

Lesson 4: Ezra 4:7 – 6:22

Verse 7 is part of a parenthetical section that began in verse 6 and that will continue through verse 23. The mentions of Darius in verse 5 and in verse 24 mark the boundaries of the excursion. As we discussed, the reason for this brief look at the intervening history between the days of Zerubbabel and the days of Ezra is so that the reader will understand the depth of animosity that was directed to the Jews by their neighbors.

Verses 7-8

7 In the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam and Mithredath and Tabeel and the rest of their associates wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia. The letter was written in Aramaic and translated. 8 Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king as follows:

Artaxerxes was the Persian king who followed Xerxes I and reigned from 464 until 424. He became king by murdering his older brother. It was during his reign that Ezra returned in 458 and Nehemiah returned in 445. Again, we are told that the opposition continued into this king's reign, but here we are given more detail, including a copy of an actual letter sent to the king by the opponents.

A major concern during the first half of Artaxerxes' reign was the Egyptian revolt that began in 460 and that was supported by the Greeks. That revolt in nearby Egypt would have caused the king to listen very seriously to these charges of sedition in Palestine.

In Chapter 2 we saw the wall of honor. Here we see a wall of dishonor, as the Bible records the names of the opponents: Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, Rehum, and Shimshai.

From verse 8 until 6:18, the text is in Aramaic. Why the switch? Most likely it was because Ezra's source documents, the letters and the replies, were written in Aramaic. Since the Jews became bilingual during the exile, Ezra simply also recorded his comments on the letters in Aramaic to avoid switching back and forth.

Verses 9-10

9 Rehum the commander, Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their associates, the judges, the governors, the officials, the Persians, the men of Erech, the Babylonians, the men of Susa, that is, the Elamites, 10 and the rest of the nations whom the

great and noble Osnappar deported and settled in the cities of Samaria and in the rest of the province Beyond the River.

Verses 9-10 probably came from the official summary of the letter that would have been located on the outside of the papyrus scroll.

The “noble Osnappar” in verse 10 is King Ashurbanipal, who ruled Assyria from 669 until 633. We don’t have any other record of his settling other people in Israel, but we know it was the Assyrian custom to do so.

Verses 11-16

11 (This is a copy of the letter that they sent.) “To Artaxerxes the king: Your servants, the men of the province Beyond the River, send greeting. And now 12 be it known to the king that the Jews who came up from you to us have gone to Jerusalem. They are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city. They are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations. 13 Now be it known to the king that if this city is rebuilt and the walls finished, they will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and the royal revenue will be impaired. 14 Now because we eat the salt of the palace and it is not fitting for us to witness the king’s dishonor, therefore we send and inform the king, 15 in order that search may be made in the book of the records of your fathers. You will find in the book of the records and learn that this city is a rebellious city, hurtful to kings and provinces, and that sedition was stirred up in it from of old. That was why this city was laid waste. 16 We make known to the king that if this city is rebuilt and its walls finished, you will then have no possession in the province Beyond the River.”

The text of the letter appears in verses 11-16. At this point, we should probably pause and consider an important reminder about inspiration. Yes, the Bible is the inspired word of God, but not every statement in the Bible is true. For example, the statement by Satan to Eve in Genesis 3:4 (“You will not surely die”) was not a true statement. (It directly contradicted what God said in Genesis 2:17.) While inspiration tells us that Satan made that statement in Genesis 3:4, the statement itself is false. Likewise here, inspiration tells us that these verses accurately record the contents of this letter, but as for the statements in the letter, we know that it contains false accusations and false statements. (For starts, King Ashurbanipal in verse 10 was neither great nor noble.) The contents of this letter are not inspired statements from God. All that inspiration tells us about this letter is that Ezra accurately reported it (just as Moses accurately recorded the words of Satan in Genesis 3). “The whole letter is inflammatory and a gross exaggeration and cannot be used to

determine Jewish activity other than the fact that some building was underway.” (This error is quite common. Many people, for example, pull verses out of Job to prove various points without remembering what God said about many of those verses in Job 42:7 – “My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.”) We need to keep this point in mind as we read the letters in these chapters.

The phrase “from you” in verse 12 suggests that the Jews under discussion here were the ones who first came from the king himself, which would be Ezra’s group who returned in 458. (Since Nehemiah had a specific mandate to rebuild the city, it could not refer to his group.) In Nehemiah 1:3, Nehemiah received news that the wall was broken down and the gates burned. That may have been the wall started here, and its destruction may have been the result of Artaxerxes’ reply in verses 18-22.

