

LESSON 4

EZRA 5 & 6

EZRA



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*“Do not be afraid, but let your hands
be strong” (Zechariah 8:9-13)*
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WORK ON THE TEMPLE IS RESUMED

EZRA 5:1-2

The last verse of the previous chapter states: “Thus the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia” (4:24).

Years had elapsed since the foundation of the temple was laid. All through those years no progress was made. The enemies of Israel had succeeded in blocking the building program.

Not all the people of Judah were discouraged to the point of indifference and lethargy, but many were. However, a change for the better seemed in prospect when a new emperor, Darius, mounted the throne.

The prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, became active (5:1). They transmitted directives from God, first to Zerubbabel the governor and Jeshua the high priest, and then to the whole populace. Haggai made the initial pronouncements. Two months later, Zechariah joined him.

Haggai said in effect: The time has come to build the temple. Your response, however, is contrariwise. You insist the time has not yet come for the Lord's house to be built. I say, it has. You are terrifically interested in building homes for yourselves, but you don't want to go to the trouble and expense of building a house for the Lord. The reason you give is that you have had a succession of crop failures. Do you know why you've had no bumper crops? The Lord offers this telling reason: Because of my house, which remains in ruins, while each of you is busy with his own house (Haggai 1:2-11, NIV).

Zechariah joined his voice with that of Haggai. Though Zechariah had much to reveal to his contemporaries and to posterity through eight visions and in ten Messianic prophecies, he embraced the opportunity to encourage the people to be strong so that the temple may be built. Zechariah said: "This is what the Lord Almighty says: You who now hear these words spoken by the prophets who were there when the foundation was laid for the house of the Lord Almighty, let your hands be strong so that the temple may be built... Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong" (Zechariah 8:9-13, NIV). Then Zerubbabel and Jeshua set to work rebuilding the temple. And Haggai and Zechariah were with them, helping them (5:2).

GOVERNOR TATTENAI MAKES INVESTIGATION

EZRA 5:3-5

The adversaries, manifestly, were again stirred into action and decided to get a judgment from the satrap or governor of the Trans-Euphrates province, consisting of Syria, Palestine, Phoenicia (Lebanon), and Cyprus. At that time, Tattenai was the satrap. He and his legal advisors went to Jerusalem and inquired of the building committee, Who authorized you to rebuild this temple and restore the structure? And, "What are the names of the men constructing this building?"

They answered — as we can gather from the letter Tattenai sent to Darius — In the first year of his reign, King Cyrus issued a decree to rebuild this house. Not only that, but "he even removed from the temple of Babylon the gold and silver articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem,"

(5:13-14). Come and see for yourself. We'll show you the articles of gold and silver.

Tattenai was half-convinced. Of one thing he was sure: he must by all means avoid acting contrary to any imperial edict issued previously. Yes, he would write to King Darius and request that a search be made for the decree of Cyrus. No, the builders need not stop their operation but could continue until an answer arrived from Darius.

THE LETTER

EZRA 5:6-17

The letter is set forth in 5:7-17. It is self-explanatory. Please read it. The only perplexing thing about it is the reference to Sheshbazzar in 5:14b. No consensus has been reached by scholars as to who he really was. At any rate, he was active, alongside Zerubbabel and Jeshua, in the exodus, in cataloguing the gold and silver articles (1:8), in governing the people and in the laying of the foundation of the temple (5:14).

IN SEARCH OF CYRUS' SCROLL

EZRA 6:1-2

King Darius took action when the letter from Tattenai reached him. He ordered a search made in the archives at Babylon. The result? Nothing. A waste of time and energy.

Then, perhaps, someone got the bright idea that the scroll of Cyrus might be in Ecbatana, "capital of Media and summer resident of Persian kings, almost 300 miles northeast of Babylon. Cyrus is known to have spent some time there during the first year of his reign" (Roehrs). And remember, it was in the first year of his reign, (1:1), that Cyrus, moved by the Lord God of heaven, proclaimed liberty to the Hebrew captives and wisely extended that same factor to all other captives in his realm. That edict was proclaimed when Cyrus resided at the summer capital, and that's where the scroll was found.

