

### EZRA

#### Lesson 11, Chapters 5 and 6

We'll conclude chapter 5 of Ezra this week and get well into chapter 6. What has taken us so long is that we have chosen this point in the book of Ezra to pause to examine the prophets Haggai and Zechariah who arose to both encourage and warn the Jews that the rebuilding of God's Temple was to be their top priority.

Let's read Ezra chapter 5.

#### **READ EZRA CHAPTER 5 all**

About 520 B.C., some 15 or so years after a group of a few thousand exiled Jews found their way back to Judah, verse 1 tells us that Haggai and Zechariah prophesied to the Judahites in the name of the God of Israel. This is just another way of saying that these two men were not merely zealous Jews who took it upon themselves to make fiery speeches in order to get the Temple reconstruction going, they were sent by God with God's message to get back to work!

The result of their prophetic utterances is stated in verse 2: the Jewish governor of Judah, Zerubbabel, and the High Priest Yeshua took the Lord's messages to heart and despite all the political pressure and the outright threats (mostly from the Samaritans) they organized the people and restarted the stalled building project. Working alongside them were Haggai and Zechariah; the prophets didn't just speak their piece and then disappear to leave the hard work to others. It is not hard to imagine that the Samaritans didn't roll over and play dead upon this latest attempt to complete the Temple. No doubt they redoubled their efforts to discourage the Jews when they saw the workmen show up. So Haggai and Zechariah needed to stick around to constantly remind these harassed Jews why it was that the Temple was so important.

And let us revisit momentarily just why a new Temple was so important; it's because it was important to God. Yehoveh had suspended His relationship with Judah some 70 years earlier when after decades of unfaithfulness by His chosen people, some cosmic line in the sand was crossed and He had decided enough was enough. As punishment the Lord put the geopolitical

circumstances together and laid an unction upon ambitious Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon to conquer Judah and haul off the Jews to Babylon. However God also promised the Jews that after 70 years of exile, their punishment would be over and He would return the Jews to their homeland and reinstate His relationship with them. The meeting point of this renewed fellowship between the Jews and their God was the Temple in Jerusalem. Thus until the Temple was rebuilt, the fellowship could not happen.

In fact the Lord saw the act of rebuilding the Temple as tangible proof that the Jews had turned back to Him. And for political reasons up to now the Jews had decided against rebuilding the Temple. This lack of interest in rebuilding His House indicated to God that they were not sincere in their desire to reestablish their relationship with Him because the God-principle of how this renewal of relationship could take place was clearly established by Zechariah.

<sup>CJB</sup> ***Zechariah 1:3 Therefore, tell them that ADONAI-Tzva'ot says this: "Return to me," says ADONAI-Tzva'ot, "and I will return to you," says ADONAI-Tzva'ot.***

Return to me, and I will return to you. Let me put that in the typical covenant protocol that is expressed in the Covenant of Moses: IF you return to Me, THEN I will return to you. God's renewed fellowship was conditional. No doubt the Jews were a bit shocked to hear Zechariah utter those words because they felt that they had already returned to God. After all they had traveled all the way from Babylon to Jerusalem, enduring about 4 months of arduous traveling conditions, with the strongest inner desire to rebuild the Temple and to re-establish Torah observance. So embedded in this short verse there is yet another God-principle revealed: true repentance must always be proved by our actions, deeds and behavior otherwise God counts it as no repentance at all. Showing up isn't enough; making fine speeches isn't enough; being zealous in your heart isn't enough; planning and preliminary preparation to do what God has assigned us to do isn't enough. DOING what God has assigned us to do is what the Lord demands of us and that "doing" may well be inconvenient, uncomfortable, or even outright perilous. It may not make us many friends and in fact may alienate us from the friends we had. And make no mistake; doing God's will isn't a guarantee of success (at least success as defined from an earthly standpoint).

