



Ezra - Chapter Six

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

Summary of Chapter Six

A record of Cyrus' decree is discovered in the Persian archives, and King Darius confirms that the Jews are to be allowed to continue their work of rebuilding the Jerusalem temple. Moreover, he confirms that the cost of the work is to be borne out of the tax received from the province Beyond the River and not by the Jews themselves. In addition, the decree instructed the governor to supply all the animals and other provisions required for the various offerings at the temple. When the temple was completed there was a service of dedication and a great celebration. At the appropriate time the people celebrated Passover.

II.d Ezra 6:1-22 - King Darius Reaffirms Cyrus' Decree; the Work is Completed

Refer to the chapter summary above.

II.d.i Ezra 6:1-12 - The Decree of Darius

When the king received the letter from his governor in the province of Beyond the River he ordered that the archives be searched for any record of King Cyrus authorising the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. It was discovered in a provincial town archive and found to contain authorisation for the Jews to return and rebuild the temple at the cost of the Persian Empire. Darius honoured his predecessor's wishes and issued a further decree that the work should be continued and the cost borne from the provincial treasury.

¹ Then King Darius made a decree, and they searched the archives where the documents were stored in Babylon. ² But it was in Ecbatana,

the capital in the province of Media, that a scroll was found on which this was written: 'A record.

Ezra 6:1-2

Then King Darius made a decree. This was the response to the respectful request made by Tattenai, the governor of the province Beyond the River, described in the last part of Ezra Chapter 5.

They searched the archives where the documents were stored in Babylon. The search for Cyrus' decree is made first in Babylon, where Cyrus had declared himself king in 539 BC and where many exiled Jews lived. However, the scroll containing the record of the decree was found in Ecbatana, a summer residence of the Persian kings, where Cyrus may have gone soon after his triumph over Babylon.

Historic documents record the departure of Cyrus from Babylon in 538 BC but they do not state where he travelled to.

This indicates that there must have been some diligence required in the search. This in itself was an evidence of God's hand in the matter; otherwise, they might have easily given up the search. This request was initiated in Judæa, referred to as Babylon, and the answer was found in records from the remote city of Ecbatana, also known as Achmetha. All this gave the builders lots of time to continue their work, because they did not stop during the inquiry process: *<<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 5:5).

The province of Media was formerly the seat of an empire itself, but Cyrus had made it part of the Persian realm. Leather scrolls are known to have been used in Persia for official documents in Aramaic. Diodorus (2.32.4) declared that the Persians had royal parchments recording their history. Persian officials wrote on scrolls of papyrus and leather, as discoveries made in Egypt show.

The document now discovered is called a record and is apparently a memorandum concerning the decree rather than the decree itself, which would probably have been written on a clay tablet.

³ In the first year of his reign, King Cyrus issued a decree: Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the house be rebuilt, the place where sacrifices are offered and burnt-offerings are brought; its height shall be sixty cubits and its width sixty cubits, ⁴ with three courses of hewn stones and one course of timber; let the cost be paid from the royal treasury. ⁵ Moreover, let the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple in Jerusalem

and brought to Babylon, be restored and brought back to the temple in Jerusalem, each to its place; you shall put them in the house of God.'

Ezra 6:3-5

This record is not identical with the decree as recorded in Ezra 1:2-4. It makes new stipulations about the building, its location, its size, and its materials. This may be because a copy of the original decree had been found, and additional instructions may have been added to it for a particular recipient or destination. Moreover, different copies of Cyrus' original decree may have been made, varying in wording according to the purpose for each copy, e.g. the one in Ezra 1:2-4 included wording for public proclamation, while this version here was an official version for royal archives.

Its height shall be sixty cubits and its width sixty cubits. The size of the temple might be specified in order to limit it to a maximum, since public funds were being used to pay for it. The absence of a length dimension is odd, and the greater breadth than Solomon's temple is unexpected: <<*The house that King Solomon built for the Lord was sixty cubits long, twenty cubits wide, and thirty cubits high*>> (1 Kings 6:2), especially in view of: <<*But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy*>> (Ezra 3:12). Sixty cubits is approximately 90 ft or 27.4m.

