

Lesson 11

Last week we were discussing Ezra 5:1-2 when class ended. We were looking at the books of Haggai and Zechariah, both of whom are mentioned by name in Ezra 5:1. As we saw, no book of other than Isaiah has more Messianic prophecies than does the book of Zechariah.

Zechariah also tells us something important about prophecy – he tells us it would cease, and he tells us when it would cease.

The question in Zechariah 1:5 is penetrating: “Your fathers, where are they? and the prophets, do they live for ever?” Zechariah’s point is that the people may have thought they had all the time in the world, but they did not. They would not live forever, and neither would they always have prophets to personally proclaim God’s word to them.

Zechariah 13:1-2 is even more explicit on that point: “In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness. 2 And it shall come to pass in that day, saith the LORD of hosts, that I will cut off the names of the idols out of the land, and they shall no more be remembered: and also I will cause the prophets and the unclean spirit to pass out of the land.”

“In that day.” When? When the fountain would be opened for sin – that happened when Jesus came. Revelation 21:6 – “I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely.” John 7:39 – “He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.”

And what would happen “in that day?” The prophets and the unclean spirits would pass out of the land. Hebrews 1:1-2 tells us the same thing about the prophets: “God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, 2 Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds.”

And what about the unclean spirits? Well, those who go around today performing exorcisms need to carefully consider Zechariah 13:2.

One final point about Zechariah is that everyone should circle Zechariah 6:13 in their Bible, and in the margin they should write Hebrews 7:12.

Zechariah 6:13 And he shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule upon his throne; and he shall be a priest upon his throne.

Hebrews 7:12 For the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law.

I was living in Austin in the late 90’s, and there was Baptist church building that I would drive by every day. They had a sign in front of their building, and all throughout the Bill Clinton scandal it read, “The Seventh Commandment Has Never Been Repealed.” While I certainly agree that God’s view on adultery has not changed, I do not agree that the Seventh Commandment has never been

repealed. (I noticed they were always closed on the Sabbath Day in violation of the Fourth Commandment.) The Old Law has been replaced. It is no longer in effect. How do we know that? Zechariah 6:13 and Hebrews 7:12.

The Old Law specified that priests were to come from the tribe of Levi, and Jesus was from the tribe of Judah, being a descendant of King David. That meant that Jesus could not be both king and priest under the old law, and yet Jesus is both king and priest. Therefore, the Old Law cannot be in effect today.

Before we proceed with verse 3, I want to say a few things about archealogy. Throughout these lessons, I often mention archeological discoveries that confirm what we are reading in the text. Why do I do that?

I am not doing that to convince you or myself that God's word is true. If that were our attitude, then it would suggest we are in doubt about the truthfulness any statement that is not accompanied with outside evidence – and I know that is not the case. Jesus said in John 17:17, “Thy word is truth,” and that statement did not come with a footnote!

Why then do I mention it? One reason is to point out the foolishness of betting against the Bible. Time and time again, those who claim that the Biblical text is mistaken find that they are the ones mistaken when archeological evidence is found confirming the truthfulness of the text.

A second reason is to help us reach out to those who do not have faith in God and who do not believe his word. The first step in teachong someone to obey the word is to convince them of the authority of that word – that it is something they should obey – and one way to do that is to show them evidence from outside the Bible.

A third reason is that (at least in my opinion) it is fascinating to see – either in person at a museum or in a photograph – items that date back to the same time we are now studying and that shed, in some cases, some additional light on the text that may help us understand it.

But all of this comes with a warning – we should never assume that the archeologists are neutral when it comes to the Bible. Most of them have a deeply ingrained bias against the Bible, and particularly against the use of the Bible as a book of history.

As an example, we have been studying about what we have called the second exodus of God's people from captivity. The first exodus, of course, was the exodus out of Egypt. Ask almost any archaeologist about that exodus, and you will be told that there is no evidence for it – none. You will be told that they went to where the Bible says the Jews were living while in Egypt, that they dug down to the right level, and they found no evidence of any Jews.

But is that all of the story, as Paul Harvey might have asked? No.

The archeologists are convinced that if the Exodus occurred it must have occurred in what they call the New Kingdom era of Egyptian history. What does the Bible say? 1 Kings 6:1 tells us that Solomon began to build the first temple 480 years after the first exodus. What happens if we go back that far, which takes us back into what is called the Middle Kingdom era of Egyptian history?

The area around the city of Ramesses in the land of Goshen has been excavated down to that time period (when it was known as Avaris). What was found?