Any dedicated athlete can tell you that using every last ounce of their gifts, training until it aches, having the right frame of mind, getting the best trainer and coach, doesn't guarantee success. Rather there is yet another God-principle that governs our efforts: obey God, do the best you can as it seems you are directed to do, and let the chips fall where they may. The outcome is in God's hands, not ours. I don't know about you, but that may be the God-principle I struggle with the most. For me success is nothing less than tangible, visible victory. Success is winning. Success is accomplishing that which I planned and set out to do. Nothing is harder for my temperament and personality to accept than to do what I am convinced the Lord wants of me and to not reach what I see as the goal. Disappointment and frustration set in and I have to work hard to reconcile my definition of success with the Lord's. I have to yield to

the reality that whatever I have done is just a piece in a larger divine puzzle that may not be visible or fully assembled for many years, or perhaps even within my lifetime. And a deep personal flaw is that I don't easily surrender. In fact, long ago in my corporate days, a colleague once angrily said to me: I sure hope I'm never in a hostage situation with you, because you'll get us both killed.

And so, naturally, verse 3 tells us that no sooner had the Judahites courageously gone back to work on the Temple before a high Persian government official showed up to question them about it. But let's be clear: there is nothing in the text to indicate that the official, **Tatnai**, called the governor, had any hostile intent towards the Jews. Persian records indicate that actually it was a fellow named **Ushtannu** who was the governor of the Beyond the River province, not **Tatnai**. It seems that **Tatnai** must have been a vice regent, similar to what Joseph was in relation to Pharaoh down in Egypt. The reason that we'll see several folks called "governor" in our English Bible translations of Ezra is because the Aramaic word that is being translated, **pechah**, is not well understood. More and more it seems that it is a broad and flexible term used for a Persian official as opposed to a specific formal title for a specific office. It seems to indicate any high level administrator of a district, or a province, or even a large satrapy.

Thus **Tatnai** must have reported to **Ushtannu**. In any case **Tatnai** and another Persian official named **Sh'tar-Boznai** came to Jerusalem for the purpose of investigating this building project. What might have alerted **Tatnai** that something nefarious might have been going on in Judah that he needed to personally look into? It must have been the Samaritans or some other opposition group that made an appeal to him. Nonetheless, **Tatnai** seems to have been thorough and professional in his investigation with no preconceived notions or bigotry. Thus his first inquiry is: who gave you permission to build this Temple and this wall? His second inquiry: what are the names of the men who are leading this effort? Both are reasonable questions that any bureaucrat might ask.

Verse 5 tells us that whatever **Tatnai** was told by Zerubbabel, it had to be convincing enough that although he would certainly take his investigation further and there was no reason to block the construction until he inquired of the current King of Persia to see if he validated what Zerubbabel had told him. The author of Ezra, however, is quite observant to note that in reality it was because of God's unseen intervention on behalf of His people that **Tatnai** didn't stop the Temple work as he waited for further instructions from King Darius.

Next we get the text of the letter that **Tatnai** sent to King Darius. The letter is factual, unemotional and without an obvious agenda other than to transmit to King Darius what **Tatnai** observed. And what **Tatnai** begins with is to assure the king that he went there personally and what the king is reading is not 2<sup>nd</sup> hand or hearsay. Large stones are being used for construction, as is structural timber (with the only source for such lumber being from the forests of Lebanon, which are also under the king's control). Further **Tatnai** reports that the workers are zealous in their tasks and progress is steady. Why does this matter? Because regardless

of the fact that this is in Judah, and that the Temple is for the God of Israel, and that the workers are Jewish, this is Persian territory, the Jews are citizens of Persia, and so all of this belongs to the Empire of Persia and the results to one degree or another reflect on the king of the empire.

Note that in verse 8 it is said in the letter that the Temple is dedicated to the great God. This letter is, naturally, written and recorded in the Bible in Aramaic, which is the language of the Persian Empire. So the words translated in English as great God are *rav elah*. *Elah* is a generic term for god; it can mean any god. Thus exactly which god is meant is left ambiguous, which serves a sensitive political situation like this perfectly. Better to let each side assume whatever suits them.

A couple of verses later it is mentioned that the names of those in charge of the construction project were gathered and sent to the king; however no names are listed in this letter. So they were sent in a separate communication or what we are reading is a condensed form of the original; it isn't possible to know for certain.

