

## Chapter Six

### PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. How did the building that Cyrus authorized compare with the one which Solomon had built?
2. Can you find anything which Darius did, which Cyrus had not done?
3. What do you see in the story that reflects the religious training which was maintained during the captivity?
4. How did the sacrifices compare with those made at the dedication of the first temple?
5. What feasts or offerings are particularly mentioned, and how were they appropriate for the occasion?
6. What help did God give them in this enterprise?

### OUTLINE

- D. The Temple is completed and dedicated.
1. The Royal Edict authorizing construction was found (vss. 1-5).
  2. Darius consequently issued a decree directing the construction (vss. 6-12).
  3. The work was completed and the building was dedicated (vss. 13-18).
  4. Services were resumed, especially the Passover (vss. 19-22).

### TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

#### D. The Temple is completed and dedicated.

1. The Royal Edict authorizing construction is found.

#### TEXT, Ezra 6:1-5

- 1 Then King Darius issued a decree, and search was made in the archives, where the treasures were stored in Babylon.
- 2 And in Ecbatana in the fortress, which is in the province of Media, a scroll was found and there was written in it as follows: "Memorandum—

- 3 "In the first year of King Cyrus, Cyrus the king issued a decree: 'Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the temple, the place where sacrifices are offered, be rebuilt and let its foundations be retained, its height being 60 cubits and its width 60 cubits;
- 4 with three layers of huge stones, and one layer of timbers. And let the cost be paid from the royal treasury.
- 5 'And also let the gold and silver utensils of the temple of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took from the temple in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be returned and brought to their places in the temple in Jerusalem; and you shall put them in the house of God.'

### COMMENT

*Verse 1* speaks of Darius' directing the search for the document in question at the government library in Babylon, as requested in 5:17. It was not an unusual place to look for Persian records; here the "Cylinder of Cyrus" was found by recent archeologists. Nevertheless, their search was unproductive.

The fact that the archives were kept in the treasury building is characteristic of the times; the temples themselves often served the functions of our libraries in preserving ancient volumes, of our county courthouses in storing legal documents, and also of our banks in guarding the government funds and in making loans to the needy.

*Verse 2* gives the location where the document was found: at Ecbatana (Achmetha). Cyrus had divided his time each year between three capitals, the one in Media being located in Ecbatana, the one in Persia at Susa, and one in the city of Babylon.

What follows in *verses 3-5* is either an extract or the full official written version of Cyrus' original order. Ezra 1:2-4 probably gives the oral version which was announced in Babylonian cities where the Hebrew captives lived.

*Verse 3* gives the proposed dimensions of the reconstructed temple; it would have been twice as high, and three times as wide as Solomon's original (I Ki. 6:2). Since this is much larger than what was actually constructed, these figures must have been intended as maximums. Its size would have been most imposing: 90 ft. high, and 90 ft. wide; the length is not stated, but would presumably be double the width. The length of the former building would have become the width of the new.

*Verse 4* duplicates the details of construction of the original edifice given in I Ki. 6:36. Work was to be financed from Persian government funds: this detail apparently was never carried out.

*Verse 5* relates the order for the restitution of the temple furnishings, which the first returning captives brought with them (1:7-11). Darius would honor this decree of Cyrus, for reasons explained in Esther 1:19.

## 2. Darius' decree ordering the reconstruction.

### TEXT, 6:6-12

- 6 "Now therefore, Tattenai, governor of the province beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and your colleagues, the officials of the provinces beyond the River, keep away from there.
- 7 "Leave this work on the house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site.
- 8 "Moreover, I issue a decree concerning what you are to do for these elders of Judah in the rebuilding of this house of God: the full cost is to be paid to these people from the royal treasury out of the taxes of the provinces beyond the River, and that without delay.
- 9 "And whatever is needed, both young bulls, rams, and lambs for a burnt offering to the God of heaven, and wheat, salt, wine, and anointing oil, as the priests in Jerusalem request, it is to be given to them daily without fail,

- 10 that they may offer acceptable sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the life of the king and his sons.
- 11 "And I issued a decree that any man who violates this edict, a timber shall be drawn from his house and he shall be impaled on it and his house shall be made a refuse heap on account of this.
- 12 "And may the God who has caused his name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who attempts to change it, so as to destroy this house of God in Jerusalem. I, Darius, have issued this decree, let it be carried out with all diligence."

