

Dr. Tiberius Rata, Ezra-Nehemiah,

Session 3, Ezra 5-6

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Let's open your Bibles again to Ezra chapter five. You remember chapter four ended with opposition to the temple being rebuilt and that was successful. They were successful for 16 years. So, after 16 years of reconstruction the work became at a standstill and then you have the project being resumed.

The rebuilding is going to be challenged, and again, we will see that there will be reconstruction. So, the first verses of chapter five talk about the prophets Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them. Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozedak arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and the prophets of God were with them supporting them.

So again, after 16 years of reconstruction the work is a standstill, but it is the word of the Lord that jump-starts the process. Again, the prophetic office did not die during the Babylonian exile, and the prophets did not become extinct. Remember, the prophets were intermediaries between God and people, and the Bible tells us here about Haggai and Zechariah.

We call these post-exilic prophets. You have pre-exilic prophets, exilic prophets and post-exilic prophets and Haggai and Zechariah are post-exilic prophets and they both write about the need to rebuild and Haggai focuses on the rebuilding of the temple while Zechariah focuses on God's sovereignty. Both Haggai and Zechariah speak in the name of the God of Israel and again who was over them and again talks about God's sovereignty.

God is in control and Zerubbabel who is identified as one of the governors of Judah plays an important role with Ezra and Nehemiah in being the leaders. We see that in Haggai 1.1 some people assume that Zerubbabel is not mentioned again because either he's removed from office or he dies, but again we do not know why. But we know that under his leadership the temple building is resumed, but again not everybody is happy.

The rebuilding is challenged again, starting in verse 3. At the same time, Tattenai, the governor of the province Beyond the River, and Shethar-bozenai and their associates came to them and spoke to them thus: "Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish the 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 until the report should reach Darius and then an answer be returned by letter concerning it.

So Tattenai appears as governor of the river across the river. There is a document, a Babylonian document that dates back to June 5th 502 BC where the name of Tath and I actually appears.

He is the representative of the Persian Empire and again, he wanted to make sure like his predecessors that these Jews are not rebelling against the king, but unlike previous times the work doesn't stop. The Jews continue working even though there is opposition, and again the, the expression here is beautiful. The eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews.

Again, it's a figure of speech when something is under the eye of God, which means God watches over it. God is in control. God gives people success.

God gives people protection and providence. So, the Jews don't stop even though there's opposition. So, then the rebuilding is again goes all the way up to the king.

Again, there's the letter being sent to the king, in this case Darius. "This is a copy of the letter that Tattenai, the governor of the province Beyond the River and Shethar-bozenai and his associates, the governors were in the province Beyond the River sent 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 those to them and spoke to them thus: 'Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish the structure?' We also asked their names for your information that we might write down the name of their leaders.

So, Tattenai and the other officials were what some scholars call imperial troubleshooters armed with powers of punishment. Remember, whenever you read Beyond the River, it talks about beyond the river of Euphrates, and that's referred to the land of Israel by the Persians. And this letter talks about not just what they say to the king, but what the Israelites replied verses 11 and 12.

This was the reply to us. We are servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding a house that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished. But because our fathers have 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 Babylon.

So, the leaders of the Jews need to give basically Darius a short history lesson of why they are in the predicament they are. But also, he reminds them of the king of the Cyrus edict starting in verse 13. 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 named Sheshbazzar, whom he had made the 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." So again, you have to remember the context again.

It's 539 years since Cyrus gives the king the edict, but now there's a new king, Darius, again. This is about around 520 BC. It's later and now Cyrus is no longer in power.

Now you have Darius. So, Darius is reminded of all this history lesson. And again, the letter ends, "Therefore if it seems good to the king let search be made in the royal archives there is in Babylon to see whether a decree was issued by Cyrus the king for the rebuilding of this house of God in Jerusalem and let the king send us his pleasure in this in this matter."