Starting in verse 11 we see that *Tatnai* fully intended to be fair and equitable with the Jews and so gives Darius the Jews' response to his inquires of them. And what the Jewish response amounts to is a justification and defense of what they're doing, why they're doing it, and who gave them permission. The justification begins with identifying themselves with "the God of Heaven and earth". Once again, since this letter is in Aramaic it reads *elah shamayin arah*, thus repeating the generic and non-specific Aramaic word for god, which is *elah*. The God of Heaven was a term the Persians regularly used, because the Persians had a God of Heaven and a Creator god who they called Ahuramazda. Thus by the Jews using the term *elah* in their identification with a certain god, even though they meant Yehoveh, the Persians could take it to mean Ahuramazda and thus another politically sensitive issue could be waltzed around.

Then the history of this building project was given. The Jews explain that this new structure is only a replacement of a former structure, built a long time ago by a great Israelite king. King Solomon, builder of the House of God, was only important to Hebrew history, and he had lived and died more than 4 centuries earlier. So no name is given because it would have meant nothing to the Persians. And in a bit of refreshing candor Zerubbabel admits to *Tatnai* that the reason for the Temple being in ruins is because the ancestors of the Jews had provoked the God of Heaven (again, the generic Aramaic term *elah shamayim* is used), and caused Nebuchadnezzar to come and attack the House of God and to carry off the Jews to Babylon. I think the willingness of Zerubbabel to openly confess the Jewish responsibility for the calamity is part and parcel of the repentance that God was looking for. And to lay the reason for the destruction at the feet of the God of Heaven as a just consequence for the Jew's unfaithfulness no doubt gave *Tatnai* the sense that what he was being told was the truth no matter how less than flattering it was to the Jewish people.

Then Zerubbabel reports that it was Koresh (Cyrus) who gave the authorization to rebuild the Temple; but notice that he is referred to as King of Babel and not King of Persia. This is not an error, because indeed Cyrus can be called King of Babel as that was the capital of the Babylonian Empire that he had just captured and indeed he was Babel's new king. And no doubt by using the title King of Babylon it helped to connect the entry into exile to Babylon, with the exit from the exile to Babylon. Remember: even though laymen and academics alike will say that the Jews returned from their Babylonian Exile, in fact they didn't return until the Persian Empire era had begun and so returned from Persia.

So in verse 13 the crux of the justification and the most important argument in favor of the Jews' position is used: King Cyrus personally ordered the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple. The next couple of verses merely explain that while Nebuchadnezzar had looted the Temple and used its valuable artifacts in the Babylonian Temple to Marduk, Koresh had those same treasures retrieved and given back to the Jews to use in their own Temple. And, the Temple could be rebuilt exactly where it had been located originally. Thus no ambiguity remained: King Cyrus ordered the Temple to be rebuilt in the original location, dedicated to the Jews' God, and furnished with its original furnishings and ritual implements. It was to be a faithful reproduction of what had been there before.

Now that **Tatnai** has reported what he has observed, and documented the answers he received to his questions he concludes in verse 17 that he requests the king to have a records search accomplished to determine if the Jews' claims are true. And when that has been completed the king should let **Tatnai** know what his decision is concerning this matter.

Let's move on to chapter 6, because here we get King Darius's reply.

### READ EZRA CHAPTER 6 all

King Darius being a professional and enlightened king saw fit to follow through with **Tatnai's** request. He ordered the records search to begin in Babylon, where no record was found. That he extended the records search for Cyrus's decree to another records city demonstrates his honest desire to administrate fairly and impartially. Another records city was in the city of **Achm'ta**, also known as **Ecbatana** in the kingdom of the Medes (Persian's governing partner in the Empire). There were 3 records cities used by the first several kings of the Persian Empire: Babylon, Ecbatana and Susa. There were royal capitals established in each of these cities and the king lived in each one according to the season of the year. The record of Cyrus's decree to rebuild the Temple was indeed found at Ecbatana, the king's summer palace.

