

Ezra 5-8

Lesson 2 Fall 2013 Series 5

5:1-6 In chapter 4 the Judahites had refused the assistance offered by neighboring people. Those people then sent documents to the imperial court with the result that an imperial decree was issued stopping the work on the temple. As we come to chapter 5 this is the state of affairs with hostile attitudes continuing to rise between the groups. The separation in time represented by these events will be rendered ambiguous and the episode recounted starting in chapter 5 will be made to provide a smooth transition to the sequel. Two new figures suddenly emerge on the scene, and it as if the stop work edict from chapter 4 never occurred.¹ It is important to recognize that the emphasis of this writing is upon the action of God rather than upon human history. Human history only seems important to Ezra as it reflects the hand of God at work. Today, we often ask questions of

¹ Gordon F. Davies, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, in the Berit Olam series (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press,

the text that it was not written to answer. They were not interested in time sequence. They are interested in showing the power of God at work even in the edicts and actions of foreign kings. God is the God of heaven and earth, not just of Israel.

The first two years of Darius's reign were years marked by widespread political upheaval, as are testified to by his own Behistun Inscription.²



² H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, in the Word Biblical Commentary series, vol. 16 (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 1985), pp. 75-76.

We are here introduced to two prophets that are familiar to us as we have their writings as well, Haggai and Zechariah. Some have seen this prophesy as a response to the stoppage of the work of 4:24,³ while others just seem to largely ignore the stoppage order altogether.⁴ Myers give as an explanation for the stoppage, and the interval, the idea that of course the worked stopped because of the resistance of the people of the land and chapter 5 represents the resumption and the continuation of that work.⁵

With Haggai and Zechariah on the scene the work of the temple continues as previously decreed, but at verse 3 there come questions from Tattenai, who is the official governor of the province, he questions the authority of the Jews for the construction. He also asks for the names of those undertaking the work. This opens the opportunity for Ezra to interject the statement that “the eye of their God

³ R. J. Coggins, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, in The Cambridge Bible Commentary series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 32.

⁴ H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, pp. 75-76. Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries series, vol. 12 (Downers Grove IL: IVP Academic, 2009), p. 59. Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, in the Concordia Commentary series (Saint Louis MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), p. 261. Gordon F. Davies, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, pp. 29-30.

⁵ Jacob M. Myers, *Ezra • Nehemiah*, in the Anchor Bible series, vol. 14 (New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. 43.

was upon the elders of the Jews.” As a consequence of the “eye of God” being upon them we are told that they did not stop in their work, even while a report was sent on to Darius and a reply returned. We are then given an account that purports to be a copy of the official letter sent from Tattenai to Darius.

5:6-17 – Ezra introduces the letter reporting the state of affairs in Jerusalem back to Darius. The first part of the letter contains the report of Tattenai regarding his inspection of the work going on in Jerusalem. Starting at verse 9 the two lines of enquiry pursued by Tattenai are expounded. He enquires regarding the authorization for the work and for their names. Their reply is reported starting at verse 11 with the leaders in Jerusalem taking the opportunity in the preamble to indicate that they are “slaves” (עֲבָדֵינוּ) “of the God of heaven and earth”. This represents an appeal on their part to the highest level of authority, while at the same time paying homage to the king. This will also acknowledge the original decree in which

Cyrus acknowledged Yahweh and the fact that Yahweh had granted Cyrus power and authority over his kingdom.⁶

The Jews also seem to take delight in reminding them of a great king which had once lived in Jerusalem. It is not clear if they remind Darius of this because they longed for this time or perhaps as an indication that the God who had made the king great is still alive and well and it is his temple that they build. Just in case there is any thought that somehow this God is not so great because of what had happened to the people of Jerusalem they confess the sins of their ancestors as the reason for their captivity. Once again they relate their answer very much to the authority and power of the God who they serve. This sin also accounts for the destruction of the house that they are now rebuilding (verse 12).

