Near the beginning of the Achaemenid Persian period, Judeans returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon to rebuild the temple of Yahweh. The reconstruction of events and issues surrounding the rebuilding of this temple is one of the more contentious areas of discussion in biblical studies. In *Temple Restoration in Early Achaemenid Judah*, Bedford seeks to understand the initial return to the land and unravel questions surrounding the temple reconstruction.

Our primary resources for reconstructing events are a limited number of passages from the Old Testament, in particular Ezra 1–6, Haggai, and Zech 1–8, and a significant analysis of each of those texts is provided. In addition, Bedford considers what can be determined regarding early Achaemenid Persian administrative practices with regard to conquered territories and their deities, how those practices have been previously understood, and in what ways past reconstructions might be reconsidered. To round out the topics for analysis, Judean hopes for restoration are addressed.

Two major conceptual understandings have dominated interpretations of this period in the life of Judah. First, based largely on the account of events in Ezra 1–6, the repatriated exiles—and only those from the Babylonian captivity—have been defined as a closed
A group of temple builders. Opposed to this group are the "people of the land," though variously defined. The tone of relationships between the envisioned groups is then described as confrontational and divisive. The second major building block used to imagine life in the period of the initial return of the exiles is a view of Cyrus as patron rebuilders and restorer of temples throughout his realm. This volume challenges both of those assumptions.

The ideology of conflict said to surround the initial return of exiles from Babylon to Judah is based on notations concerning local opposition to the temple reconstruction project found in the opening chapters of Ezra, so this is where the author begins. The interpretation of Ezra and Nehemiah is contentious, to say the least. Particularly difficult is the claim of Ezra 1:1–4:5 that the building of the temple was marked from the outset with conflict, as the returnees from Babylonian exile sought to establish themselves over against the community resident in the land. Bedford sees this text as placing in the early Achaemenid period concerns that arise in a later social and political context when such contention had become a part of life. Thus, he contends Judean conflict with Samaritans of the fourth century B.C.E., at the earliest, is read back into the initial return of deportees, or more properly the "return" to Judah of descendants of those exiles. As a result, Bedford views the first chapters of Ezra as historically unreliable.

Life in Judah in the period between the fall of Jerusalem and the restoration of the city and rebuilding of the temple is largely lost to us. Often an understanding of this period revolves around ideas of an empty land, derived in large part from an ideology developed from theological constructs rather than any historical evidence. Any attempt to measure the extent of deportation is riddled with difficulties, as are related questions concerning the population remaining in the land. How is the idea of the remnant understood? Who are the faithful? And if the ideology of the empty land is developed from a prophetic view of events in which the "deportation and subsequent repatriation of Judeans was in order to display the sovereignty and holiness of Yahweh" (60), what impact should this have on historical reconstruction? Bedford acknowledges the community of Babylonian exiles as theologically important for the message and public demonstration of the preeminence of Yahweh but concludes that all "attempts to find in exilic period texts the roots of a division between the Babylonian exiles and those who remained in Judah, which supposedly later manifested itself at the repatriation of the exiles, must be judged to be unsuccessful" (61). In fact, he argues, far from being in pitched battle, rhetorical or otherwise, over the rebuilding of the temple, the two communities found unity in the building project when it was eventually undertaken during the reign of Darius. How does he arrive at such a conclusion? It is at this point that the second major aspect of typical reconstructions of the period comes into play.
More often than not, the repatriation of Judean exiles is viewed as part of an imperial policy undertaken by Cyrus, who assumes the role of patron of the cults of conquered peoples. Two sources of evidence are offered for this dominant perception of Cyrus as the sponsor of temple restorations: the text of Ezra 1–4 and the decisions made by Cyrus concerning cultic sites in ancient Mesopotamian centers. Having already concluded that the views espoused in the early chapters of Ezra are anachronistic retrojections of later situations, what does a closer examination of the policies of Cyrus reveal? Bedford argues that Cyrus’s highly public royal role as patron of ancient Mesopotamian cult sites aligns with earlier Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian examples of the restoration of the cults of Mesopotamian deities by rulers. The point of such rebuilding and refurbishing of cult sites in Mesopotamian tradition was to demonstrate the endorsement of the current ruler by the important ancient gods. Cyrus, in his desire to designate himself as the welcomed successor to a decaying Babylonian Empire, portrays himself as chosen by Marduk and appointed to the restoration of order. But even in these examples there is a distinct lack of evidence for the return or repatriation of exiled peoples. Rather, exiled deities are returned to their shrines, and their cultic worship is reconstituted. Bedford notes that the other major example of Persian patronage in the restoration of cults takes place in Egypt at a later date. There, the Achaemenid ruler desires to be seen in the role of pharaoh. Much more difficult is assessing the “policy” as it relates to minor centers such as Jerusalem. Is there any evidence of state sponsorship in rebuilding? Or is it more accurate to describe a policy of Persian endorsement of the reestablishment of cult centers, rites, and temples in subject territories at the expense of the worshipers of the deity? Perhaps tax relief and other considerations to enable the subject state might have been forthcoming, but there is a discernible lack of evidence of patronage by the empire.