The foundations in verse 12 are not the foundations of the temple. By the reign of Artaxerxes, the new temple had been standing for half a century. Instead, verse 12 is talking about the foundations of the city.

Three different words for taxes are used in verse 13. (Some things never change!) They refer to a monetary tax, a payment in kind (oil, grain, etc.), and a duty tax. After his costly campaign against the Greeks, Artaxerxes could not afford to overlook any revenue. The opposition played on the king’s fears that he might lose revenue or perhaps even lose the whole western province (verse 16). Of course, there is no mention of their true motives, which were *not* to help the king collect taxes or keep his kingdom intact!

The phrase “we are under obligation to the palace” in verse 14 is literally “we have eaten the salt of the palace,” which is how the ESV renders it. Salt was often used to seal covenants, and thus came to symbolize loyalty. “Eating the salt of” was an idiom for “being in the service of” or “receiving a salary from.” Our word “salary” comes from the Latin *salarium*, which means “salt money.”

The Persian kings considered themselves the successors of the Babylonian kings, which is why the Babylonian kings are referred to as their fathers or predecessors in verse 15.

Verses 17-22

17 The king sent an answer: “To Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe and the rest of their associates who live in Samaria and in the rest of the province Beyond the River, greeting. And now 18 the letter that you sent to us has been

plainly read before me. 19 And I made a decree, and search has been made, and it has been found that this city from of old has risen against kings, and that rebellion and sedition have been made in it. 20 And mighty kings have been over Jerusalem, who ruled over the whole province Beyond the River, to whom tribute, custom, and toll were paid. 21 Therefore make a decree that these men be made to cease, and that this city be not rebuilt, until a decree is made by me. 22 And take care not to be slack in this matter. Why should damage grow to the hurt of the king?"

Verses 17-22 give us the king's reply to the letter in verses 11-16. He apparently believes the threats against his reign are genuine, and he orders that the rebuilding be stopped. (Letters took about a week to travel back and forth between Samaria and Persia.)

This order raises the question of contradictory orders—how could this be the same king who later sends Nehemiah back to rebuild the walls. The answer is in verse 21—the king said that the city would not be rebuilt “until a decree is made by me.” “Without that providential addition, Nehemiah would have had a difficult time gaining the king's approval for his plans to rebuild.” Esther 8:8 and Daniel 6:8 tell us that “an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked.” The situation that moved Nehemiah to pray and act may have been the events described here.

Verse 23

23 Then, when the copy of King Artaxerxes' letter was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their associates, they went in haste to the Jews at Jerusalem and by force and power made them cease.

In verse 22, the king ordered the Jewish adversaries “take care not to be slack in this matter” of stopping the rebuilding. That is one order he certainly did not need to worry about being followed! Verse 23 tells us that they showed no slackness at all in obeying the king's command—they went in haste to do so. (But isn't that always the way with troublemakers!)

By force and power they caused the rebuilding to end. They likely also destroyed the work that had already been done, which may be the destruction reported in Nehemiah 1:3—“the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates have been burned with fire.” Notice that the king had told them only to halt the rebuilding—he had not given them permission to destroy what had already been rebuilt.

Verse 24

24 Then the work on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped, and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

The word “then” at the beginning of verse 24 sounds as if this verse is describing what happened after verse 23, but that can’t be the case since Darius in verse 24 reigned *before* Artaxerxes. Instead, as we discussed earlier, verses 6-23 should have parenthesis or brackets around them. That parenthetical statement was inserted to show the real attitude of those who offered their help in verse 2 and to show the depth of their adversity against the Jews. Verse 24 is picking up from verse 5 (which also mentions Darius).

Thus, the work that started under King Cyrus has now ceased due to the opposition of the Jews’ neighbors. That work would remain halted through the remainder of Cyrus’ reign and through the reigns of Cambyses II and Smerdis. It would not begin again until the second year of Darius the Great’s reign, which would be in 520—the same year that Haggai and Zechariah began to preach about the people’s neglect of the temple project. It would be completed five year later in 515.

Ezra 5

Verses 1-2

1 Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them. 2 Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and the prophets of God were with them, supporting them.

There is a jump in time between Ezra 4 and Ezra 5. Work on the temple had been stopped for about 16 years. How do we know that? We get the dates for these events, not from verses 1-2, but from the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah. Haggai 1:1, for example, begins with a specific date: “In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, in the first day of the month.” The second year of Darius the king is 520 BC.