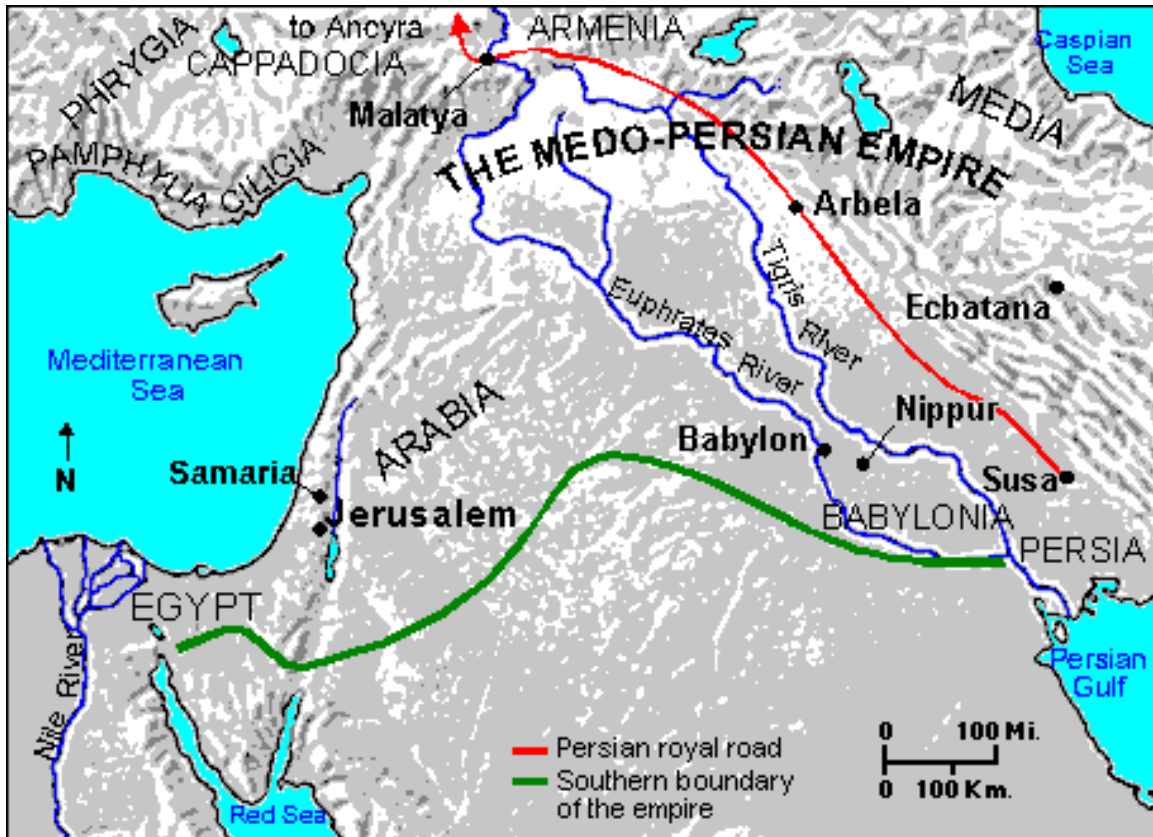
Finally, (verse 13) they turn to the earthly mandate for rebuilding the temple, which is very much placed under the authority of God as the source for the action of Cyrus. In addition, the gold and silver vessels were given by Cyrus in

⁶ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, pp. 264-265.

order for them to be returned to the temple that was to be built (verses 14-15). The temple has been under construction since the time of Cyrus: Despite the fact that little progress has been made since that time. Finally, they call for a search to be made of the archives to find the decree made by Cyrus and they request for him to let them know how they are to proceed.

6:1-12 – With this chapter we will come to the end of one era in the history of Israel and begin a new one. The twenty or so years of the return will come to a conclusion along with the age of Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the new age of Ezra and Nehemiah will begin with all the reforms that they will bring. The vast distances of the Persian empire and the great delays that are necessary to transmit information across that vastness are reflected in this chapter. An enquiry was initiated in Palestine, referred to Babylon, and eventually answered with a records request from the distant Ecbatana.⁷

⁷ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, pp. 62-63.



The record from Ecbatana was found to be very detailed not only regarding the date and origin of the decree but also with regard to size and construction of the structure. It indicates that this construction is to be paid for from the royal treasury (verse 4). It even mentions the restoration of the vessels from the first temple that was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. Everything that the Jews said was in the decree of Cyrus is confirmed to be true by consulting a document some eight hundred miles away.