### COMMENT

*Verse 6* begins abruptly, suggesting that the introduction of Darius' letter has been omitted, to get immediately to the issue. In effect, Tattenai and Shethar-bozenai are commanded in *verses 6 and 7* not to interfere. The phrase, "keep away from there," apparently was an Aramaic legal formula for such occasions.<sup>1</sup>

*Verse 8* specifies that tax money is to be provided from the general area between the Mediterranean Sea and the Euphrates River to pay the total cost. We may wonder why a Persian ruler would give first priority to this project; *verse ten* will furnish an answer.

*Verse 9* lists the various items for Israel's sacrifices that were also to be furnished daily and financed from the public treasury. Evidently they had inquired of Israel's priests what would be needed. Since every day was to begin and end with a burnt offering (Num. 28:3-6), this need was specifically anticipated. Wine was a frequent part of offerings (Ex. 29:40f.; Lev. 23:13). And so was oil; it is mentioned particularly at the anointing of priests for service (Lev. 8:30). Incidentally, Darius is known to have ordered a similar list of supplies for the Hebrew community in Egypt.<sup>2</sup>

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1. *Anchor Bible*, "Ezra-Nehemiah," p. 50.

2. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 618.

This list is notable in that it corresponds exactly with instructions in Leviticus: bulls, rams, lambs (Lev. 1:5, 10), accompanied by wheat and salt (Lev. 2:1).

In *verse 10*, two reasons are given for Darius' action. For the benefit of the community of Israel, the offerings would be pleasing to their God. For the benefit of the Persians, the priests were asked to pray for the king and his sons, that is, the total officialdom. This would not have been considered unreasonable; Jeremiah (29:7) had urged prayers for the Babylonian rulers when many of Israel's citizens were under this authority. Paul recommends the same course of action in the N.T. (I Tim. 2:1, 2) respecting Roman rulers. The surprise is that the mighty Persian ruler would request a handful of subjugated, impoverished people whom he was befriending to pray to their strange God for him!

*Verse 11* threatens any violator with painful death, and the reduction of his home to an outhouse. This comes as a shock if we have become acclimated to expecting kindness from the Persians. The Assyrians and Babylonians were noted for their sadism, including the impaling of victims on pointed posts to induce lingering death; but the Persians followed a policy of benevolence toward their enemies to encourage rapid surrender. But this is another matter, having to do with the enforcing of justice.

It is obvious from Persian accounts that they were acquainted with both impalement and crucifixion as a means of punishing criminals. Herodotus,<sup>3</sup> the Greek who recorded Persian history, speaks of Persian crucifixions, though they are like those with which Julius Caesar<sup>4</sup> later punished pirates, in that the victims were first killed and then affixed to crosses.

In *verse 12* Darius invokes a curse in the name of Israel's God on anyone who would change his decree so that the temple would be destroyed. Dr. Ironside<sup>5</sup> mentions that this curse was

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3. *Great Books of The Western World*, Vol. VI, p. 123.

4. Suetonius, *The Lives of The Twelve Caesars*, p. 48.

5. Ironside, *ibid*, p. 55.

fulfilled in the case of Antiochus Epiphanes, of Herod (who altered the Temple), and of the Romans in AD 70. However, there is no need to insist on a literal fulfilment here; after all, the curse is only the pronouncement of the pagan Darius. (Nevertheless, the same idea is expressed in Gen. 12:3.) We may ask, has God bound Himself to carry out the curse pronounced in His name by a pagan? It is noteworthy that when Solomon dedicated the previous Temple, he recognized that God might destroy it because of the people's sins, and Solomon did not pray for the destruction in turn of its destroyers: only for Israel's restoration if they returned to God (I Ki. 8).