Bedford finds no evidence in the early period of Achaemenid rule of Judah for the concept of a “cultic community” formed of “theocratists” living under the authority of the Torah and the rule of priests. Nor does he find the associated “parties” advocating one or another form of political agenda transported from exile to be evidenced in the period of temple reconstruction. In fact, he argues, the evidence available from Haggai, Zech 1–8, and Ezra 5–6 would suggest that the problem of restoration of the temple was “not due to putative social division or the interference of Samarian officials, but was rather due in part to lack of interest in the project by the Achaemenid Persian administration” (302). The other major element involved was timing. When Sheshbazzar and the first Babylonian exiles were repatriated, what indications of Yahweh’s approval for the rebuilding were present? Clearly the destruction was understood by Judean communities to reflect the wrath of Yahweh. Bedford is correct to observe that more than Persian approval of the project would be needed for the reconstruction to take place, especially if the funding for temple rebuilding were to be generated by the Judean population, and not
underwritten by Persian coffers, and pressed forward regardless of local participation. Of critical significance for Judeans would be the authorization of the rebuilding by Yahweh and a builder who was a legitimate ruler.

Clearly, when the rebuilding is undertaken, it is not as a result of a mandate from Darius, who needs to search imperial records to verify an edict by Cyrus allowing the project. What seems to have served as a catalyst to restoration efforts is the decision of the Persian administration to send the Davide de Zerubbabel as governor of Judah. Yet neither Zerubbabel nor the priest Joshua had been sent to rebuild the temple. Rather, their appearance around 520 served as an inspiration to prophetic voices. The oracles of Haggai and Zechariah (1–8) endorse temple reconstruction as fulfilling the plans of Yahweh, thus leading to security and stability for a fragile state. Surely Yahweh’s anger is over. Rather than waiting for the “right time” any longer, the prophet Haggai declares that the Judeans are missing the fact that the opportune time has arrived, and it is a failure to recognize this and respond appropriately by the rebuilding of the temple that is at the root of Judah’s economic and agricultural woes.

The rebuilding of the temple is closely connected to Zerubbabel as the authorized temple builder, temple building being intimately associated with kingship. So how can this work in the case of Zerubbabel? Is this a sign of a revolt against Persian rule? Bedford notes that as long as no political reality is attached to the dreams of the future, the role of Zerubbabel does not seem to be at issue. Though he does not explore the issue, this would lead one naturally to the observation that a prophetic proclamation need not be understood to be endorsed by the figure acclaimed. Surely such must have been the case on more than one occasion in the life of any of the large empires. Prophetic endorsement, whether by oracular or divinatory means, must have been a regular part of the undercurrent of political life. In any case, Bedford is correct to note that the Persians demonstrate no concern over the role of Zerubbabel, and he suggests that the governor may have displayed a high level of political acumen to use the prophetic endorsements in a manner that stabilized the fragile gains made in the Judean community while assuring the Achaemenid overseers that no real threat to Persian rule was intended by these enthusiastic proclamations.

_Temple Restoration in Early Achaemenid Judah_ is to be commended for its thorough review of the evidence. Even if the reader finds the thesis or elements of it unconvincing, one is certain to encounter new insights and perspectives that will enrich one’s thinking and develop further understanding of the topic and the related issues. It is hardly to be expected that this will provide the last word on such a contentious era in the history of Judah, but it is a volume that makes an important contribution to our understanding of the period. A helpful bibliography and indexes to modern authors and biblical and ancient
texts serve to round out the volume. Given the wealth of ideas considered, it is unfortunate that the price will dictate that many individuals and smaller libraries may not feel they can afford this volume. One can only hope that does not limit its contribution to scholarly discussion of the era.