DARIUS IS APPRISED OF THE CONTENT OF THE SCROLL

EZRA 6:3-5

The researchers gave Darius a resume of the content of Cyrus' decree, to wit, that the temple in Jerusalem was to

be rebuilt; that the cost be defrayed from the royal treasury; and that the sacred vessels be returned to their places in the temple in Jerusalem and deposited in the house of God.

DARIUS ANSWERS TATTENAI DIRECTLY AND FORCEFULLY

EZRA 6:6-10

“Let the work on this house of God alone...” Their expenses are to be fully paid from taxes raised in the Trans-Euphrates area so that the work will not stop. Whatever else is needed, whether for sacrificial purposes or the maintenance of priests and workers, shall be provided for on a daily basis. All I ask in return is that the worshippers pray for the “life of the king and his sons.”

DARIUS ADDS A WARNING

EZRA 6:11-12

“If anyone changes this edict, a beam is to be pulled from his house and he is to be lifted up and impaled on it. And for this crime his house is to be made a pile of rubble... I Darius have decreed it. Let it be carried out with diligence.”

ONWARD! FORWARD! EXCELSIOR!

EZRA 6:13-15

Tattenai and his associates were not facing an iffy situation. They knew exactly what was to be done. Do what the man on the throne said, or else! Without hesitation, they carried out the king’s decree.

The people, on their part, waxed enthusiastic. They became God-intoxicated under the powerful preaching of their spiritual leaders, Haggai and Zechariah. The work prospered. After 15 years of delay, the construction of the temple was completed in 515 B.C. It was less grandiose than the temple of Solomon, but it endured longer. A segment of it was later incorporated into Herod’s Temple, and that segment survived the wholesale destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D., and is now known as the Western Wall or the Wailing Wall.

We read, “They finished building the temple according to the command of the God of Israel and the decrees of Cyrus, Darius” and, for good measure, the name of Artaxerxes is added because later he provided regal support when Ezra led the second expedition back to Jerusalem (Ezra 6:12-20).

DEDICATION OF THE TEMPLE

EZRA 6:16-18

Jubilate: The day of dedication was at hand. With hearts full of gratitude, the people of God gathered to offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving.

The ways of God are not only mysterious at times but leisurely as well. He is in no particular hurry to compose our oft restlessness. Imagine, for fifteen years after the foundation was laid, the Jews had to wait for the completion of the superstructure, the temple itself. In everybody’s book, that’s a long time to

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rededicate it to God in the beauty of His holiness.*

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possess one's soul in patience.

They gave thanks to God for coming through and fulfilling His promises. He alone knows the whys and wherefores of hopes deferred. The only thing we can do is to acquiesce and say, "Submission to thy will, O Lord, is the only path to inner tranquility."

An interesting aside: the Aramaic word for "dedication" is "Hanukkah." In the second century B.C., Zerubbabel's Temple was defiled by Antiochus Epiphanes of Syria. The Maccabees, however, vanquished him in battle and regained independence for Israel. The first thing they did was to purify the temple and rededicate it to God in the beauty of His holiness. The anniversary of that dedication is observed by universal Jewry in the month of December, and is appropriately termed Hanukkah (John 10:22).

PASSOVER IS CELEBRATED

EZRA 6:19-22

A month after the dedication of the temple, the people celebrated the festival of Passover, not only in memory of the release of their forebears from Egyptian bondage but also of their own exodus from the Babylonian captivity. "For seven days they celebrated with joy the Feast of Unleavened Bread, because the Lord had filled them with joy by changing the attitude of the king of Assyria [Darius], so that he assisted them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel."

Finis. Curtains. The End.

This brings to a close the events associated with

Zerubbabel. There is an interim period of 57 years between the end of chapter 6 and the beginning of chapter 7 of the book of Ezra. In the interval, the events recorded in the book of Esther took place. Esther became queen of the fourth king of the Persian Empire, Xerxes or, as he is called in Hebrew: Ahasuerus. He reigned 486-465 B.C. (or thereabouts).