- They found evidence of a huge Semitic population that occupied the area for hundreds of years.
- They found evidence that that huge population all left the area, taking their belongings with them.
- They found a large structure that was surrounded by 12 graves, with each grave having a memorial chapel on top.
- They found that one of the 12 graves was different from the others – its memorial chapel was shaped like a small pyramid, suggesting that whoever was buried there, although not a king, was honored in death as a king.
- They found the remains of a statue in the pyramid structure – a statue that had red hair and pale yellow skin, indicating it was not a statue of an Egyptian.
- On the torso of the statute they found faint multi-colored stripes.

And yet they will tell you there is no evidence for the exodus! Amazing? Definitely. Surprising? Definitely not.

Do not bet against the Bible. You will lose every time. Voltaire famously predicted that in 100 years the Bible would be a forgotten book. Voltaire is dead and gone, and his former house now belongs to the French Bible Society. The Bible will never fail to outlive its pall-bearers!

“Thy word is truth!” That is the verdict on the Bible from the Son of God, the word made flesh, and no one who disagrees with that statement by the Son of God can be a faithful child of God. Faith in God cannot be separated from faith in God’s word. Just as no one can have Christ apart from his church, no one can have God apart from his word.

Ezra 5:3-5

3 At the same time came to them Tatnai, governor on this side the river, and Shetharboznai, and their companions, and said thus unto them, Who hath commanded you to build this house, and to make up this wall? 4 Then said we unto them after this manner, What are the names of the men that make this building? 5 But the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews, that they could not cause them to cease, till the matter came to Darius: and then they returned answer by letter concerning this matter.

The first two years of Darius’ reign were stormy ones due to numerous revolts. Thus, it is natural that the authorities in the area would arrive to question the Jews about their building project and report their findings back to the king. Although their questions were logical (what are your names, and who gave you permission to do this?), their awareness of the project probably came from a report by the Jews’ troublemaking neighbors.

This was the type of construction normally carried out by royal edict and with resources of a

monarch. The construction of a temple or palatial structure without royal permission could signal an action against the interests of the throne, so this was a serious matter.

The “eye of their God” in verse 5 refers to God’s providential care over his people. (The same expression occurs also in Deuteronomy 11:12 and Psalm 33:18.) God knew what was happening, and he cared about what was happening. Persian kings had spies who were called the King’s Eye or the King’s Ear. God’s system of intelligence was much more efficient than Darius’ system! God’s network was omniscient, and the same is true today. God knows what is happening to his people.

Zechariah 4:10 For who hath despised the day of small things? for they shall rejoice, and shall see the plummet in the hand of Zerubbabel with those seven; they are the eyes of the LORD, which run to and fro through the whole earth.

The whole transaction of sending the report to Darius, searching the records, and sending back a reply would have taken four or five months. The governor could have easily stopped the work, but he did not. Why? Verse 5 tells us – it was the providence of God.

And how did the people respond? They continued to work even though they must have known that it all might be torn down again. They had faith that God would continue to open doors for them, and unlike the previous 16 year period of idleness, they now had Haggai and Zechariah to stir them up and move them forward. God opened a door for them, and they rushed through it – yet another lesson for us!

Tatnai in verse 3 is one of the few Persian officials mentioned in the Bible for whom there is external evidence. A tablet has been found naming Tatnai and dated in the year 502. Tatnai himself is now known by extra-Biblical evidence to have been at this time governor of Beyond the River only, and thus subordinate to Ushtannu, who was governor of Beyond the River and Babylon together.

Ezra 5:6-10

6 The copy of the letter that Tatnai, governor on this side the river, and Shetharboznai, and his companions the Apharsachites, which were on this side the river, sent unto Darius the king: 7 They sent a letter unto him, wherein was written thus; Unto Darius the king, all peace. 8 Be it known unto the king, that we went into the province of Judea, to the house of the great God, which is builded with great stones, and timber is laid in the walls, and this work goeth fast on, and prospereth in their hands. 9 Then asked we those elders, and said unto them thus, Who commanded you to build this house, and to make up these walls? 10 We asked their names also, to certify thee, that we might write the names of the men that were the chief of them.

Verses 6-10 contain the first part of the letter that the governor sent to Darius. What we find here is a report that is well organized and official – a remarkable historical document even apart from its religious significance. It presents (1) an account of their inspection of the work, (2) a record of

the questions they asked the Jews, (3) a lengthy account of the Jews' answer (in verses 11-16), and (4) a request that Darius check the records concerning Cyrus' decree (verse 17).

To some it seems odd that the Persian officials would use the phrase "the great God" in verse 8. But we have already seen that the Persians liked to use the religious language of their subject peoples. Also, the same phrase has been found on Persian tablets.

