



Ezra - Chapter Five

II Ezra 3:1-6:22 - The Returned Exiles Rebuild the Temple on Its Original Site (continues)

Summary of Chapter Five

Haggai and Zechariah prophesied that God wanted them to rebuild the temple and so work recommenced. The governor of the whole region came to enquire as to why they had resumed work, who had authorised it and what the names of the leaders were. The Jews simply replied they were fulfilling the will of God, providing details of the original authority from Cyrus.

The governor then wrote a letter to the King of Persia citing what had happened and asking him to check the Jew's account with the archives, expecting him to find that their account was either true or false and issuing a decree for them to continue or forbid them from building the temple. The governor wanted to ensure that the correct procedures were being followed in this part of his province.

II.c. Ezra 5:1-17 - Restoration of the Temple Resumed

Refer to the chapter summary above.

¹ Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah 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. ² Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua son of Jozadak set out to rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem; and with them were the prophets of God, helping them.

Ezra 5:1-2

The prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, are also known from their books, which contain prophecies made in the second year of King Darius, 520 BC; refer to Ezra

6:14, Haggai 1:1 and 2:1, and Zechariah 1:1 and 1:7. Haggai proclaims that the people were in trouble because they had lost sight of their top priority of rebuilding the temple: *<<Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your panelled houses, while this house lies in ruins? Now therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider how you have fared. You have sown much, and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and you that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes>>* (Haggai 1:4-6). Verses 1-2 bring out the connection between the prophetic work and the renewed action, following the discouragement recorded in Ezra 4:4-5 and 4:24.

The two prophets who now proclaimed their message in Jerusalem appeared at a time of deep depression. They were not borne on the crest of a wave or a religious revival, but as its spokesmen to give it utterance.

The words of the prophet Haggai to the community of returned exiles are found in the OT book that bears his name. The heart of his prophecy is communicated in Haggai 1:2-10, where the prophet rebuked the people for their attitude towards the building of the temple. They said, “The time has not come, the time that the Lord’s house should be built.” In saying this, the people made their excuse sound spiritual. They could not speak against the idea of building the temple, so they spoke against its timing. “It is not God’s timing to rebuild the temple.” Therefore, the prophet rebuked them with pointed words: *<<Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your panelled houses, while this house lies in ruins?>>*. The problem was simply wrongly ordered priorities. They were content to let the cause of the Lord suffer at the expense of their comfort. Instead, they should have felt no rest until the work of God was as prosperous as their personal lives, and been as willing to sacrifice for work of God as they were for their personal comfort and luxury. Then God spoke to the people through the prophet: *<<Consider how you have fared. Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honoured>>*. God called them to work. Sometimes God’s cause needs work, work that is supported by prayer, not work that is neglected because of pretended ‘spiritual’ service. The people had allowed a delay beyond their control to become a delay of their own choosing.

Zechariah’s prophecy is also recorded. Haggai’s prophecy was a more direct encouragement to get on with the work of building the temple; Zechariah’s prophecy was more directed to the spiritual condition of the returned exiles. The name Zechariah means ‘The Lord Remembers,’ and is a fitting name for a prophet of restoration. This prophet was called to encourage and mobilise God’s people to accomplish a task that they began yet lost momentum in completing. He encouraged them indirectly by telling them about God’s care for them and by keeping the presence of the Messiah very much in their minds. He worked with others, notably Haggai, Zerubbabel, and Ezra. He warned them

of the consequences of neglecting God's work and he emphasised that God wants to work through his people.

If only the words of Haggai existed, the reader might conclude that all God was really interested in was the temple. Zechariah gives the rest of the story, and shows how God is interested in lives, not only buildings.

In beginning again, Zerubbabel and Jeshua are simply re-implementing Cyrus' decree, recognising it as the will and purpose of God.

And with them were the prophets of God, helping them. The work of these prophets was effective, and helped the people properly reorder their priorities and to resume the building work on the temple. i.e. set out to rebuild the house of God. This verse also indicates that their work went beyond the directly prophetic, and that they took a hand in helping with the practical work of building.