As a result of the finding of the document at Ecbatana from Cyrus, Darius transfers authority for the project to the Elders in Jerusalem and tells Tattenai to keep his hands off. He does not stop here though; he orders the costs to be paid from the royal revenue (verse 8), in full, and without delay. He even tells them to supply burnt offerings for the temple sacrifices. He is wanting for them to offer prayers on behalf of him, and his dynasty (verse 10). He does not stop here as if he is somewhat annoyed that a decree made so long ago has not been fully executed he calls for the punishment by death, being impaled on a beam for anyone who stands in the way of this edict being implemented and the house of that person to be made into a dunghill. Such curses were a common feature of royal decrees.⁸

6:13-18 – The account of the building of the temple moves very quickly as Tattenai and Shethar-bozenai followed the instructions from King Darius diligently. Because of this edict from the king an era of prosperity is ushered in for the Elders of the Jews, but it is noteworthy

⁸ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, pp. 268-269.

here that credit for this prosperity is not ascribed to King Darius, but it is indicated that it is the result of the prophesying of the two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah son of Iddo. This then leads us on to primary cause of the completion of the temple, (verse 14) “the command of God” and the secondary cause was the decree (singular) of the Persian rulers Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes. The use of the singular emphasizes that God, was the unseen agent here whose sovereignty resulted in the edicts of the different Persian kings, all of whom sanctioned in a sense the decree that originated with God for the rebuilding of the temple.⁹

It is once again here that we encounter a problem with time sequence. Because the temple was finished in the reign of Darius there has been a great deal of discussion as to why Artaxerxes is included in this list, since he came to the throne some 50 years after the completion of the temple. There are a variety of theories as to why he is included, but it must be remembered that this verse is part of a larger archival report (Ezra 4:8-6:18) and it seems

⁹ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, pp. 269-270.

evident that the document is designed to persuade Artaxerxes to allow the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem. If this is the case then Artaxerxes' name is included for rhetorical effect:

1. Artaxerxes had stopped the work on the temple in Jerusalem according to Ezra 4:24.
2. God had made the decree that the temple should be rebuilt (Ezra 6:14).
3. Artaxerxes is the only one in the list in 6:14 who is given the title king, singular, of Persia. This gives him singular honor as the greatest of the Persian kings. A little bit of flattery going on here.
4. The authors of the Aramaic report were urging Artaxerxes to follow in the footsteps of his noble predecessors and issue a decree that would allow completion of the temple in the sense of

allowing the wall to Jerusalem to be
rebuilt.¹⁰

The wall in a sense was a part of the temple in the sense of protection and status.

The purpose for including the correspondence between Tattenai and Darius (5:7b-6:12) and the results of that correspondence (6:13-18) was to demonstrate that Jerusalem was no longer the rebellious city as portrayed by their enemies (4:9-22). They were now an obedient pious people living in that city who were obediently carrying out the orders of Cyrus and Darius. They obeyed God and the king. This is a central tenant of the message of Ezra. The temple was completed March 12, 515 BC according to Ezra, or on the April 1, 515 BC according to 1 Esdras 7:5. Either way the temple was completed just four and a half years after the prophecy of Haggai (cf. Haggai 1:1-11).¹¹

It should be noted that this is seen as a great victory for God and his people and they celebrate that victory glorifying God. A reflection of their acknowledgement of the

¹⁰ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, pp. 269-270.

¹¹ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 270.

source of this victory is their obedience to God in the observance of the ordinances of the priests and Levites in their courses as it is written in the book of Moses.

6:19-22 – The feast of Passover comes only a few days after the dedication of the temple. The text here returns to Hebrew, only returning to Aramaic for the letter of Artaxerxes in 7:12-26.¹² The emphasis on the purity of the people as an action related to obedience to God is important here. It is also to be noted that the exclusivity that was seen earlier when the people of the land asked to help rebuild the temple here is set in a different light as they accept the inhabitants of the land (vs. 21) who had “joined them and separated themselves from the pollutions of the nations of the land to worship Yahweh, the God of Israel.” They are open to fellowship with their neighbors if, and when, they express obedience and faithfulness to Yahweh. This is a major theme of the Book of Ezra.