It seems that the people had used the opposition as an excuse to do nothing for God’s house, and instead had turned their focus to their own houses. They had given in to the fear we saw in 3:3 and to the

discouragement we saw in 4:4-5. We find from Haggai and Zechariah that they had set aside spiritual concerns in favor of physical concerns. (This is just another example of the timeless messages of the Old Testament prophets. Yes, the prophets spoke to a specific people about specific problems, but their messages are as relevant today as they were when they were delivered.)

What was the cure for that fear? What was the cure for that discouragement? Simple – the bold proclamation of the word of God. Haggai and Zechariah declared God’s word to the people, and, as we will see, it awoke them from their stupor. If we face fear and discouragement today, the solution is the same – the bold proclamation of God’s word.

Zerubbabel and Jeshua in verse 2 are the same two leaders we have seen before. They are mentioned many times in Haggai and Zechariah, and, as we have discussed, Zechariah used them as a figure of the perfect priest/king who was to come.

Haggai and Zechariah show that Zerubbabel was an important leader and refer to him as “governor of Judah.” Thus, it seems strange that he disappears from Ezra’s narrative and is not even mentioned in Ezra’s description of the completion of the temple. Some have conjectured that Zerubbabel was involved in a rebellion and was removed by the Persians. Some even suggest that Zechariah’s prophecies about the coming priest-king may have caused some to push him forward as the messiah in such a rebellion. But that is all just conjecture, and neither Haggai nor Zechariah speaks against the Persian government. A more likely answer is that Zerubbabel died before the temple was completed, but we don’t know for sure.

Verses 3-5

3 At the same time Tattenai the governor of the province Beyond the River and Shethar-bozenai and their associates came to them and spoke to them thus: “Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?” 4 They also asked them this: “What are the names of the men who are building this building?” 5 But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until the report should reach Darius and then an answer be returned by letter concerning it.

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.

The "eye of their God" refers to God's providential care over his people. He 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.

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 walked through it – yet another lesson for us!

Verses 6-10

6 This is a copy of the letter that Tattenai the governor of the province Beyond the River and Shethar-bozenai and his associates, the governors who were in the province Beyond the River, sent to Darius the king. 7 They sent him a report, in which was written as follows: "To Darius the king, all peace. 8 Be it known to the king that we went to the province of Judah, to the house of the great God. It is being built with huge stones, and timber is laid in the walls. This work goes on diligently and prospers in their hands. 9 Then we asked those elders and spoke to them thus: 'Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?' 10 We also asked them their names, for your information, that we might write down the names of their leaders.

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 phrase can be translated “the great house of God.”

The “huge stones” in verse 8 might be translated as “smooth stones” or “polished stones,” although they may also been huge. 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.

Verses 11-17

11 And this was their reply to us: ‘We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the house that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished. 12 But because our fathers had angered the God of heaven, he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house and carried away the people to Babylonia. 13 However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, Cyrus the king made a decree that this house of God should be rebuilt. 14 And the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple that was in Jerusalem and brought into the temple of Babylon, these Cyrus the king took out of the temple of Babylon, and they were delivered to one whose name was Sheshbazzar, whom he had made governor; 15 and he said to him, “Take these vessels, go and put them in the temple that is in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be rebuilt on its site.” 16 Then this Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and from that time until now it has been in building, and it is not yet finished.’ 17 Therefore, if it seems good to the king, let search be made in the royal archives there in Babylon, to see whether a decree was issued by Cyrus the king for the rebuilding of this house of God in Jerusalem. And let the king send us his pleasure in 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 ordered rebuilt by Cyrus.

Usually Cyrus is called the king of Persia, 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.

This 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 confusion regarding his relation to Zerubbabel, another governor. Part of that confusion 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.

So 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 worked was begun again under another. Others note that Sheshbazzar is credited in this Persian context, 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.

Ezra 6

Verse 1

1 Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in Babylonia, in the house of the archives where the documents were stored.

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.

Verse 2a

2 And in Ecbatana, the capital that is in the province of Media, a scroll was found on which this was 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.

Verses 2b-5

2b “A record. 3 In the first year of Cyrus the king, Cyrus the king issued a decree: Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the house be rebuilt, the place where sacrifices

were offered, and let its foundations be retained. Its height shall be sixty cubits and its breadth sixty cubits, 4 with three layers of great stones and one layer of timber. Let the cost be paid from the royal treasury. 5 And also let the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple that is in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be restored and brought back to the temple that is in Jerusalem, each to its place. You shall put 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 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 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 items 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)

Verses 6-7

6 "Now therefore, Tattenai, governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and your associates the governors who are 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.

