

Who was Sheshbazzar in the Bible?

Sheshbazzar appears briefly in the book of Ezra, where he is first introduced as “the prince of Judah” (Ezra 1:8). Later, he is described as a post-exilic governor of Judah (Ezra 5:14).

Sheshbazzar is mentioned in the Bible only four times (Ezra 1:8, 11; 5:14, 16). He was a leading Babylonian Jew who found favor with Cyrus the Great, King of Persia. In the first year of his reign, Cyrus issued a proclamation to rebuild the house of the Lord in Jerusalem (Ezra 1:1-4).

In 538 B.C., Cyrus appointed Sheshbazzar to lead an expedition of the first group of Israelites to return to Jerusalem from Babylon. He also entrusted Sheshbazzar with the task of returning the gold and silver vessels taken from the temple by Nebuchadnezzar during the Babylonian exile: “Moreover, King Cyrus brought out the articles belonging to the temple of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and had placed in the temple of his god. Cyrus king of Persia had them brought by Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. . . . In all, there were 5,400 articles of gold and of silver. Sheshbazzar brought all these along with the exiles when they came up from Babylon to Jerusalem” (Ezra 1:7-11).

Sheshbazzar completed the commission and then “laid the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem” (Ezra 5:14-16).

The name Sheshbazzar is likely derived from the Akkadian language and means “may Shamash [the sun god] protect the father.” Nothing more is known for certain about Sheshbazzar. Perhaps this obscure prince is most notable for the historical controversy surrounding

his name, identity, and role, which have been much discussed and debated.

Until recently, it was commonly thought that Sheshbazzar was another name for Zerubbabel, who, like Sheshbazzar, was also called a prince of Judah and governor after the exile (Haggai 1:1). Also, Zerubbabel, like Sheshbazzar, was recognized for restoring the temple's foundation (Ezra 3:8-11). It was common for Babylonian kings to rename their Hebrew captives (see Daniel 1:7), so it's possible that Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel were the same man. Now, however, scholars tend to believe they were different individuals: Sheshbazzar came to Judah before Zerubbabel and was governor during the reign of Cyrus; later, under King Darius, Zerubbabel was appointed governor and continued the work of restoration that Sheshbazzar had begun.

Following this line of thought, some scholars have proposed that Shenazzar (1 Chronicles 3:18) is an alternate name for Sheshbazzar. Shenazzar was the son of King Jehoiachin, which would make him Zerubbabel's uncle. Because Sheshbazzar's lineage is not clear, his exact identity remains uncertain.