The "great stones" in verse 8 might be translated as "smooth stones" or "polished stones," although they may also have been large stones. There was something about the seriousness of this project that aroused the Persian's suspicions, and it may have been the size of the foundation stones.

As we have said, the questions (repeated in verses 9-10) were legitimate questions, and apparently the Jews were courteous in their responses. In fact, their response, which we will see next, may have played a role in the governor's positive attitude toward them. Yes, it was the providence of God, but yes – God helps those who help themselves.

The Apharsachites in verse 6 of the KJV is a transliteration of a Persian word meaning "officials" or "lesser governors," or possibly meaning "messengers" or "investigators." It is most likely **not** an ethnic group as no ethnic group by that name is known.

Verse 8 mentions that the temple was being built with stones and timbers. The first temple was also constructed this way – with three courses of stone and one of timber to be exact. (1 Kings 6:36 and 7:12) Archeologists have discovered other buildings constructed in this way, and they speculate that it may have been useful to counter earthquakes.

Ezra 5:11-17

11 And thus they returned us answer, saying, We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and build the house that was builded these many years ago, which a great king of Israel builded and set up. 12 But after that our fathers had provoked the God of heaven unto wrath, he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house, and carried the people away into Babylon. 13 But in the first year of Cyrus the king of Babylon the same king Cyrus made a decree to build this house of God. 14 And the vessels also of gold and silver of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple that was in Jerusalem, and brought them into the temple of Babylon, those did Cyrus the king take out of the temple of Babylon, and they were delivered unto one, whose name was Sheshbazzar, whom he had made governor; 15 And said unto him, Take these vessels, go, carry them into the temple that is in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be builded in his place. 16 Then came the same Sheshbazzar, and laid the foundation of the house of God which is in Jerusalem: and since that time even until now hath it been in building, and yet it is not finished. 17 Now therefore, if it seem good to the king, let there be search made in the king's treasure house, which is there at Babylon, whether it be so, that a decree was made of

Cyrus the king to build this house of God at Jerusalem, and let the king send his pleasure to us concerning this matter.

Verses 11-17 contain a record of the Jews' answer to the questions posed by the Persian governor, and the first thing we note is that Jews knew their own history, and they understood their own role in that history. Starting with the construction of the temple by Solomon, they described how it was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar and then ordered rebuilt by Cyrus.

Usually Cyrus is called the king of Persia (as in the decree itself in Ezra 1:2-4), but in verse 13 he is called the king of Babylon. Archeologists have found ancient inscriptions that also refer to Cyrus as the king of Babylon, and that title makes more sense in this context. The Jewish history with Cyrus begins with his victory over Babylon. It was during his first year as King of Babylon (not his first year as King of Persia) when this decree was made.

Cyrus' decree was the Jews' best argument. They had legal backing for what they were doing, and that legal backing gave them certain rights under the Persian system. And they had a special legal backing – Cyrus was still honored as the great founder of the Persian Empire. In fact, history tells us that Darius made efforts to follow the policies of Cyrus.

In verse 14, Sheshbazzar is called the governor, and we have discussed him in our earlier lessons, and particularly the uncertainty regarding his relation to Zerubbabel, another governor. Part of that uncertainty comes from verse 16, which says that Sheshbazzar laid the foundations of the house of God. Ezra 3:10 suggests that the foundations were laid under Zerubbabel. What is the answer?

First, and this is a subtle point, Ezra 5:14 is a record of what the Persians told the king they had been told by the Jews. Were the Jews speaking by inspiration when they answered the Persians? There is no indication they were. Were the Persians inspired when they wrote the letter to the king? There is no reason to believe they were. Thus, the Jews could have been mistaken in their answer, or the Persians could have mistakenly recorded that answer. All we know from inspiration is that we have a true record of the letter they sent the king. Do I think the statement in verse 16 is mistaken? No. But could it be mistaken? Yes – inspiration tells us that the Persian governor wrote it, and inspiration tells us that we have an accurate record of what he wrote, but it does not tell us that what the Persian governor wrote was correct.

Verse 16 may be a good example of that. Verse 16 reads: "Then came the same Sheshbazzar, and laid the foundation of the house of God which is in Jerusalem: and since that time even until now hath it been in building." Did the Jews say that, and was that correct? We don't know for sure that the Jews said it. All we know for sure is that the Persians told the king that the Jews said that. The Jews most likely said it, but inspiration is not vouching for the truthfulness of what these Persians were reporting.