The prescription of three courses of hewn stones and one course of timber exactly follows the construction of the older temple: <<*He built the inner court with three courses of dressed stone to one course of cedar beams*>> (1 Kings 6:36), and: <<*The great court had three courses of dressed stone to one layer of cedar beams all round; so had the inner court of the house of the Lord, and the vestibule of the house*>> (1 Kings 7:12), which was modelled after temples in other lands; refer to 1 Kings 5:1-12. The great stones which had excited suspicion were now found to be expressly authorised - for the term is the same as for the hewn stones of Ezra 5:8 - literally, stones for rolling, too massive to be transported by other means.

While the original decree had required people in Babylon to support the cost of the exiles' project: <<*and let all survivors, in whatever place they reside, be assisted by the people of their place with silver and gold, with goods and with animals, besides freewill-offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem*>> (Ezra 1:4), this record requires that the cost be solely met from the royal treasury.

Let the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, be restored and brought back to the temple in Jerusalem. Furthermore, Cyrus ordered that the spoils taken from the temple some two generations before must be returned to the Jerusalem temple. It was a remarkable example of God's providence that so many

of these gold and silver articles of the house of God still existed intact and that King Cyrus commanded them to be returned.

Some of the vessels had been used at a banquet given by King Belshazzar of Babylon: <<*Under the influence of the wine, Belshazzar commanded that they bring in the vessels of gold and silver that his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them. So they brought in the vessels of gold and silver that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. They drank the wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone*>> (Daniel 5:2-4). His actions cost him his kingdom and his life, yet the vessels were preserved.

⁶ ‘Now you, Tattenai, governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and you, their associates, the envoys in the province Beyond the River, keep away; ⁷ 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.

Ezra 6:6-7

Now you, Tattenai. King Darius now instructs Tattenai and his fellow officials to allow the work to continue.

Let the work on this house of God alone. Based on the search and recovery of the relevant document from King Cyrus, Darius made the appropriate command to Tattenai, governor of the region Beyond the River. Darius commanded him to allow the work on the temple and the city of Jerusalem to continue without interruption or interference.

The governor of the Jews refers to Zerubbabel: <<*In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest*>> (Haggai 1:1). Zerubbabel was probably the first governor, also known by his Assyrian or Persian name as Sheshbazzar.

Rebuild this house of God on its site. Darius recognised what the elders of the Jews recognised, that it was essential to build the temple upon its old foundations.

⁸ 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 people, in full and without delay, from the royal revenue, the tribute of the province Beyond the River. ⁹ Whatever is

needed – young bulls, rams, or sheep for burnt-offerings to the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, or oil, as the priests in Jerusalem require – let that be given to them day by day without fail,¹⁰ so that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king and his children.

Ezra 6:8-10

The cost is to be paid to these people, in full and without delay, from the royal revenue, the tribute of the province Beyond the River. Darius not only confirms Cyrus' decree but also provides for costs to be met from taxes raised in the province Beyond the River itself. He also provides for materials for sacrifice in perpetuity, with the political stipulation that the Jews pray for the life of the king and his children, showing that Darius' generosity was part of his policy to sustain Persian power.

This prayer request does not mean that Darius had become a true believer in the Creator God but that he did at least recognise him as of significant power and influence; a god that was worth praying to. So many people come close to salvation but never make that final step!

It was funded in an impressive manner: whatever is needed and let it be given to them day by day without fail mean that this was a substantial grant. In this, the wonderful hand of God is seen at work with the questions raised by Tattenai and Shethar-Bozenai in Ezra 5:3. The end result of these enquiries was to further the work of God instead of hindering it, as might have been the case in the natural world. This is an example of God working all things together for good for his people; refer to Romans 8:28.

¹¹ Furthermore, I decree that if anyone alters this edict, a beam shall be pulled out of the house of the perpetrator, who then shall be impaled on it. The house shall be made a dunghill. ¹² May the God who has established his name there overthrow any king or people that shall put forth a hand to alter this, or to destroy this house of God in Jerusalem. I, Darius, make a decree; let it be done with all diligence.'

