

Ezra 6: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Ezra chapter 6. Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in Babylonia, in the house of the archives where the documents were stored, and in Ekbatanah, the citadel that is in the province of Media, a scroll was found on which this was written. A record. In the first year of Cyrus the king, Cyrus the king issued a decree concerning the house of God at Jerusalem.

Let the house be rebuilt, the place where sacrifices were offered, and let its foundations be retained. Its height shall be sixty cubits, and its breadth sixty cubits, with three layers of great stones and one layer of timber. Let the cost be paid from the royal treasury, and also let the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple that is in Jerusalem, and brought to Babylon, be restored and brought back to the temple that is in Jerusalem, each to its place.

You shall put them in the house of God. Now therefore Tatanai, governor of the province beyond the river, sheath our Bozenai, and your associates, the governors who are in the province beyond the river, keep away. Let the work on this house of God alone. Let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site. Moreover I make a decree regarding what you shall do for these elders of the Jews, for the rebuilding of this house of God.

The cost is to be paid to these men in full, and without delay from the royal revenue, the tribute of the province from beyond the river. And whatever is needed, bulls, rams, or sheep for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, or oil, as the priests at Jerusalem require, let that be given to them day by day without fail, that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king and his sons. Also I make a decree that if anyone alters this edict, a beam shall be pulled out of his house, and he shall be impaled on it, and his house shall be made a dunghill. May the God who has caused his name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who shall put out a hand to alter this, or to destroy this house of God that is in Jerusalem.

I, Darius, make a decree. Let it be done with all diligence. Then according to the words sent by Darius the king, Tatanai, the governor of the province beyond the river, Shetharbozani, and their associates did with all diligence what Darius the king had ordered. And the elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Ido. They finished their building by decree of the God of Israel, and by decree of Cyrus and Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia. And this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king. And the people of Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy. They offered at the dedication of this house of God one hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel, twelve male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel. And they set the priests in their divisions, and the Levites in their divisions, for the service of God at Jerusalem, as it is written in the book of Moses. On the fourteenth day of the first month, the returned exiles kept the Passover. For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together.

[3 : 20] All of them were clean. So they slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the returned exiles, for their fellow priests, and for themselves. It was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile, and also by everyone who had joined them and separated himself from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to worship the Lord, the God of Israel. And they kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy, for the Lord had made them joyful, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

Ezra chapter 6 continues and concludes the Aramaic section that began in chapter 4 verse 8. The section ends in verse 18 of this chapter. This section of the book, according to the more widely accepted chronology, moves between several different times, relating a number of different periods of resistance. Chapter 4 verses 1 to 5 recounts our position during the period of Cyrus from around 536 BC. Then in chapter 4 verses 5 to 6, and chapter 4 verse 24, to the end of the Aramaic section in chapter 6 verse 18, it recounts our position or challenges during the reign of Darius I, from around 522 to around 515 BC. Chapter 4 verse 6 mentions our position during the reign of Ahasuerus, or Xerxes, from around 486 BC. Chapter 4 verses 7 to 23 describes the opposition during the period of Artaxerxes, from 465 BC. This movement backwards and forwards in time can be confusing and somewhat disorienting. Some commentators, such as Charles Fensham and Carl Keill, have argued that chapter 4 verses 6 to 23 should be regarded as largely parenthetical. Others, giving more weight to the shift to Aramaic in chapter 4 verse 8 to chapter 6 verse 18, have suggested that there is an underlying apologetic source addressed to Artaxerxes, perhaps when ordered by Nehemiah. Andrew Steinman argues for this, noting 2nd Maccabees reference to Nehemiah's possession of a library with a collection of official documents in his archives. Once again, according to the more standard chronology, there are two distinct construction projects. The first is the rebuilding of the temple, which occurred over a period of around 20 years, from around 536 to 515 BC. The second is the rebuilding and refortification of the city. James Jordan has strongly disputed this treatment, arguing that Artaxerxes and Ezra and

Nehemiah is actually Darius I, and that the wall restoration was completed by 502 BC, something typically dated about 60 years later. In the preceding chapter, Tatanai, the governor of the province of Trans-Euphrates, inquired about the authorisation of the temple rebuilders, although without halting their work. He suggested that a search be conducted for the decree of Cyrus concerning the temple in the archives in Babylon. However, in verse 2 we see that the relevant records were actually found in Ecbatana, where, according to the history of Xenophon, Cyrus' summer palace was situated. The decree of Cyrus gives a number of distinct instructions. First, that the house is to be rebuilt on its original site and foundations. Second, that its dimensions should be 60 cubits height and 60 cubits breadth. Presumably, Cyrus was concerned to ensure that it was kept within reasonable limits.

The width, likely of 20 cubits, seems to have been omitted here. Some commentators argue that this is likely the result of a transcription error earlier in the transmission of the text. Third, the materials of the temple should be three layers of stone and one of timber. Fourth, the project would be funded by the Persian royal treasury. And fifth, the vessels that were taken by Nebuchadnezzar were to be returned.

Derek Thomas notes the importance of the fact that the project was funded by a Gentile power, suggesting a connection with Haggai chapter 2 verse 7. And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in. And I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord of hosts. The Lord's temple is here being funded by tax revenue from Gentile pagan powers. While the Israelites spoiled the Egyptians in the time of the Exodus through their fear of the Israelites, here Gentile authorities, their hearts stirred by the Lord, are willingly supporting this project. Cyrus seems to have supported other similar projects in other provinces, presumably as a means of currying favour with the diverse groups throughout his empire.