Was the statement itself true? No. Verse 24 of the previous chapter tells us that the work stopped, and we know from this chapter that it did not resume until about 16 years had passed. Why would the Jews have said this knowing it was not true? Most likely they just wanted to connect their current efforts with the efforts sanctioned by Cyrus, and, as we say in Texas, they had been fixin' to get back on it for quite a while now!

So, back to our original question, how could Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel both lay the foundation? Some surmise that one started, while the other finished. Others suggest that one laid a foundation, but it had to be re-laid when the work was begun again under another. Others note that Sheshbazzar is credited in this Persian context (where crediting a Persian would have been helpful to the Jews' cause), whereas Zerubbabel is credited in the earlier Jewish context. This suggests the possibility that Sheshbazzar was a Persian leader, perhaps a Babylonian governor that Cyrus left in charge. (Ezra 1:8 does refer to him as the "prince of Judah," which many take to mean that he was Jewish, and possibly from the royal line, but others argue that the word "prince" in that verse could have been used as a synonym for "governor.")

Verse 17 requests that a search be made for this decree. Apparently the Jews did not possess a copy or they would have just shown it to the governor. (Another lesson for us, perhaps? Always keep good written records!)

We should note the courteousness of the Jews' response to the Persian officials. That courteousness likely played a role in the tone of the letter that went to Darius. The Bible is clear on how we should treat those in authority – and we should treat them with respect. (Romans 13:1-2, 1 Peter 2:13-14, 17, Titus 3:1, 1 Timothy 2:1-4) True, we should obey God rather than man (Acts 5:29), but we are obeying God when we treat our elected officials with respect because that is how God has told us to treat them. Any attack on authority, either authority in the nation or authority in the church, is an attack on God's authority.

Ezra 6:1

Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in the house of the rolls, where the treasures were laid up in Babylon.

King Darius takes notice of the letter and does what the letter suggested. He orders a search for the decree. No doubt the rebellions early in his reign made him particularly sensitive to issues such as this. Archaeologists have found rooms that were used to store documents and that were linked to royal treasuries.

Ezra 6:2

2 And there was found at Achmetha, in the palace that is in the province of the Medes, a roll, and therein was a record thus written:

Verse 2 includes two details that are very interesting historically. First, the decree was found on a scroll, and second, the decree was located not in Babylon but in Ecbatana (ehk-BAT-uh-nuh).

Because thousands of clay tablets from this time have been found, we generally assume that all writing was done on such tablets. But sources other than the Bible speak of the "royal parchments" on which the Persians kept records.

As for Ecbatana, it was the location of the king's summer palace because of its high elevation and comfortable climate. Cyrus lived in Babylon during the winter, in Susa during the spring, and in Ecbatana during the summer. We know that Cyrus spent the summer of 538 BC there. The name

was changed to Hamadan after the Muslim conquest.

Ezra 6:3-5

3 In the first year of Cyrus the king the same Cyrus the king made a decree concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, Let the house be builded, the place where they offered sacrifices, and let the foundations thereof be strongly laid; the height thereof threescore cubits, and the breadth thereof threescore cubits; 4 With three rows of great stones, and a row of new timber: and let the expenses be given out of the king's house: 5 And also let the golden and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took forth out of the temple which is at Jerusalem, and brought unto Babylon, be restored, and brought again unto the temple which is at Jerusalem, every one to his place, and place them in the house of God.

Verses 3-5 provide a record of Cyrus' decree, and the first thing we notice is that it is different from the decree we saw in Chapter 1. As we discussed in that earlier lesson, this version of the decree appears to have been a memorandum to the royal treasurer regarding the expenses for the rebuilding of the temple. It was possibly a longer document with only the relevant portion being reproduced here. The version of the decree in Ezra 1 was a public announcement.

Verse 3 says "its height shall be sixty cubits and its breadth sixty cubits." Some point out that such a temple could not have been built in the place of the original temple because the original temple was sixty cubits by 20 cubits (1 Kings 6:2). What is the explanation? First (and once again), inspiration tells us that this is what Cyrus wrote to his treasurer; it does not vouch for the veracity of what Cyrus wrote. Second (and also once again), Hebrew and Aramaic numbers were difficult to copy, and thus we may have simply had a scribal error here.

It is remarkable that Cyrus' decree in verse 5 regarding the gold and silver vessels agrees so well with what the Jews told the Persian official in 5:14-15. As one commentator noted, it certainly lends credence to the integrity of their report. Jeremiah had prophesied that these items would be carried off to Babylon and later returned. (Jeremiah 27:21-22) We discussed earlier how important that was to the Jews.

