 (2006) 173–79; “*Seder Olam* and the Sabbaticals Associated with the Two Destructions of Jerusalem: Part II,” *JBQ* 34 (2006) 252–59.

1. Remission of taxes under Alexander the Great for the sabbatical year 331/330 BC²¹
2. Second battle of Beth-Zur in the summer of the sabbatical year 163/162 BC
3. Murder of the Hasmonean Simon in the sabbatical year 135/134 BC
4. Conquest of Jerusalem by Herod on 10 Tishri after the previous sabbatical year 37/36 BC²²
5. Agrippa I recites Deut 7:15 in a post-sabbatical year, making the sabbatical year AD 41/42
6. A note of indebtedness from Wadi Murabba'at: AD 55/56
7. Destruction of the temple in Jerusalem at the end of the sabbatical year AD 69/70
8. Rental contracts of Simon bar Kosba (bar Kochba) indicating AD 132/133 as a sabbatical year
9. Three fourth and fifth-century tombstones in Sodom indicating AD 433/434 and 440/441 as sabbatical years

All of these sabbatical years occur within multiples of seven years to each other, indicating that there was a consistent reckoning of sabbatical years for over 750 years from the days of Alexander the Great to the fourth century AD.

More importantly, as Wacholder noted, Neh 10:32 (EV 31) demonstrates awareness of established nature of this cycle already in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.²³ Apparently, some had been neglecting the sabbatical years, and they pledged to keep them. Counting backward from the known post-exilic sabbatical years indicates that 527/526 BC during the reign of Cambyses would have been a sabbatical year. Since this was the seventh year after coming to the land, the first year would have been 533 BC, some five years after Cyrus's decree.

IV. CONCLUSION: THE RETURN TO THE LAND AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE

Thus it is possible with external information to determine when Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel led the Judean exiles back to Jerusalem and the Persian province of Yehud. While five years may seem like a long time between Cyrus's decree and the return to Jerusalem, the details in Ezra 1–2 would seem to indicate that an immediate return would have been unlikely. First of all, there was a time of preparation to make the return. Ezra 1:6 indicates a concerted effort by those who remained in Babylon to help equip and finance the return. This was probably not a quick process given all that was donated.

Second, it is unlikely that the returnees simply dropped everything in order to return. There was property to sell, accounts to settle, travel arrange-

²¹ Sabbatical years ran from the beginning of Tishri to the end of Elul and, therefore, always overlap two Julian years.

²² See also Andrew E. Steinmann, "When Did Herod the Great Reign?" *NovT* 50 (2007).

²³ Wacholder, "The Calendar of Sabbatical Cycles" 157–58.

ments to be made. Third, Ezra 2:64–65 and Neh 7:66 indicate that about 50,000 people made the trip to Jerusalem. Organizing such a large group would not happen quickly. Finally, it would have been unlikely that Cyrus's treasurer Mithredath would have turned over the temple vessels to any Judean who presented himself as leader of the returning Judeans, no matter how prominent he may have been (Ezra 1:8). Instead, it is more reasonable to assume that the exiles first organized themselves and their leaders requested that one of them be named governor of Yehud and entrusted with the vessels.

For these reasons, a five-year period of planning and organization is not at all unreasonable. Furthermore, this five-year delay explains why, after making only a beginning by laying the foundation, the Judeans were forced to stop. Had they returned immediately with the decree of Cyrus still new, it is unlikely that their building program could have been successfully opposed in the court of Cyrus as indicated by Ezra 4:5. It simply would be unlikely for the king or his officials to reverse policy so abruptly and quickly. If, however, the Judeans returned in 533 BC and began to build in 532 BC during their second year in Jerusalem, the decree would have been some six years old—long enough in the past that it was capable of being opposed and allowing for the opposition to persuade Persian authorities to halt the work. Thus from the text of Ezra and the evidence of the sabbatical year cycles of the post-exilic era we can be reasonably certain that Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel and the people with them returned in 533 BC. This also enables us to construct a chronology for the events of Ezra 1–6:

Ezra 1:1	Cyrus's decree	538	
Ezra 3:7	Arrival of Sheshbazzar in Jerusalem	Summer (?) 533	
Ezra 3:2	Altar in Jerusalem rebuilt	Elul (?) 533	
Ezra 3:6	First sacrifices on new altar	1 Tishri 533	September 20, 533
Ezra 3:8	Second Temple begun	Ziv 532	
Ezra 4:4	Work on the Temple halted	531 (?)	
Ezra 5:1–2	Work on the Temple resumed	24 Elul 520 ^a	September 21, 520
Ezra 6:15	Second Temple finished	3 Adar 515	March 12, 515 BC

a. The date is given in Hag 1:15.