They celebrate this festival with joy and they assert that the source of this joy is Yahweh. They also proclaim

¹² Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 68.

their belief that God had turned the heart of the king to them. They credit God with this favorable assistance and the attitude of the king. There is however a surprise here as the king is described as the king of Assyria (אַשּׁוּר). This reading also occurs in the early Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (Septuagint Ἀσσοῦρ) so if this was a copyist's error it was very early. It is instead likely an effort to bring to mind this traditional enemy of the Jewish people and to reflect that God has now transformed this enemy into an advocate through his great power.¹³ This enemy now aids them as an advocate: as the king who conquered and thus inherited the throne of Assyria through its conquest by Babylon and now the Persians is now shown to be subject to God's power.

7:1-10 – This section finally, in the reign of Artaxerxes, brings us to the introduction of Ezra as “a scribe skilled in the law of Moses”. Which Artaxerxes is intended here is not specified and there is uncertainty regarding exactly which one. It is generally assumed that the

¹³ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 68.

Artaxerxes here is the first king bearing that name (465-424 BC). The actual date of Ezra's arrival would naturally affect somewhat the interpretation, of the context, of the work undertaken by Ezra. Ezra was both a priest and a scribe and as such he was reckoned as being part of the Aaron-Zadokite line (7:2). It is likely that this narrative should be dated 57 years after the Passover celebration of Ezra 6:19, which was April 21, 515 BC. The date here would then be April 8, 458 BC.¹⁴

Ezra was powerful, according to his words here (7:6), because "the hand of Yahweh his God was upon him." Once again the theme focuses upon the fact that Yahweh is the source of the grace granted to the Jewish people, in this instance through Ezra. Ezra did not go to Israel alone, but returned with additional priests, gatekeepers, and temple servants. The grace of God comes to Ezra as he sought the "Teaching of Yahweh" and through his faithful response to those teachings. "To seek God" is a technical idiom during this period when speaking of a diligent worshipper and

¹⁴ Jacob M. Myers, *Ezra • Nehemiah*, pp. 59-60.

follower of Yahweh. Ezra is unique in the fact that he is described also as being diligent in these things as a man who seeks God where he reveals himself, in the Holy Scriptures.¹⁵ This is the place to find God.

7:11-26 – The letter here, like the others in the Book of Ezra is written in Aramaic, the language of official correspondence in the Persian Empire. This letter authorized Ezra, and all who wished to go with him to return to Jerusalem in order to insure proper observance of the Law.¹⁶ Ezra was sent in order to make inquiries about Judah and Jerusalem, using the Law, which he has in his hand. He takes a copy of the Law with him to Jerusalem. He was also to convey silver and gold that was offered by the king and his counselors to the “God of Israel.” It is important to note homage being paid here to the God of Israel by this foreign king. This indicates the power and the favor of God. God is in control of even the heart and actions of this foreign king and when his people are faithful that is reflected in God’s intervention for his people.

¹⁵ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 279.

¹⁶ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 71.

This gold is to be used to buy sacrifices (verse 17) to be offered on the altar of the temple of Jerusalem. This favor even goes so far as to give leave for any money that is left over to be used as appropriate to the “will of God.” He is given vessels for the temple and he is also given a stipend from the Kings treasury. This is all seen as a representation of the mighty power of God. Today we might describe this as a miracle. The details are given in order to express the magnitude of this miracle. They are also given tax-exempt status for those that serve in the temple (verse 24):

Something that surely stands behind the tax-exempt status given to churches today. Finally, Ezra is given the power to set up judges, that would judge according to the laws of Israel and he is given the power of life and death over those of the land.

7:27-28 – These two verses represent a blessing to Yahweh who they credit with all of these wonderful things. He ascribes his courage to Yahweh and any success to Yahweh. It is interesting to note his success is not ascribed to a political action committee, donation of funds to

politicians or any other means. He glorifies God for these things as an act of grace and power. Surely there are lessons for us to learn from this today, because these people were a captive and punished people who now saw their lot changed by God's grace and rather than taking it for granted they glorified God. This is the response of a humble and Godly leader.