King Darius I of Persia came to the throne in a time of conflict and struggle. Therefore the Jews in Jerusalem started their work without receiving any permission from him, and they did this when he was far too busy fighting for his throne to attend to the troubles of a small, distant city.

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 this structure?' ⁴ They also asked them this: 'What are the names of the men who are building this building?' ⁵ But the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until a report reached Darius and then answer was returned by letter in reply to it.

Ezra 5:3-5

Tattenai the governor of the province Beyond the River was the man appointed by the King of Persia to govern the province that included Judæa. He and his companions wanted to know why the work of building both the temple and the wall had resumed.

The officials Tattenai and Shethar-bozenai are much more neutral than the officials named in Ezra 4:8-10. Clearly they have no knowledge of Cyrus' decree, no doubt because the work had long stopped, and they presumably were appointed to their roles only after the exiles had arrived. They are interested only in the proper authorisation of this important project that was happening under their jurisdiction, without having submitted to them for the equivalent of planning permission, and they do not actually interfere with the work's progress. God's blessing was upon them, so that the work - resumed under a response to the

prophets of God - did not have to stop almost as soon as it started. The work continued, and this blessing was a confirmation of God's hand on his prophets. The author knows that a higher authority, the eye of their God, was watching over the builders' activity and that God was protecting them: <<*I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me. Then they said, 'Let us start building!' So they committed themselves to the common good*>> (Nehemiah 2:18), <<*Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love*>> (Psalm 33:18), and: <<*You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice; your bodies shall flourish like the grass; and it shall be known that the hand of the Lord is with his servants, and his indignation is against his enemies*>> (Isaiah 66:14).

Tattenai seems much more reasonable than the Samaritans who had opposed the work some fifteen years previous to this. This shows that not all who oppose God's work do it out of premeditated evil; some do it out of custom and a sense of duty.

What are the names of the men who are building this building? There are no sinister reasons for asking for the names of the leaders of the work. These officials simply wanted to record the facts to send back to the king and his administrators. They were simply adhering to their accepted procedures.

Until a report reached Darius and then answer was returned by letter in reply to it. This was good for two reasons. First, the nature of bureaucracy and the slow communication system meant that the work could continue for some time after this meeting. Second, they could pray and trust that God would guide King Darius to a favourable decision.

⁶ The copy of the letter that Tattenai the governor of the province Beyond the River and Shethar-bozenai and his associates the envoys who were in the province Beyond the River sent to King Darius; ⁷ they sent him a report, in which was written as follows: 'To Darius the king, all peace!

Ezra 5:6-7

The copy of the letter has a formal opening similar to the one in Ezra 4:7-16. As a good administrator, Tattenai not only sent a letter to Darius, he also preserved a copy that made its way into Ezra's record.

⁸ May it be known to the king that we went to the province of Judah, to the house of the great God. It is being built of hewn stone, and timber is laid in the walls; this work is being done diligently and prospers in their hands.

Ezra 5:8

May it be known to the king. In this letter, Tattenai seems to fairly recount the situation from his perspective. Without prejudice or malice he factually explains the matter to King Darius.

The province of Judah lay within the Persian province Beyond the River, of which Tattenai was governor in Samaria. Texts from the reign of Darius I dating 520-519 BC name the local governor of the province 'Beyond the River' as Tattanu. The later is probably his Persian name and the former Aramaic or Hebrew.

The expression the house of the great God is a diplomatic way of referring to the temple and the God of Israel, and does not imply that the writers of the letter believed in or worshipped him.

The use of hewn stones and timber recalls the building of the first temple in 1 Kings 6:36 and 7:12, and was a common practice in the ancient Near East. The size of the stones may have concerned the governor. Were the Jews building a temple or a fortress for defence?

Courses of timber at intervals, between those of stone or brick, were quite a common constructional feature over a long period in the ancient Near East, and may have originated as a means of strengthening buildings against earthquakes, to which the region was prone: <<*The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of King Uzziah of Judah and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel, two years before the earthquake*>> (Amos 1:1), <<*And you shall flee by the valley of the Lord's mountain, for the valley between the mountains shall reach to Azal; and you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of King Uzziah of Judah. Then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him*>> (Zechariah 14:5).