[7 : 52] As Steinman and others note, bricks with the stamp of Cyrus have been found elsewhere, in various temples. Darius confirms all of the claims made by the rebuilders in response to Tatnai's investigation. He instructs Tatnai and his associates not to trouble the rebuilders, but to give them their full assistance, granting them the tax revenue that they need, animals for sacrifices, and other necessary materials on a daily basis. Darius expected the Jews to pray to the Lord for him and his kingdom in the temple. While Darius was clearly a polytheist, and would have expected prayers for him to be made to various gods, the Lord had also called his people to pray for the well-being of their Gentile rulers and nations. Jeremiah chapter 29 verses 4-7.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters. Take wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters. Multiply there, and do not decrease, but seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. We find similar teaching in the New Testament in places like 1 Timothy chapter 2 verses 1-2.

First of all then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. Darius threatens anyone who alters or resists his decree with a terrible judgment and with a curse. They will suffer a punishment at the hands of men and at the hands of God. The authorities obey Darius' decree and cooperate with and support the rebuilding project, which proceeds rapidly.

The project is especially propelled by the ministry of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. Surprisingly, verse 14 mentions not merely Cyrus and Darius, but also Artaxerxes, a detail that seems to be inconsistent with the standard chronology, on the surface of it at least, for which Artaxerxes is identified as reigning some 50 years after the time of the completion of the temple. Joseph Blenkinsop argues that the point of mentioning him here is merely to round out the Aramaic narrative.

The author was not unaware of the chronology. Rather, Artaxerxes is mentioned because he acts decisively in support of the temple and its worship, as we see in the chapter that follows, establishing it.

[10 : 27] Steinman argues that he was included for rhetorical effect. He writes, First, Artaxerxes had stopped the work on the house of God in Jerusalem by stopping the work on the wall, in chapter 4, verse 24. Second, God had decreed that the work on the house of God should be completed, chapter 6, verse 14. Third, Artaxerxes is the only one in the list in Ezra, chapter 6, verse 14, who is called King, singular, of Persia, which renders him the greatest honour, as if he is the greatest of the Persian kings. Fourth, the authors of the Aramaic report, were urging that Artaxerxes would, like his noble predecessors, honour the singular and consistent decree of Persian kings to complete the house, thereby aligning himself with both God and his illustrious predecessors, chapter 6, verse 14. Thus, the purpose of including the correspondence between Tatanai and Darius and its results in the Aramaic report was to demonstrate that Jerusalem was no longer the rebellious city portrayed in the correspondence between Reham and Artaxerxes, but was now the obedient, pious, and industrious city of the men who carried out the order of

Cyrus and Darius. They were obeying both God and the king. This is part of the larger theological message of Ezra, chapter 3, verse 6. Most importantly here, it is the decree of the Lord that is the primary decree mentioned. The Lord is the one who stirs up all of the other parties involved.

Without his instigation, no one else would have acted. The temple was completed around 70 years after the first temple had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, likely on March 12, 515 BC.

The completion is around three and a half years after the time of Haggai's prophecy. The dedication of the temple is then completed, although it pales in comparison with the dedication of Solomon's temple, described in 1 Kings, chapter 8, verse 63. Solomon offered as peace offerings to the Lord 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep. So the king and all the people of Israel dedicated the house of the Lord. Hezekiah and Josiah's contributions of animals in 2 Chronicles, chapter 30, verse 24, and chapter 35, verse 7, also dwarfed those given here. They also established the priests and the Levites in their proper appointed offices, according to the law of Moses. Perhaps a particularly interesting detail here is that they offer for all Israel 12 male goats. As Thomas notes, this evidences their continued sense of themselves as the 12 tribes, even after the loss of the northern kingdom and the fact that the remnant was largely from Judah, Benjamin and the Levites. They still retain a strong sense of themselves as 12. The Aramaic section ends at this point. Steinman argues that this should be understood as Nehemiah's report to King Artaxerxes, seeking his support to rebuild the wall. However, the report also shows the purpose and sovereign activity of God behind all else, even the actions of kings. Everything culminates in a joyous celebration of the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The author of this section is likely different from that of the Aramaic section, and not merely on account of the language change. The month, as Steinman notes, is here referred to by its number rather than by its name, as in the Aramaic section. Special celebrations of the Passover occurred at various pivotal moments in Israel's history, such as the time of their departure from Egypt, their first entry into the land, and the two great covenant renewal Passovers of King Hezekiah and King Jeziel. All of these Passovers recalled that original deliverance from Egypt, aptly having experienced a sort of a new exodus, being brought out of the land of their exile and re-established in the promised land. They celebrate another great Passover here.

This Passover then is one of the great Passovers. It's a time of re-consecration, of a renewal of covenant. It's a huge milestone in their re-entry into the land, as the temple is finally completed.

[14 : 31] Surprisingly, verse 22 speaks of the Lord turning the heart of the king of Assyria to them. The great empire of Assyria had fallen to the Babylonians almost 100 years previously, and then Babylonia's own empire had fallen to the Medes and the Persians. Perhaps the point here is that the Persian empire is the heir of what once belonged to the Assyrian empire, and the reference to them also recalls the history of Israel and of Judas suffering at the hand of the Assyrians and the Babylonians, the two great empires that the Lord had raised up against them.

A question to consider. Verse 22 speaks of the Lord turning the heart of the king of Assyria to them. What are other examples in scripture of the Lord acting in the hearts of pagan kings to establish his purposes for his people?