Ezra 6:11-12

Darius makes in effect a further decree, backed up with a typical threatened sanction. He was careful to make the decree strong, with severe punishments against those who violated both the letter and the spirit of the decree. The final warning borrows language from the Jews' own way of speaking about God's presence in Jerusalem, i.e. the God who has established his name there: <<*But you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes as his habitation to put his name there*>> (Deuteronomy 12:5a), and:

<<Have regard to your servant's prayer and his plea, O Lord my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today; that your eyes may be open night and day towards this house, the place of which you said, "My name shall be there", that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays towards this place>> (1 Kings 8:28-29); Darius strikingly acknowledges the efficacy of the God of Jerusalem in his own place, although, like Cyrus in Ezra 1:3, he might not be claiming that there is only one true God.

A beam shall be pulled out of the house of the perpetrator, who then shall be impaled on it. There is some debate as to whether this punishment involved flogging a man at his own house, hanging him to death at his house, or impaling him at his house as an early form of crucifixion. Removing a main beam would also cause considerable and costly destruction of the building.

Let it be done with all diligence. At the end of it all, the king of the mightiest empire on the earth commanded that the temple be finished by the returned exiles and funded by the tax payers. This might seem absolutely unique, but there is good evidence that Persian monarchs had similar concern for the conquered temples in other regions of their empire. In 1973 French archæologists discovered at Xanthos in Lycia in south western Turkey a cult foundation charter - written in Greek, Lycian, and Aramaic - dated to 358 BC, a period when the area was controlled by a Persian satrap, that provided some striking parallels with the decree of Cyrus.

This is a powerful illustration of the principle from Proverbs: <<The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will>> (Proverbs 21:1).

II.d.ii Ezra 6:13-18 - Completion and Dedication of the Temple

The governor Tattenai obeys the dictates of the king and the work is allowed to continue. When it is completed, the temple is dedicated with great celebration.

¹³ Then, according to the word sent by King Darius, Tattenai, the governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their associates did with all diligence what King Darius had ordered.

Ezra 6:13

Tattenai and his fellow officials respond quickly to Darius' decree. The governor was an effective and efficient administrator, obeying the king's orders and doing so in a speedy manner. They were diligent in supporting and funding the work of rebuilding the temple, and were diligent in punishing anyone who opposed it.

The political motives for this forthrightness may have been many, including a desire to show respect for the policies of Cyrus and to promote stability in a

part of the empire which was important for communications with Egypt, at a time when widespread unrest had only recently been quelled.

¹⁴ So the elders of the Jews built and prospered, through the prophesying of the prophet Haggai and Zechariah son of Iddo. They finished their building by command of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus, Darius, and King Artaxerxes of Persia; ¹⁵ and this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.

Ezra 6:14-15

The elders of the Jews built and prospered. That is, they were successful in their building. Their success came through the prophesying of the prophet Haggai and Zechariah son of Iddo. The words and personal ministry of these postexilic prophets was an important component in the success of the work. The work and the workers were genuinely strengthened by the word of God through these prophets. This passage emphasises that God – here represented as speaking through his prophets – is the real influence behind events.

The initial ministry of these prophets is mentioned in Ezra 5:1-2. There, the prophets had to encourage the people of God to resume the work after a significant period of inactivity. Now they had to encourage them to keep working when God had opened the doors for the work to be done. Even with the open doors, the work was still difficult and needed prophetic encouragement. God's blessing on the work did not make the work easy to do.

The God of Israel has also given a decree that the work should proceed. But the actions of the kings of Persia on the Jews' behalf, in the decrees of Cyrus, Darius, and King Artaxerxes of Persia, are also acknowledged. The inclusion here of Artaxerxes, who ruled after the events of this chapter, anticipates his decree in support of Ezra's later mission; refer to Ezra 7:11-26 and the associated comments.

The mention of Artaxerxes, who belongs to the next century, takes the account forward to the restoration of the city walls by Nehemiah, which this king authorised. His name, as the third royal patron of Israel's rehabilitation, is added here to complete the picture, whether by the author or by an early scribe.

This house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius. This means that it took four years from the resumption of construction. It was such a big task that even with everyone participating in the work diligently it was not completed quickly.

The month of Adar corresponds to February/March and was the last month of the Jewish year, and the dedication of the temple falls fittingly in it, just before the celebrations of the New Year that would follow.