The mention in *verse 12* that God "has caused His name to dwell there" may be supported by Deut. 12:5, 11 and I Ki. 5:5. Here again the "name" means more than a word written on the front of a building; it is a promise of His personal presence.

### 3. The completion of the building, and its dedication

#### TEXT, 6:13-18

- 13 Then Tattenai, the governor of the province beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their colleagues carried out the decree with all diligence, just as King Darius had sent.
- 14 And the elders of the Jews were successful in building through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they finished building according to the command of the God of Israel and the decree of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia.
- 15 And this temple was completed on the third day of the month Adar; it was the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.
- 16 And the sons of Israel, the priests, the Levites, and the rest of the exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy.
- 17 And they offered for the dedication of this temple of God 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel 12 male goats, corresponding to the number of tribes of Israel.

18 Then they appointed the priests to their divisions and the Levites in their orders for the service of God in Jerusalem, as it is written in the book of Moses.

### COMMENT

*Verse 13* shows the result which Darius' decree had made: it was meticulously obeyed.

*Verse 14*, like the dedication plate on a new post office, lists all the people responsible for the construction, from the God of Israel who commanded it, through three administrations of kings, two prophets, Israel's governor and high priest, and down to the elders. The name of Artaxerxes raises questions. Surely this is not the Artaxerxes of 4:7, 23, who held up construction!

One alternative is to see a reference to the Artaxerxes of the next chapter (7:12, 21), whose cooperation gave life to the ceremonies in the new building. So Ezra may include him here because the restoration would have been incomplete without his contribution.

Another possibility is that all three names may be different titles for Darius.<sup>6</sup>

But the first idea is not impossible; it was a fact of history that a part of the construction had taken place during his rule, before he blocked its continuation. His being mentioned out of sequence and placed last may be just as an afterthought, suggesting his little importance to the project.

*Verse 15* gives the date for its completion. Adar would be the twelfth month, about our February-March. Construction has occupied four and a half years.

In *verse 16* the description of the dedication begins. There are no tears as in 3:12: only joy. Dedications after extensive repairs had also been conducted by Josiah (II Chr. 30:17) and Hezekiah (II-Chr. 35:11).

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6. *Anchor Bible*, p. 50.

*Verse 17* describes two kinds of sacrifice. The one for dedication would be the burnt offering (Lev. 1), in which all of the edible meat of the animals would be consumed in fire, thus representing total consecration. This offering was always appropriate at dedication services.

The other, the sin offering, would be appropriate as they draw the curtain over the long years of suffering in exile because of their sins, as they celebrate God's forgiveness. We can't help noticing the number twelve, a goat for each of the tribes of Israel (cf. Num. 7). Again it is obvious that they regarded themselves as the remnant of all the tribes. It was an appropriate gesture, for this was the first time in almost four centuries, since the division of the nation under Rehoboam and Jeroboam, that all Israel had been able to worship together in one temple.

Admittedly, Elijah had called attention to the twelve tribes which had received God's word, when he built his altar of twelve stones (I Ki. 18:31). And some seventy-eight years before the incident recorded here, Israel had rejoiced together (Ezra 3:1-3, 11). But in neither case were they worshipping in a temple.

The 100 bulls, 200 rams, and 400 lambs (total 700) of the burnt offering may be contrasted by Solomon's 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep (total, 144,000) in I Ki. 8:63.

Also, there was no mention of fire descending from heaven, as at Solomon's dedication service (II Chr. 7:1, 2). But the people may have reflected on encouraging words from Haggai (2:9) that the temple would be more glorious in the future than it had ever been in the past.

*Verse 18* witnesses the reinstatement of the priests and Levites to their duties in the House of God, as specified by Moses (Num. 3:6, 10; 8:9).

With verse 18, this Aramaic portion of Ezra ends.

#### 4. The Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread observed

TEXT, 6:19-22

19 And the exiles observed the Passover on the fourteenth of the first month.



- 20 For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together; all of them were pure. Then they slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the exiles, both for their brothers the priests and for themselves.
- 21 And the sons of Israel who returned from the exile and all those who had separated themselves from the impurity of the nations of the land to join them, to seek the LORD God of Israel, ate the Passover.
- 22 And they observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the Lord had caused them to rejoice, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them to encourage them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

### COMMENT

*Verse 19* takes us to the next major event at the Temple: the observance of the Passover in the following month, after the pattern of Ex. 12. We see the appropriateness of the feast for the occasion as it is a reminder of the event which gave birth to their nation; now they were celebrating its rebirth.

