

Ezra 5: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Ezra chapter 5 Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?

They also asked them this, What are the names of the men who are building this building? But the eye of their god was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until the report should reach Darius, and then an answer be returned by letter concerning it.

This is a copy of the letter that Tatanai the governor of the province beyond the river, and Sheethar Bozenai and his associates, the governors who were in the province beyond the river, sent to Darius the king.

They sent him a report, in which was written as follows, To Darius the king, all peace. Be it known to the king that we went to the province of Judah, to the house of the great god.

It is being built with huge stones, and timber is laid in the walls. This work goes on diligently and prospers in their hands. Then we asked those elders and spoke to them thus, Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?

[1 : 2 6] We also asked them their names, for your information, that we might write down the names of their leaders. And this was their reply to us. We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the house that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished.

But because our fathers had angered the God of heaven, he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house, and carried away the people to Babylonia.

However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, Cyrus the king made a decree that this house of God should be rebuilt. And the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple that was in Jerusalem, and brought into the temple of Babylon, these Cyrus the king took out of the temple of Babylon, and they were delivered to one whose name was Shesh-baza, whom he had made governor.

And he said to him, Take these vessels, go and put them in the temple that is in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be rebuilt on its site. Then this Shesh-baza came and laid the foundations of the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and from that time until now it has been in building, and it is not yet finished.

Therefore, if it seems good to the king, let search be made in the royal archives there in Babylon, to see whether a decree was issued by Cyrus the king for the rebuilding of this house of God in Jerusalem.

[2 : 4 6] And let the king send us his pleasure in this matter. Ezra chapter 5 continues an Aramaic section of the book, which runs from chapter 4 verse 8 to chapter 6 verse 18, largely containing correspondence with Persian kings.

These are key witnesses to the Jews' life during the Persian period. They also serve as an apologetic for the rebuilding efforts more generally, especially for the later period of Nehemiah.

At the beginning of this chapter we have references also to two important prophetic voices of the period, Haggai and Zechariah, who played pivotal roles in encouraging the rebuilding of the temple.

While much of the preceding chapter addressed the period of the reign of Artaxerxes, several decades later chronologically, at least according to the longer chronology that most scholars adopt, At the end of that chapter we will return to a period shortly after the events described in the very beginning of chapter 4, during the reign of Darius I.

The Jews had faced concerted opposition to their project of rebuilding the temple from surrounding peoples, and this had discouraged their efforts, preventing them from making progress during the rest of the reign of Cyrus, through the reign of his successor Cambyses, and into the reign of Darius I.

[3 : 57] While they had started to lay the lower foundation, the actual rebuilding of the temple had been placed on hold. In the book of Ezra, the explanation for the stalling of the rebuilding project chiefly focuses upon the opposition faced by the people.

In the books of Haggai and Zechariah, there is more criticism of the people themselves for their failure to advance the work. They are accused of being too preoccupied with their own affairs to rebuild the house of God.

Zechariah is here referred to as the son of Ido, In Zechariah chapter 1 verse 1, he is identified as the son of Berechiah, the son of Ido. Later, in Nehemiah chapter 12 verse 4 and verse 16, we see that Zechariah was the head of the priestly family of Ido, his grandfather.

In the joining together of Zerubbabel, a governor descended from David, Jeshua the high priest, and the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, figures representing all of the traditional offices of Israel's public life, king, priest and prophet, we see the unity of the temple rebuilding effort.

The prophet brings the word of the Lord and the vision that inspires the people. The king or the governor gives his strength to the project, and the consecration of the new temple and its priesthood will be achieved through the high priest.

[5 : 10] The reference here to the name of the God of Israel who was over them might refer to the Lord's rule over his people, or perhaps even to the way that the people were set apart by the Lord's name placed upon them.

The final verse of chapter 4 spoke of the second year of King Darius, which is the context given for Haggai's prophecy in his first chapter, where he gives his account of the recommencement of the rebuilding efforts.

In Haggai chapter 1 verses 12 to 15, Then Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua, the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God and the words of Haggai the prophet, as the Lord their God had sent him.

And the people feared the Lord. Then Haggai, the messenger of the Lord, spoke to the people with the Lord's message, I am with you, declares the Lord. And the Lord 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.

And they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God, in the twenty-fourth day of the month, in the sixth month, in the second year of Darius the king. The governor of the province of Beyond the River, or the Trans-Euphrates province, which included the land of Israel, along with Syria and Lebanon, was Tatanai.

[6 : 28] He, along with his associates, questioned the temple rebuilders. They did not directly oppose the project in the way that the Jews' Samaritans' neighbours had. However, they wanted to know their authorisation.

While wanting to confirm that the returnees were authorised, they did not put a halt to the project, determining rather to wait to hear a response from Darius. As in the prophetic guidance, and the Lord's stirring up of various people's hearts, the hand of the Lord is seen in this.

They give a careful report of what's taking place, and the speed with which things are progressing. If the rebuilding of the temple is not to go ahead, it should be addressed with some urgency. They had enquired concerning the authorisation for the rebuilding, and also concerning the names of those who were involved.

[7 : 36] The cause of the temple's destruction was not the greater power of some foreign gods, but the anger of the Lord against his people who had proved unfaithful, giving them into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. Later, however, as the kingdom of Babylon had passed into the hands of the Medes and Persians, Cyrus had returned the gold and silver vessels, and authorised the rebuilding of the temple that had been destroyed.

If Cyrus had in fact authorised the rebuilding, then there should be a reference to the decree to be found in the royal archives in Babylon. The relevant records will later be found in Ek-Baktanah.

Where else in scripture do we see examples of how figures associated with these three different offices could be involved in the building and the upkeep of temples? ■■■■■■

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