The sixth year of the reign of King Darius was 515 BC, almost exactly seventy years after the destruction of the first temple in 586 BC, thus fulfilling the prophecy of seventy years of exile, which is one way of reading Jeremiah 25:11-12 and 29:10. The date can also be counted from the first exile in 605 BC to the first return, variously dated from 538 BC to 535 BC.

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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.

Ezra 6:16-17

The people of Israel. Even though the returned exiles consisted of only three tribes (refer to the comment made on Ezra 1:5), they are taken to represent all twelve tribes, the number of the tribes of Israel. The other divisions, the priests and the Levites and the laity, are a typical way of describing the whole community in Ezra.

Celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy. There was a previous celebration, many years before at the founding of this second temple; refer to Ezra Chapter 3. This was the celebration for the finishing of a functioning temple. The dedication, Hebrew *hanukkah*, of the temple follows its completion, and is celebrated with lavish sacrifices, as Solomon's temple had been: <<***Then the king, and all Israel with him, offered sacrifice before the Lord. Solomon offered as sacrifices of well-being to the Lord twenty-two thousand oxen and one hundred and twenty thousand sheep. So the king and all the people of Israel dedicated the house of the Lord. The same day the king consecrated the middle of the court that was in front of the house of the Lord; for there he offered the burnt-offerings and the grain-offerings and the fat pieces of the sacrifices of well-being, because the bronze altar that was before the Lord was too small to receive the burnt-offerings and the grain-offerings and the fat pieces of the sacrifices of well-being***>> (1 Kings 8:62-64). The later Jewish holiday of Hanukkah, however, was based not on this dedication but on the rededication of the temple under the Maccabees in 165 BC after its profanation by Antiochus IV Epiphanes.

They offered at the dedication of this house of God. Compared to the dedication of Solomon's temple, this was a meagre dedication celebration. Solomon sacrificed around 142,000 animals at his dedication of the temple; here at the dedication of the second temple they only sacrificed a total of 712 animals. However, given the relative wealth of Israel in the days of the first temple as compared to the second temple, the smaller gift recorded in Ezra may have been more acceptable to God.

The sin-offering for all Israel recalls the sin offering prescribed for the Day of Atonement: <<*He shall slaughter the goat of the sin-offering that is for the people and bring its blood inside the curtain, and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, sprinkling it upon the mercy-seat and before the mercy-seat. Thus he shall make atonement for the sanctuary, because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel, and because of their transgressions, all their sins; and so he shall do for the tent of meeting, which remains with them in the midst of their uncleannesses*>> (Leviticus 16:15-16), and is appropriate at this rededication following God's former judgement on his people. Here again the symbolic unity of Israel is emphasised.

¹⁸ Then they set the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their courses for the service of God at Jerusalem, as it is written in the book of Moses.

Ezra 6:18

The priests and the Levites are set in their divisions, i.e. according to the roster for duty in the temple, as King David had once done; refer to 1 Chronicles Chapters 23-27.

The phrase as it is written in the book of Moses applies to the general assignment of the priests and Levites to their respective duties, as recorded in Numbers Chapters 3 and 8, rather than to the system of divisions outlined in Chronicles.

They took care to resume the proper priestly service as commanded by the Book of Moses and previous pattern of David. Yet, all was not the same as in the previous service in the days of Solomon's temple. The general plan of the second temple resembled the first. However, the Most Holy Place was left empty as the Ark of the Covenant had been lost through the Babylonian conquest. The Holy Place was furnished with a table for showbread, the incense altar, and one menorah instead of Solomon's ten.



Zerubbabel's Temple

The rebuilding of Jerusalem's temple was done in stages circa 536-516 BC. First, the altar was built, so that sacrifices could again be made: <<*Then Jeshua son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel with his kin set out to build the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt-offerings on it, as prescribed in the law of Moses the man of God. They set up the altar on its foundation, because they were in dread of the neighbouring peoples, and they offered burnt-offerings upon it to the Lord, morning and evening*>> (Ezra 3:2-3). The second phase was the laying of the foundation of the temple. This elicited mixed reactions from the people. Some rejoiced that the foundation was laid, while others, especially the elder priests, were sad, presumably because the quality of construction was inferior to that of the previous temple. Due to the opposition of the local population and the lack of motivation among the Jews, it took 20 years to complete the construction of the temple building.