Starting in verse 3 is the contents of the letter sent back to **Tatnai**. In the 1<sup>st</sup> year of King Cyrus he ordered that the Temple be rebuilt in Jerusalem, at the place where they offer sacrifices (meaning where the altar of burnt offering had been located). Interestingly even the dimensions of the Temple are specified: 90 feet high by 90 feet long, although the proportions as recorded are odd and not those of the original Temple. It is to have 3 rows of large stones at its base. Large stones were difficult to handle, and much more difficult to build with than small stones; but they were infinitely more durable and beautiful. Thus they were also more expensive. In addition there would be one row of new timber; this is referring to the roof rafters that would span the Temple from side to side. Timber was expensive because timber that was of the strength and size to be used to carry structural loads was rare in the Middle East. So why the attention to these dimensions and materials? Verse 4 gives us the answer; generous King Cyrus ordered that the royal Persian treasury was to pay for the construction, thus the general specifications set both upper and lower limits for the costs.

Then the document states that all the gold and silver articles taken from the Temple by Nebuchadnezzar were to be returned to the Temple in Jerusalem. So everything that Zerubbabel claimed to **Tatnai** has been proven to be accurate. Therefore King Darius instructs **Tatnai** that the governor and his officials are to stay away from the work site, and leave the Jews in peace to build their Temple. No interference will be tolerated.

But then **Tatnai** gets a bit of bad news. It seems as though the money for the project is to come from the taxes collected ONLY from **Tatnai's** governing district called Beyond the River. The King will not be sending any funds from the main Persian treasury; the government administration of Beyond the River is to provide the funding. Once again, the King looks magnanimous and gets all the credit as he spends other people's money for a popular project. Not much has changed in politics since ancient times, has it?

Even more, the Beyond the River district is to supply all the animals needed for the daily sacrifices at the Temple, as well as the other ritual items needed in large quantities like salt to absorb the blood from the meat, wine, olive oil, and wheat no doubt to help feed the Levites and Priests. What does the king want in return for this? He wants the priests of the God of Israel to pray for the life of the King and his family; especially his sons, one of which is scheduled to be his successor and the others part of the royal court. In the famous Cyrus Cylinder archaeological find, is recorded this general instruction that is to be followed throughout his empire and it reads: "May all the gods whom I have resettled in their sacred cities ask daily Bel and Nebo for a long life for me. To Marduk, my lord, they should say this: Cyrus, the king who worships you, and Cambyses his son..." In other words, Cyrus had ordered that all the god idols that had been captured by Nebuchadnezzar were to be returned to the various cultures and religions from whence they were taken so that they could reinstitute their religious cults and worship their own gods as they pleased. However, these same religious cults were to add to the worship of their own gods, a petition to the Persian gods Bel, Nebo and Marduk for the sake of King Cyrus and his family. So what we should understand from this inscription is something that was a truism for ancient times, even among the Hebrews: they all

believed in many gods existing. The concept of monotheism for the Hebrews, especially at first, was not that there was only one god in existence; it's that while all other cultures had many gods the Hebrews were only allowed to have one.

The ancient mind had no problem accepting many gods, and that each pantheon was dedicated to a certain nation and its king. So Cyrus had no issue believing that the God of Israel was Yehoveh, and that He indeed existed and operated in the territory of Judah, and that Yehoveh had powers to affect matters on earth. And by showing respect to all gods in his empire, Cyrus hoped to win not only the affection of his subjects but also the favor of all the gods if not to do his bidding; at least they would not try to harm him.

And if anyone were to think to defy the king's order concerning rebuilding the Jerusalem Temple, and instead harassed the Hebrews, there would be a severe consequence. Most Bible versions, including the CJB, translate verse 11 to say that a wooden beam was to be removed from the house of the person who would violate Darius's order, and that the beam should be placed into the ground and then the offender impaled upon it. A couple of versions disagree with this translation because some scholars say this penalty seems too harsh for the offense. However in the end, that is no more than a Bible editor's personal opinion and in fact impalement was a common punishment for disobedience to the king, even if to us this particular disobedience wouldn't seem to warrant the death penalty. Further this person's house would be destroyed, thus the consequence affected the violator's entire household.

The king's letter ends with a curse; the use of such curses was the norm for the ancient Eastern world. And of course using the general understanding of how gods operated as the rationale, Darius invokes the God of this Temple in Jerusalem as the guarantor of his curse upon anyone who dared to defy his order to leave the Jews in peace to build.

