

## Freedom to Worship

Ezra 6:1-12

March 13, 2022

Today's lesson brings us to Ezra Chapter 6. Reading straight through Ezra can be confusing, because to convey the religious message he's trying to impart, the author (the Chronicler) has moved material about in time. So, the passage including a letter to the Persian King Artaxerxes, in Chapter 4:7-24, in Nehemiah's time, is out of place. It may be helpful to lay out a timeline of who was where, when, and of the correspondence back and forth:

1. Cyrus II "the Great" 559-529BC. Conquered Babylon 538BC. Made the proclamation (Ezra 1) that the Jews could return and rebuild the temple, and provided support. The Jewish secular leader seems to have been Sheshbazzar "the prince of Judah." A start was made at rebuilding, but didn't get further than the altar and a foundation. Jeshua was the High Priest. Zerubbabel is mentioned as being present two years later (3:8) but may in fact be the same person as Sheshbazzar. Zerubbabel is apparently the governor (4:2) when the "people of the land" offer to help and are refused. The "people of the land" (Samaritans and others) then set out to frustrate the rebuilding (4:4-5).
2. Cyrus is succeeded by son Cambyses II. Cambyses extends Persian empire to Egypt. The efforts to frustrate rebuilding continue. (The historian Josephus calls Cambyses "not good.") Cambyses II reigns 529-522. The temple rebuilding seems to be stalled.
3. Darius I reigns 522-486. A pretender to be the brother of Cambyses tried to take the throne, and after a period of conflict, Darius, from an older line of the royal family, came to power. He had to put down various revolts, and did succeed in reestablishing the full extent of the Persian empire and then some. Darius later sought to conquer the Greeks, and lost the battle at Marathon 490 B.C. He did capture the Greek islands of Cyprus and Samnos. It is about at the time of Darius's succession that Haggai and Zechariah were urging the Jews in Jerusalem to go ahead and complete the temple. With Persia in chaos, why not? This was the occasion for the governor, Tattenai, to refer the matter to the King, Darius. That is reported in Ezra 5. Tattenai seems to handle the matter fairly, as he reports what the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem replied when they were challenged. In Chapter

6, today's scripture, we see Darius's reply. The Temple work is resumed, or possibly completely restarted, and brought to completion.

4. Xerxes reigned 486 to 465 B.C. He is "Ahasuerus" of the Esther story. He further sought to conquer Greece in 480 B.C. He ultimately lost his fleet at the battle of Salamis and had to retreat, ending serious Persian efforts to conquer Greece. From this time to Alexander the Great, the Persian empire remained stable. Apparently the opponents of the Jews were continuing to write letters objecting to rebuilding in Jerusalem (4:6). The temple had been rebuilt, so it was primarily the fortification of Jerusalem that was at issue.

5. Artaxerxes I 465-425 B.C. It is to this emperor that Rehum and Shimshai and others wrote a letter to the King objecting to further construction, particularly of the wall, in Jerusalem. This is the letter of Ezra 4:7-16. Artaxerxes decrees that construction stop. Verse 24 is confused or distorted because it refers to the work on "the house of God" which was already rebuilt in Artaxerxes's time. Then the verse says work was stopped until Darius's second year, which was in the distant past. The Chronicler seems to have misplaced this letter and used it as if it was the letter sent earlier. Later in Artaxerxes's reign, in 444 B.C., Nehemiah, as Artaxerxes's cup bearer obtains permission, and then goes to Jerusalem to supervise rebuilding of the wall. Later Ezra arrives with The Law. This is much later than the earlier period of conflict, with a different cast of characters.

6. Darius II (423-404), Artaxerxes II (404-359), Artaxerxes III (359-338) and Darius III (336-330) were the succeeding Persian emperors. Darius III was defeated by Alexander the Great in a series of battles, and the Greeks entirely conquered the Persian empire. Bad news for the Jews, but that's for another day.

So, going back to #3 above, the reign of Darius I, about 520 B.C., we have this reply from the King to Tattenai's inquiry.