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!

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!)

Verses 8-10

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 men in full and without delay from the royal revenue, the tribute of the province from Beyond the River. 9 And whatever is needed—bulls, rams, or sheep for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, or oil, as the priests at Jerusalem require—let that be given to them day by day without fail, 10 that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the life of the king and his sons.

The Jews were likely very anxious about what Darius would say, but their fears turned out to be unfounded. 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! “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.

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.”

Verses 11-12

11 Also I make a decree that if anyone alters this edict, a beam shall be pulled out of his house, and he shall be impaled on it, and his house shall be made a dunghill. 12 May the God who has caused his name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who shall put out a hand to alter this, or to destroy this house of God that is in Jerusalem. I Darius make a decree; let it be done with all diligence.”

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 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.

Verse 12 contains an additional curse. The phrase “the God who has caused his name to dwell there” 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.

Verses 13-15

13 Then, according to the word sent by Darius the king, Tattenai, the governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their associates did with all diligence what Darius the king had ordered. 14 And the elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. They finished their building by decree of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king 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 Darius the king.

In these verses we are reaching the grand conclusion of the first half of Ezra – the rebuilding of the temple. God’s providence has been seen throughout, but no more so than here at the end where Darius the Great is seen moving to help God’s people as God pulls his strings. As one commentator noted, this victory of God’s people clearly displays the providence of God at work through these pagan potentates.

God used foreign kings and foreign peoples to accomplish his plan. God raised up prophets from among his own people to accomplish his plan. God used his own people to accomplish his plan. He opened doors using the enemies of his people (who reported the building efforts to the local Persian officials), and he opened doors using royal decrees. We, too, are a part of God’s plan, we, too, have a role to play in that great plan, and we, too, are presented with great open doors. These people walked through that door. Do we?

Verse 14 says that the people “finished their building by decree of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia.” The most powerful word on earth at that time was the

decree of a Persian king, but that king was being directed by an infinitely more powerful decree.

The inclusion of King Artaxerxes in verse 14 requires an explanation because he didn't become king until much later than these events in 515 BC. Instead, he was the king when Ezra and Nehemiah returned in 458 and 445 BC. Why is he included here with Cyrus and Darius?

The most likely answer is one that we have seen before – the author jumped out of the chronology for a moment to make a point. Remember, this book was written after the walls had been built under Artaxerxes, and the author was looking back through history to the times of Cyrus and Darius. Just as he included the (then future) opposition during the reign of Artaxerxes in Chapter 4, here in Chapter 6 included the support for the Jews that also occurred during the reign of Artaxerxes (although that support involved rebuilding the walls rather than rebuilding the temple).

Verse 14 makes it clear that the building (not just of the temple) would continue with divine direction and Persian support through the time of Artaxerxes. One commentator describes verse 14 as the key verse book in the book of Ezra.

And finally in verse 15 the temple was completed! Haggai and Zechariah began preaching in 520 BC, and the temple was completed about five years later on March 12, 515 BC (converting to our own calendar). This great event occurred 72 years after the destruction of the temple in 587.

The people had started off strong, but through disobedience and neglect they had wandered away from God and had eventually been carried off into captivity after witnessing the destruction of their temple. Now that temple had been restored. How? By Godly people who turned back to God's word to discover how he wanted them to live and how he wanted them to worship. God's plan continued through the process of restoration – as it did yet again in our own recent history, and as it will likely do again if the present digression continues unabated. One thing is certain – God will accomplish his plans.

Verses 16-18

16 And 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 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel 12 male goats, according to the

number of the tribes of Israel. 18 And they set the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their divisions, for the service of God at Jerusalem, as it is written in the Book of Moses.

Now comes the celebration! We should always take the time to celebrate great victories. The term translated “dedication” is Hanukah, the name of the Jewish holiday that celebrates a similar dedication of this same temple after its defilement by the Seleucid King Antiochus IV in 165 BC. (Following a major renovation by Herod, the “second temple” was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70.)

We can also compare this dedication with that of the first temple under Solomon in 1 Kings 8. There the number of sacrificed animals was much greater: 22,000 cattle and 120,000 sheep and goats.