We're informed that **Tatnai** obeyed the king's order to the letter, as did his associates. Thus with all the formal charges against the Jews swept away, and their right to rebuild the Temple reaffirmed by the current King of Persia, the Temple took shape rapidly. There would be no interruptions until it was finally completed in the 6<sup>th</sup> year of Darius's reign. The 6<sup>th</sup> year of Darius's reign would have been 515 B.C. or 72 years since the destruction of Solomon's Temple. This is so close to the 70 years predicted by Jeremiah in his book (chapters 25 and 29), that to quibble that 72 years means the 70 years prophecy was inaccurate is disingenuous. When we see round numbers in the Bible (like 40 or 70), they are usually partially symbolic and partially to give us a reasonable approximation of time or of whatever it is that is being referred to. In other words, like with David when it is said that he reigned for 40 years, that's not precisely accurate; it was closer to 41 or 42. And many academics, liberal and conservative agree that while these round numbers in Scripture and Prophecy at times are precise, more often than not they are only very close approximations. And part of the reason for using round numbers in prophecy is because surely the Lord knew that when these numbers were first given to His Prophets in these ancient cultures, calendars of various

societies didn't agree. Some used lunar months, some used solar years, some used seasons, some used the reigns of kings, and there were a couple of other ways to count years employed as well. So to this day there are disagreements over how to precisely count years in the Bible. That God said so many years in advance that it would be 70 years from the Temple's destruction until a new one was built, and that it was 72 years by the modern Gregorian calendar but may have been exactly 70 by calendars of that era, is amazing and proves God's mastery over time and history.

Verses 16 and 17 are interesting in that it helps us to see how the Jews thought of themselves at this time in history in relation to their heritage; and it was that they saw themselves as representing all 12 tribes of Israel. However we should also understand that on one hand the meaning of verse 16 saying that those who attended the Temple dedication were 1) the people (the **am**) of Israel, 2) the priests, and 3) the Levites is merely to announce the attendees in terms of the 3 basic divisions that God ordained for Israel in the Law of Moses: the laypeople (Israel), the Levites who were separated away from the tribes at Mt. Sinai, and the priests who were separated away from the Levites to directly serve God on behalf of all Israel. At the dedication an opulent amount of animals were sacrificed but a very telling piece of information is given to us that a sin offering for all Israel (**kol** Israel) consisting of 12 male goats, one for each tribe, were also sacrificed.

Let's remember that by this time in history the 10 tribes of the northern portion of the former Kingdom of Israel called Ephraim-Israel had been deported and scattered by the Assyrians throughout the Asian continent and into parts of northern Africa. We hear nothing more of them in the Bible except in the form of prophecies about when in the Latter Days they will rejoin their brethren, Judah, in the Promised Land. But these are always in the form of Messianic prophecies; that is, the return of the 10 tribes is a harbinger of the imminent coming of Messiah. So while I've discussed this with you before it bears repeating; in modern Judaism a basic belief is that the modern Jews represent all that is left of ancient Israel and thus of all 12 tribes. And we see more or less the earliest start of that belief that grew into a Tradition here in Ezra. Yet there is simply no historical or Scriptural validation of that belief and Tradition. Judah is but one house of Israel, Ephraim-Israel is the other house of Israel, and only together do they form the whole house of Israel (**kol** Israel), all the tribes of Israel. And those two houses have not been together nor even lived side-by-side since late in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.

But in modern times, since the rebirth of the modern State of Israel in 1948, the Jews have been challenged in this Tradition of them being the sole representatives of all 12 tribes by the reemergence of many of the so-called 10 Lost Tribes, and they have demanded their right to live in the Promised Land as Israelites, but not as Jews, because they thoroughly understand that a Jew represents only the house of Judah.

As momentous was the rebuilding of the Temple in Ezra's day, it will be all the more so in our day because when the sacrifices of dedication to ordain the 3<sup>rd</sup> Temple into service are made



on behalf of all 12 tribes of Israel, because indeed actual representatives of all 12 tribes will be physically present. And that is because many of those 12 tribes have members who have recently immigrated to Israel and more are on their way.

We'll conclude chapter 6 next time.