Esther providentially saved the Jews from a massacre and thus kept alive the remnant of the tribe of Judah from whom the Messiah would derive.

A LINGERING LOOK BEFORE LEAVE-TAKING

The first five kings of the Persian Empire were: (1) Cyrus, (2) Cambyses (not mentioned in the Bible), (3) Darius, (4) Xerxes (who made Esther his queen), and (5) Artaxerxes. Total years of reign: 115 (from 539 to 424 B.C.).

During the reign of Cyrus and down to the reign of Darius, the enemies of Judah thwarted plans for the erection of the temple on the foundation already laid (4:4-5). In fact, as the writer brings to remembrance, they continued their obstructionistic tactics even after the temple was completed, seeking to prevent, in this instance, the reconstruction of the city walls. The interference occurred during the reign of Xerxes and Artaxerxes, successors to Darius. It is recorded here, in 4:6-23, as an example of continuing and stubborn opposition to the people of God.

The writer then returns to his previous theme, 4:24, and furnishes details in chapter 5 and 6 on how the obstacles to the building of the temple were overcome during the reign of King Darius.

PERSONAL APPLICATION – EZRA 7 & 8

I come in reverence before you, Lord Jesus. You are my Redeemer; save me. You are my Mediator; reconcile me. You are my Shepherd; lead me. Enlighten me by Your Spirit, my Savior and my God. Amen.

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Ezra 7:1-20

1. Between chapters 6 & 7, there is a 57 year interval at which time a second expedition made its way from Babylon. Who was the leader this time and who was the reigning monarch?

2. To whom was Ezra able to trace his ancestry?

3. List what we are told about Ezra from 7:6-10.

4. The king and his seven advisers formulated a letter in which the privileges and responsibilities of Ezra and of the satraps, governors, and treasurers of the province west of the Euphrates River were clearly outlined. What was the decree specifically directed to Ezra? (7:11-14).

5. What information and instructions were given as to the financing of the project and how the gifts and monies were to be used? (7:15-17)

6. What procedure was to be followed in case there was a surplus?

7. What procedure was to be followed in case there was a deficit?

Ezra 7: 21-28

8. How were the treasurers of Trans-Euphrates to be of definite service to the repatriated exiles? (7:21-23)

9. Who were the persons exempted from paying taxes of any sort?

10. What special authority was extended to Ezra by the king and his cabinet of seven?

11. List the four types of punishment to be meted out to lawbreakers.

12. In your opinion, is capital punishment to serve primarily as a deterrent or as a punishment?

13. Why was Ezra's ascription of praise addressed to God rather than directly to Artaxerxes?

Ezra 8:1-30

14. What leads you to believe that Ezra was a meticulous type of individual, careful about details? (8:1-14)

15. Three days were required to assemble and register all who intended to accompany Ezra. Who were the men that should have been there but were not?

16. Ezra sought to rectify the situation by contacting the "top brass," a man by the name of Iddo, and asking him and his kinsmen to recruit attendants and workers for the house of God. Ezra even told the messengers what to say to Iddo by way of persuasion. If you were in Ezra's place, what sales talk would you have suggested point by point?

17. Why were the messengers successful in gaining recruits and to what extent?

18. What was the first item on the agenda when the mass meeting came to order?

19. Why did Ezra not request a military escort of the king?

20. What precautionary measures did Ezra take to safeguard the consecrated treasures?

Ezra 8:30-36

21. To whom did the leaders and people attribute their safe arrival in Jerusalem, and, after a three day rest, what was the first order of business on the fourth day?

22. How did the returnees express their gratefulness for "Mission Accomplished"?

23. Why did the king's orders, delivered to the satraps and to the governors west of the Euphrates River, prove exceedingly helpful?

24. What spiritual and practical lessons did you learn from your study of Ezra 7 and 8?