In verse 17, the people offered 12 male goats as a sin offering “for all Israel.” Again, we see the theme of continuity. Even though most of the former exiles were from the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and Levi, all of the tribes were represented by this sacrifice. They were collectively the people of God, and they were collectively the heirs of his covenants.

In verse 18, the organization of the priests and the Levites was reinstated as it was practiced before the exile. And how did they know how to do that? Verse 18 tells us that, also: “as it is written in the Book of Moses.” Restoration must begin with a return to the word of God.

But that book was so dated! It was so old! These people were much more sophisticated now! They had much better ideas about how to do things! Surely God was looking for a modern approach to go along with their new modern temple – right? Wrong! They turned back to the unchanging word of God to discover what God wanted them to do, and men today must do the same thing.

The Aramaic section of Ezra that began in 4:8 ends in verse 18. From verse 19 onward the text is once again in Hebrew.

Verses 19-22

19 On the fourteenth day of the first month, the returned exiles kept the Passover. 20 For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together; all of them were clean. So they slaughtered 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 every one who had joined them and separated

himself from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to worship the LORD, the God of Israel. 22 And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, 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 of the house of God, the God of Israel.

The fourteenth day of the first month was the day stipulated in Exodus 12:6 for celebrating the Passover. In 515 BC it would have been on April 21 according to our calendar.

The Passover, as we know, commemorated Israel's deliverance from Egypt and also prefigured our redemption by Christ's death ("For even Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us." 1 Cor. 5:7)

Although Passover's were celebrated yearly, they were typically only recorded when they were celebrated in relation to some important event, and most often when associated with revival movements, such as under Hezekiah in 2 Chronicles 30, under Josiah in 2 Chronicles 35, and here in Ezra 6.

The purification of the priests in verse 20 would have involved a ritual washing with water as described in Exodus 29:4 and Numbers 8:7. Hezekiah's great Passover celebration had to be delayed because there were not enough ceremonially pure priests. (2 Chronicles 30:3)

Verse 21 confirms that this group included some Jews who had remained behind when the others were taken away into exile. Apparently, many of them had assimilated themselves with the non-Jewish people who lived there, and some of them had been encouraged by these returning exiles and the by the prophets to return to the religious requirements of the Law of Moses. These non-exiled Jews were welcome to join the exiles, but each had "to separate himself from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to worship the LORD, the God of Israel."

The Feast of the Unleavened Bread in verse 22 was a separate feast that started the day after the Passover and lasted for seven days, but it was so closely associated with the Passover that the two were often treated as one feast.

The theme of verse 21 is joy. Throughout the Bible, joy is the characteristic of those who trust in God. In the Old Testament, thirteen different Hebrew roots (27 different words) are used to express joy in worshipping God, which tells us how important that

concept was to the Jewish people. As Nehemiah would tell them later in Nehemiah 8:10, “for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

The deeper we go in our study of God’s word and our desire to know God and please God, the more joyous we become. If we lack joy, it is an indication that we are living on the surface – that we have just enough religion to make us miserable!

We end Chapter 6 with another puzzle – why does the author mention the “king of Assyria” in verse 22? But this puzzle is an easy one when we remember that a major theme in this book is continuity. The trouble began with the Assyrians, and that empire had continued all the way to the present day, albeit through the Babylonians and then through the Persians. Even Herodotus recognized this continuity when he referred to Babylon as the capital of Assyria. The Gentile oppression had begun under the Assyrians, as Nehemiah also recognized:

Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who keepest covenant and mercy, let not all the trouble seem little before thee, that hath come upon us, on our kings, on our princes, and on our priests, and on our prophets, and on our fathers, and on all thy people, **since the time of the kings of Assyria unto this day.** (Nehemiah 9:32)

Although the Gentile domination was not over, God had given his people a brief period of favor in the eyes of the foreign kings.

One commentator says that the reference in verse 22 to Darius as the king of Assyria is “perhaps the most significant statement about Persia in the book.”

So where are we at the end of Ezra 6? The first return under the decree of Cyrus has occurred and the goal of that return has been accomplished with the dedication of the second temple. Ezra 6 ends with a joyous celebration over the victory of God’s people.

What happens next? Ezra 7 will begin almost 60 years after the events in Ezra 6, with the second return under Ezra in 458. But we are not going to study the second half of Ezra until after we look at what happened between those two chapters, and we read about those events in the book of Esther, which is centered on the royal city of Susa. Other than a brief note about Xerxes in 4:6, Ezra tells us nothing about this interim period.