It's very interesting to see how history is not known by the previous king, by the kings. So, they have to be reminded about what happened just 20 years or so before. So, a period of 16 years have passed between the original attempt to rebuild in 536 and the resumption of the work on Darius in 520.

You remember that time frame. But since there was a regime change, Darius is asked to check the historical documents, and again, we see God at work. In chapter 6, God moves the heart of the king again.

Just like God moved the heart of Cyrus, now God moves in the heart of Darius. And we'll see that God's house will be completed, and he will be dedicated, and the people will celebrate. So first, we see God moving in the heart of Darius the king.

Chapter 6 starts with "Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in Babylonia, in the house of the archives," and again he found the record that talked about Cyrus the king issuing the decree. So, verse 7 he says, he sends a letter back to Titania and says let the work of this house of God alone. Let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild the house of God on its site.

Moreover, I make a decree regarding what you shall do for these elders of the Jews for rebuilding of this house of God. Not only will you let him rebuild the cost is to be paid to these men in full and without delay from the royal revenue the tribute of the prophets 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 priests of the Jerusalem require.

Let that be given to them day by day without fail that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to God of heaven and pray for the life of the king and his sons. Isn't that beautiful? That what the enemy wanted to use against the people of God. Now God moves in the heart of the king and not only allows for the work to be continued, but he gives money for the treasury from the treasury to happen.

Also verse 11, I make a decree that if anyone alters this edict a beam shall be pulled out of his house and shall be impelled on it and his house shall be made a dung hill. 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 dare you make a decree let it be done with all diligence.

It's beautiful work of God that uses a foreign king, a pagan king to accomplish his purposes, not just to rebuild but to pay for the rebuilding of this. Again, this was not something unique that the Persian kings were doing for just the Jews. They were doing that with other nations because they were very, very tolerant and because of this the work is completed.

Remember 587 minus 70, 517. Finally the restoration is complete. The return is complete because God's house is completed.

Starting in verse 13. "Then according to the word sent by Darius the king, Tattenai the governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai 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 Iddo."

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.

Again, when you look at the calendar, it's 517, 516 BC around February or March. And the sovereignty and providence of God clearly seen. When God uses a pagan king, a pagan administration to accomplish his purposes.

Artaxerxes is mentioned here. He will appear again much later 465, 424 BC. But Cyrus, Darius, Artaxerxes, they're both used by God to accomplish his purposes, to accomplish the rebuild, the return, the rebuilding of the altar, the rebuilding of the of the temple.

And because they rebuild the house they have to dedicate it. And that's what we have in verses 16 to 18. And the people of Israel the priests and the Levites, and the rest returned exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy."

Again, the joy motif. "They offered at the dedication of this house of God." Think about how big this party was.

"100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel, 12 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.

Wow. You remember, in the Old Testament where you have something very similar to this at a much smaller scale, but it's a dedication of the temple of Solomon. You had a lot of these sacrifices being given.

But now, at a much smaller scale, the dedication of what we call now the second temple period. And again, you see that all this is done for the service of God, and it is done with joy. So, what do you do? When you come back to the land, you rebuild the altar, and you build the temple, you start keeping the feasts.

Something that they were not necessarily always keeping in the exilic period. So now they also keep the Passover. And again, you see again the parallel to the book of Exodus.

Because it is the book of Exodus in chapter 12 that you had the Passover that God commanded for the Israelites to keep, but now starting in verse 19, on the 14th day of the first month the returned exiles kept the Passover. For the priests and Levites had purified themselves together.

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." It was very fitting that he's celebrating the Passover because he remembered the parallel to the book of Exodus.

The Passover was a celebration of deliverance from the Egyptian slavery. And now they're celebrating again the fact that they're back in the promised land. During the monarchy period the Passover was many times neglected.

During the exile, obviously, we don't know for sure how many times they could have observed it. But now we know that they are celebrating it again. Just like God moved in the house of Cyrus, God moved in the house of Darius.

Now, the people celebrate the Passover, and they are reminded of God's faithfulness to be with them. They are rejoicing about all that God is doing.

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