*Verse 20* reports a deviation from previous practice relating to the Passover: the Levites now slaughtered the lambs as a service to the people and even the priests.

In *verse 21*, it is not clear whether the sons of Israel and those who had separated themselves from the impurity of the nations are the same or two different groups. This could refer to Israel and to the Gentile proselytes or else Jewish backsliders. Or it could be commenting on the fact that Israel was now at last cleansed from her impure associations with the heathen. Since the second group joined the first, to seek Israel's God, it would be more reasonable to see here a host of foreigners, similar to the mixed multitude (Ex. 12:38) when Israel left Egypt, who joined with them now in the worship of the true God.

In *verse 22*, the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread followed and was a continuation of the Passover. As the removal of all

leaven from their houses symbolized the purging out of all their old sins, so now they were wiping the slate clean of heathen involvement going all the way back to the Canaanites and the conquest under Joshua, and which had reached its logical end in their being led away by foreigners.

The prayer of Solomon (I Ki. 8:50) was now answered, as God turned the heart of the king in sympathy toward them.

One problem remains: what is the king of Assyria doing here? This may be a way of referring to the king of the Persian empire, which had conquered the conquerors of Assyria and whose empire now succeeded and encompassed theirs. This loose kind of reference was common in that day, so it is possible. But why would the author choose the confusing term, king of Assyria, in place of the simple term which he had been using previously, i.e., the king of Persia? It may be a deliberate effort to remind the reader of that series of events that began with the Assyrian invasion of Israel, and that the entire era had now come to a welcome close. What one king of Assyria had begun to destroy, God caused another king over the land of Assyria to repair.

One further comment on the chapter: note the joy in verses 16 and 22. This we are assured was the result of their keeping the Lord's commands, and will be the result equally of our attention to His Word.

## WORD STUDIES

**DARIUS:** Preserver, conservator. His name very aptly describes the character of his reign. Cyrus had brought the nation to greatness, and Darius preserved and extended that which Cyrus had begun.

**BURNT OFFERING:** that which ascends. (The base of this word appears in the second component of the name of the Israeli airline, EL AL.) Two ideas may be present: (1) the total offering ascended in smoke to God, or (2) the priest ascended to the altar with the offering.

**PASSOVER:** (Pasach: the word, "Paschal," comes from this.) To leap over, or pass over (a stream, for example). When God passed over the doors of the Israelites, they were spared, or delivered (Ex. 12:13, 27). Therefore the word almost always refers to this sparing or deliverance.

**UNLEAVENED:** (The word, "matzoth," comes from this): the word imitates the sound of sucking something out with relish: hence, something sweet, i.e., unleavened or unfermented.

### SUMMARY

Darius initiated a search that turned up Cyrus' original order for the rebuilding of the Temple with government funds. He therefore ordered the co-operation of the officials in the total Beyond-Euphrates area, of which Israel was a part, in collecting funds and in permitting the reconstruction.

Violators were to be punished with the full severity of which the law was capable. All ranks of leaders in Israel, religious and secular, institutional (priests) and individual (prophets), got behind the project and speeded it to completion in a little more than four years. With joy the citizens of Israel celebrated at the dedication ceremonies; sin offerings, and renewal of the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread. All of these were done to follow the pattern of worship handed down by Moses.

Because this chapter marks the end of an era, some regard it as the end of the seventy years of captivity prophesied by Jeremiah. The beginning would be counted from 586 B.C., when Jerusalem was finally overthrown and the last of the captives carried off.

### REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How was Cyrus involved in the Temple's restoration?
2. Where was Cyrus' decree found?
3. How had Cyrus wanted the work to be financed?
4. How long did it take to complete the work?
5. Whose writings guided them in their sacrifices?