One point on which this memorandum version of the decree is much more explicit than the public version is on this important issue of who was to pay for the restoration. Verse 4 says to "let the expenses be given out of the king's house." The public version in Chapter 1 does not include that statement, but it is most likely implied by 1:2 – "he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem." In any event, there is no doubt here about who was to pay.

Ezra 6:6-7

6 Now therefore, Tatnai, governor beyond the river, Shetharboznai, and your companions the Apharsachites, which are beyond the river, be ye far from thence: 7 Let the work of this house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews build this

house of God in his place.

After recording the decree by Cyrus, verse 6 picks up again with the message from Darius to the Persian officials, and that message in verse 6 is for them to keep away. That phrase is actually a technical legal term that means the accusations were rejected. The Jews had won their case! “Let the work of this house of God alone!” How wonderful that command must have sounded to the Jews!

We would suppose that the governor in verse 7 is Zerubbabel, although he is not mentioned by name. (In fact, after 5:2, he is never mentioned again in the book of Ezra, which may be good news to those tired of hearing about the Sheshbazzar/Zerubbabel conundrum!)

Ezra 6:8-10

8 Moreover I make a decree what ye shall do to the elders of these Jews for the building of this house of God: that of the king's goods, even of the tribute beyond the river, forthwith expenses be given unto these men, that they be not hindered. 9 And that which they have need of, both young bullocks, and rams, and lambs, for the burnt offerings of the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, and oil, according to the appointment of the priests which are at Jerusalem, let it be given them day by day without fail: 10 That they may offer sacrifices of sweet savours unto the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king, and of his sons.

The Jews were likely very anxious about what Darius would say, but their fears turned out to be unfounded. They had likely imagined the worst, but God gave them the best. It reminds me of one of my favorite Mark Twain quotes, “I’ve lived through some terrible things in my life, some of which actually happened.”

In fact, what could have been bad news, turned out to be tremendously good news. Those Persian officials (prodded along by the Jews’ troublesome neighbors) had indirectly done the Jews a huge favor – they once again had funding for their project from the king! As the poet William Cowper wrote, “The clouds ye so much dread are big with mercy” – and that was certainly the case here.

Some are surprised by Darius’ concern for the details of the Jewish worship in verses 9-10. As before, the most likely explanation is that he had help from a Jewish scribe in writing this letter. Many, and in fact most, of the Jews were still living in Babylon. Had Daniel died by this time? Perhaps likely, but not necessarily. It is possible that he was working behind the scenes as an advisor to King Darius. (This was **not** the same Darius who threw Daniel into the lion’s den.)

Verse 10 shows us that Darius took these religious matters seriously. He wanted the Jews to pray for his life and the lives of his sons. We saw a similar request in the Cyrus Cylinder – “May all the gods whom I have resettled in their sacred cities ask daily Bel and Nebo for a long life for me and may they recommend me to him.” Whether requested or not, Christians today should be praying for all of those in authority.

1 Timothy 2:1-2 I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and

giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.

Ezra 6:11-12

11 Also I have made a decree, that whosoever shall alter this word, let timber be pulled down from his house, and being set up, let him be hanged thereon; and let his house be made a dunghill for this. 12 And the God that hath caused his name to dwell there destroy all kings and people, that shall put to their hand to alter and to destroy this house of God which is at Jerusalem. I Darius have made a decree; let it be done with speed.

In verse 11 we find the penalty for anyone who would alter the king's edict, and it is quite severe: "a beam shall be pulled out of his house, and he shall be hanged or impaled on it, and his house shall be made a dunghill." Once again, a Jewish scribe may have had a hand in crafting this penalty! But we know that it was common for ancient covenants to include curses against those who broke them, and many ancient decrees include punishments for those who disobeyed. Here the justice is a bit poetic – anyone who harms God's house will have his own house destroyed.

The word "hanged" in verse 11 is better translated impaled. Impalement on a sharpened pole was an excruciatingly painful and deadly form of punishment. It was practiced by the Assyrians as portrayed in the reliefs depicting their conquest of Lachish in the time of King Hezekiah. These were recovered from Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh by Austen Henry Layard in the mid-1800s. This method of punishment was apparently taken over by the Persians. It was certainly no idle threat. History tells us that Darius once had 3,000 Babylonians impaled to crush a rebellion.

Verse 12 contains an additional curse. The phrase "the God who has caused his name to dwell there destroy all kings and people" recalls Deuteronomy 12:5 and is the strongest indication that a Jewish scribe helped Darius prepare this letter. And Darius was almost speaking as a prophet here because we know from Daniel that God would indeed overthrow kings and peoples as part of his plan to usher in his eternal kingdom.