⁹ Then we spoke to those elders and asked them, "Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?" ¹⁰ We also asked them their names, for your information, so that we might write down the names of the men at their head.

Ezra 5:9-10

Then we spoke to those elders. The officials' concern for administrative propriety is reflected in their inquiries about both the original authorisation and the names of those who are to be held responsible for the action being undertaken.

¹¹ 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. ¹² But because our

ancestors had angered the God of heaven, he gave them into the hand of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house and carried away the people to Babylonia.

Ezra 5:11-12

This was their reply to us. The letter now reports the reply of the Jewish leaders. Direct quotation was also a feature of known formal Persian letters. The letter writers probably got their information from the returned exiles themselves, since it reflects their understanding of the situation.

We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth. They do not hesitate to say that they are serving not a local deity but the one true God of the whole world. They give this answer instead of giving their individual names when asked (v.10). The great king of Israel is, of course, Solomon in this context.

But because our ancestors had angered the God of heaven. The leaders of the nation fully accepted that the fault lay with the people of God and not God himself or even the actions of the foreign nation that took them: <<*but they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord against his people became so great that there was no remedy*>> (2 Chronicles 36:16).

Verse 12 sums up the message of First and Second Kings.

¹³ However, King Cyrus of Babylon, in the first year of his reign, made a decree that this house of God should be rebuilt. ¹⁴ Moreover, the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem and had brought into the temple of Babylon, these King Cyrus took out of the temple of Babylon, and they were delivered to a man named Sheshbazzar, whom he had made governor. ¹⁵ He said to him, 'Take these vessels; go and put them in the temple in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be rebuilt on its site.'

Ezra 5:13-15

Cyrus the king made a decree. This is recorded in Ezra 1:1-4 and commented on there. Essentially, without such a decree, the Jews would not have been in Jerusalem at all.

Sheshbazzar was introduced as <<*the prince of Judah*>> in Ezra 1:8b, being the one who had received directly from King Cyrus the charge to rebuild the temple. Here he is called governor, a name applied to Tattenai himself in v.3; it seems that the term could be used somewhat loosely, since Judah would not have had a

‘governor’ on a par with the governor of the entire province Beyond the River. Darius’ reply also refers to <<*the governor of the Jews*>> (Ezra 6:7b), a name given to Zerubbabel in Haggai 1:1. The role seems more to have been that of a local city official who would have been subordinate to the regional governor, in theory at least.

These verses essentially repeat information found in Ezra 1:2-4. The report stops short of claiming that Cyrus had also commanded that the building be funded by donations from Babylon; refer to Ezra 1:4. This was perhaps more than Tattenai or even the exiles wished to urge at this point.

¹⁶ Then this Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem; and from that time until now it has been under construction, and it is not yet finished.” ¹⁷ And now, if it seems good to the king, have a search made in the royal archives there in Babylon, to see whether a decree was issued by King Cyrus for the rebuilding of this house of God in Jerusalem. Let the king send us his pleasure in this matter.’

Ezra 5:16-17

Then this Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem. This is further evidence that Sheshbazzar is actually the Persian name for Zerubbabel, and that Tattenai used this name because it would be more likely to appear in the official records that were to be searched.

From that time until now it has been under construction. The period when building had ceased was irrelevant both to the information Tattenai was giving and to the request he was making. The author therefore omits here the specific work of Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Haggai, and Zechariah, although their names were no doubt among those asked for by the governor, and sent with the letter (v.10). Tattenai, following the Jews’ own account, wants to make a link between the original authorisation and the present building activity, and so portrays Sheshbazzar as having laid the foundations of the temple, since it was done under his authority, although that achievement is attributed to the work initiated by Zerubbabel and Jeshua in Ezra 3:8-10. Again, this links Sheshbazzar and Zechariah.

If it seems good to the king, have a search made in the royal archives there in Babylon. Respectfully, Tattenai asked King Darius to research the matter, to determine if the rebuilding of temple and Jerusalem was royally sanctioned. He also wanted a formal reply so that he was sanctioned to carry out whatever actions were necessary, i.e. Let the king send us his pleasure in this matter.