**6 Then King Darius made a decree, and they searched the archives where the documents were stored in Babylon. <sup>2</sup> But it was in Ecbatana, the capital in the province of Media, that a scroll was found on which this was written: "A record. <sup>3</sup> 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;<sup>[a]</sup> its height shall be sixty cubits and its width sixty cubits, <sup>4</sup> with three courses of hewn stones and one course of**

**timber; let the cost be paid from the royal treasury. <sup>5</sup> 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."**

A few comments here might help. Darius's "decree" would seem to be merely something that he would order somebody to do. The Persian kings didn't do things that way. Everything was a "Decree." (Interestingly, though, the kings of Persia did not hold themselves as divine, as did many of the ancient kings, for example Pharaoh in Egypt, and later the Roman Emperor.) Cyrus typically spent three months of the year in Persia, two months in Ecbatana, and the rest of the year in Babylon. This was before railroads and other means of mass transport. The King had a huge retinue, so it was perhaps more convenient for the King and his court to move, than for goods to be transported to maintain him someplace year-round. Babylon was in the midst of one of the most fertile regions in the world. Those other capitols, much less so. During the Middle Ages, European courts also moved from place to place for similar reasons. The Romans had the advantage of shipping across the Mediterranean Sea. That allowed efficient transport of grain from Egypt and other goods from throughout the empire, most of which was near the sea. They could thus more easily maintain just one big capitol city. Earlier, a search for Cyrus's letter in just Babylon had come up empty. This time, Darius apparently made sure to search archives in all three places where Cyrus and his court had resided. Here is his letter back to Tattenai:

**<sup>6</sup> "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; <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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, <sup>10</sup> so that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king and his children. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> 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.”

Notice that Darius is not doing this out of altruism. He is early in his reign, and is seeking support, after following a previous king who was not his father. He is explicit with his reasons. “... so that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king and his children.” Darius intends to establish a dynasty. This transaction should bring him the support of the God of Israel who is the God in Jerusalem, a reason similar to that given by Cyrus earlier.

<sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> 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; <sup>15</sup> and this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.

Notice that, again, the Chronicler is crediting Artaxerxes, who still is in the future, as the temple is completed. The reference is to the letter to Artaxerxes in Chapter 4, which is in the past for the reader of *Ezra*, but still in the future in the historical timeline. But, that is getting into next week’s scripture, which immediately follows.

The first half of the Persian period was a time of constant struggle between those who returned from Babylon (and other points in the Persian empire) and those living in the land when they returned. Those people of the land included several different populations. There were some people of Judah who were not carried off to captivity in Babylon. These included the poorest. The Babylonians were most interested in the elite, people like scribes and artisans, who would be useful in captivity. There were also people of Judah who had fled to Egypt or other principalities outside the Babylonian empire, for example, those who dragged Jeremiah away to Egypt. Some of them had returned. The Samaritans, the people of Israel who had not been carried off into captivity by the Assyrians, mixed with the peoples from elsewhere exiled to Palestine by the Assyrians. They are said to practice a hybrid religion in which they worshiped the LORD, but also other gods,

as described in II Kings 17. The Samaritans later had their own somewhat different version of the Torah. They apparently did not have the Prophets. Finally, there were settlers from Edom, Moab and Ammon, kindred populations to Israel, but of pagan religion, at least for Moab and Ammon. There had been considerable intermarriage among these groups. But at the time of the first return from Babylon, none of these seem to have made any effort toward the restoration of Jerusalem .

From the very outset, those returning from Babylon backed by Cyrus's decree made it a policy to have nothing to do with those others in the land. It was only well after the return that the "peoples of the land" tried to sign on to be part of the effort. This segregation from the peoples of the land was at least the official policy. When Nehemiah and Ezra came more than a century after Cyrus, they found that, again, the Jews were intermarrying, and the religious practices were again losing their purity.

Life in Jerusalem had been difficult. It took the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah, and the energy and initiative of the governor Zerubbabel and High Priest Jeshua, to get the temple construction re-started. They stepped out in faith, despite the earlier prohibitions and barriers to continuing. When questioned, they gave a forthright answer. They admitted that God had been displeased with His people, and thus causing the Exile. Their faith that God was in these events was rewarded. Not only did Darius allow them to continue and complete the temple, but he provided resources to help. In such a way God used Darius, even as he had Cyrus, as instruments of help to His people. They now were again free to worship The LORD in Jerusalem, and in a way that no longer carried the corruption of paganism.

It was the right time for these events to happen. We can see other occasions in history that were the "right time." Jesus appeared when the Jews were under Roman oppression. But, the Roman domination of the world of that day made travel, and spreading of the gospel, much easier. Letters could be sent reliably, making possible the career, accomplishments, and letters of Paul. The Jewish communities throughout the world resulting from the Exile were by then also joined by communities of Gentile God-fearers. While not becoming Jews, they had become acquainted with the Jewish God, and had found him worthy of worship. These were the ones who carried the Good News to the world at large in the generations that followed. It was the right time.

Prayer: *God, your timing is always right. Guide us, so we can perceive it and respond.*