The only information given in the biblical record about the architecture of the temple is the dimensions, which were sixty cubits, i.e. 90 feet or 27m, high and wide (v.3). As there is no mention of the length of the building, these dimensions must refer to the facade of the temple, i.e. the Porch. They were included in the decree of Cyrus and were probably intended as maximum rather than actual dimensions.

II.d.iii Ezra 6:19-22 - The Passover Celebrated

When the appropriate date came the nation celebrated the Passover as stipulated in the Law of Moses. The narrative returns to Hebrew in v.19; refer to the comment made on Ezra 4:7-8.

¹⁹ On the fourteenth day of the first month the returned exiles kept the passover. ²⁰ For both the priests and the Levites had purified themselves; all of them were clean. So they killed the passover lamb for all the returned exiles, for their fellow-priests, and for themselves. ²¹ It was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile, and also by all who had joined them and separated themselves from the pollutions of the nations of the land to worship the Lord, the God of Israel. ²² With joy they celebrated the festival of unleavened bread for seven days; 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 on the house of God, the God of Israel.

Ezra 6:19-22

The Passover is kept on its appointed date, followed immediately by the festival of unleavened bread, which lasts for seven days, an eight day festival in total in accordance with the stipulations of Leviticus 23:5-6. This shows that they were careful to keep the Passover according to the commands given through Moses, on the proper day. In keeping Passover they remembered the central act of redemption of the OT, the deliverance of God's people from Egyptian slavery. The Passover here is very similar in that God is keeping his promise to return a remnant to the Promised Land: <<*Then the remnant of Jacob, surrounded by many peoples, shall be like dew from the Lord, like showers on the grass, which do not depend upon people or wait for any mortal. And among the nations the remnant of Jacob, surrounded by many peoples, shall be like a lion among the animals of the forest, like a young lion among the flocks of sheep, which, when it goes through, treads down and tears in pieces, with no one to deliver*>> (Micah 5:7-8).

The priests and Levites had purified themselves and were ceremonially clean; i.e. they had made the necessary ritual preparations. The participants are the

people of Israel, the returned exiles again representing the whole, and the people of the land who had joined them.

The inclusion of converts shows how important it is for the church to allow all Christians to join them in Communion, even if they are not part of a particular denomination and have not participated in their particular rites. Anyone who is truly part of the body of Christ can eat at his table.

So they killed the passover lamb for all the returned exiles. This indicates that the people themselves did not sacrifice the Passover lambs, rather the priests did this for them. It seems that there was no absolute custom for this; sometimes the people sacrificed the Passover lambs under the supervision of the priests and sometimes the priests did it for the people, as they did in the days of Josiah: *<<Make preparations by your ancestral houses by your divisions, following the written directions of King David of Israel and the written directions of his son Solomon. Take position in the holy place according to the groupings of the ancestral houses of your kindred the people, and let there be Levites for each division of an ancestral house. Slaughter the passover lamb, sanctify yourselves, and on behalf of your kindred make preparations, acting according to the word of the Lord by Moses>>* (2 Chronicles 35:4-6).

The Lord had made them joyful. He had fulfilled his prophecies and answered his people's prayers. There is spontaneous joy when God's people see evidence that he is working in the world. In the context of obedience and purity, they did not lose their joy. The purity of God's delivered people was joyful in its character, instead of being dour. It also aided them in the work on the house of God.

The reference to the king of Assyria at first seems odd because kings of Persia have supported the Jews in Ezra. The reference here, however, is based on the continuity of the various empires. The king of Persia now ruled over the territorial empire of the Assyrians, and thus he could be called the king of Assyria; this is confirmed by Herodotus, History 1.178, in a discussion of Cyrus' conquests, where Babylon is called the strongest city in Assyria. This wording emphasises the turn in fortunes, under God, since the Assyrians had been used as God's agent of punishment centuries before; refer to Nehemiah 9:32 and Isaiah 10:5-11.

Remarkably, the returning Jews are joined by all who had joined them and separated themselves from the pollutions of the nations of the land to worship the Lord. This shows that the community was essentially religious, rather than based merely on physical birth and lineage, and that outsiders could be converted into it.