8:1-14 – We are now given a list of those who went up with Ezra from Babylonia.

8:15-20 – Ezra begins his account of the gathering of the people for the return journey with an encampment by the Ahava River, which was likely a canal that used the Euphrates as a source of water. It was during the time at this encampment that Ezra found that no Levites were there (15). This delays the departure as he cannot fulfill his mission without them. In nine days the Levites are recruited and the journey begins.¹⁷

8:21-23 - Ezra proclaims a fast by the river before the journey begins in order to seek from God a safe journey on

¹⁷ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, pp. 311-312.

the trip. He was ashamed to ask for guards from the king since they had convinced the king of the power of God and the fact that his hand is against those that forsake him.

They fasted and petitioned God and he listened to them and provided them with safe passage.

8:24-30 – This section notes the meticulous attention to detail undertaken by Ezra to fulfill his mandate. This also testifies as to why Artaxerxes had placed so much confidence in Ezra in the first place. Everything was done to insure that nothing is lost or goes missing along the way. He proclaims to those that he entrusts with the valuables that the mission they are undertaking is one that is one that makes them “holy to Yahweh”. The intent is to weigh out the offerings in the presence of the heads of families in Israel. It has been said that administration is not something that God values, but that certainly does not seem to be the message of Ezra.

8:31-36 – These verses recount the beginning of their journey and the fact that the hand of God was upon them delivering them from all the dangers along the way, even

with the great valuables that they were transporting. The vessels were delivered to the temple into the hands of the priests and Levites and everything was carefully recorded. They take great care in this work because it is the Lord's work that they do. They offered sacrifices and they delivered the king's orders to the government officials in Israel who supported the people and the house of God. This part of their mission is now completed.

Synopsis

This section introduces us to a number of new character such as the Prophets Haggai and Zechariah whose prophecy will be instrumental in spurring the Israelites onward to complete the rebuilding of the temple. In this section we are walked through some elements of the official red tape of the Persian Empire as the governor of the region of the province where Jerusalem was challenges their authority to build the temple and in a rather menacing fashion takes their names in order to report and enquire of the king regarding their activities.

This sets the stage not only to recount once again the miraculous activity of God starting with Cyrus, but also affords an opportunity to have a new round of such activity in the decree Darius. The words of the Jews are shown to be accurate in their account of the decree under Cyrus and a fresh decree is made under Darius that will lead to prosperity, honor and to the temple being completed without any further interference. The people of Jerusalem

celebrate the completion of the temple and then the Passover. They demonstrate an evangelistic fervor in drawing their neighbors into obedience and purity before God and their worship of God through these actions.

In chapter 7 we are finally introduced to our author who will be sent to Jerusalem to continue the reforms and take them far beyond what had initially taken place. He will also go with the favor of the king of Persia and with his blessing. All of the accomplishments here are ascribed to God and another letter is sent this time from King Artaxerxes outlining the tremendous power and authority given to Ezra for the administration of the temple but also for the administration of the country under Jewish law.

The protection of God is a central theme in chapter 8 and this is petitioned through prayer and fasting. Great gifts of tremendous value are transported safely without the king's protection under the protection of God. These gifts are delivered to Jerusalem and the tremendous administrative skills of Ezra are demonstrated. All of the details given here are given in order to ascribe glory to God

and show the way that the people sought and acquired the favor of God. This was done in humility, acknowledging God, in purity and in the Law Moses, through study and putting that law into action through obedience.

Main Points

1. God is in control of even foreign kings and kingdoms.
2. Recognition of the hand of God at work is important.
3. Obedience and obeisance to God are critical.
4. God is found in the scriptures.

Questions

1. What is the role of prophecy among God's people?
2. How can we walk in the favor of God?
3. What is God's role in the world governments?
4. Is respecting others in positions of power against the will of God?
5. Why do you think we are given all of the detail that you find in Ezra?
6. Do you think God cares about good stewardship?
Why or why not?
7. Why do you think building the temple was important?
8. Why is purity important to God?
9. Why is obedience important to God?
10. Where do you seek protection when you feel threatened? Why?
11. What do the gifts from the kings of Persia show to us in these chapters?