

## LESSON 13

Last week, we started Ezra 5, and when class ended we were looking at the first two verses of Ezra 5.

Haggai and Zechariah are both mentioned in Ezra 5:1, and we were looking briefly at their messages for the people. What they told the people forms the backdrop for the events we see here in Ezra 5 and 6. Although the temple had been started in Ezra 3, that work had stopped due to the opposition of the Jews' neighbors. Ezra 4 gave us examples of the trouble they caused from this time all the way up to the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.

So the work on the temple had been stopped for about 15 years, but then God sent Haggai and Zechariah to rouse the people from their slumber and to cause them to get busy doing what God wanted them to do – rebuild the temple. And that is what they did. What did Haggai and Zechariah say to create such a dramatic turn around?

Last week, we looked at the message of Haggai – consider your ways! Haggai told the people that their priorities had changed. They were no longer focused on God as they had been in Ezra 3, but now they were focused on themselves. Instead of building God's house, they were building their own homes. And we also saw how Haggai briefly lifted the prophetic curtain to show them the perfect king who was coming through the line of David and Zerubbabel.

### What was the message of Zechariah?

First, we should note something very interesting about Haggai and Zechariah, something that tells us a bit about God reaches people. In some ways, Haggai and Zechariah were almost complete opposites!

Haggai was most likely quite old, having seen the original temples with his own eyes. In contrast, the evidence suggests that Zechariah was quite young – likely in his twenties when the temple was completed in 515 BC.

Also, the message of Haggai for the most part is very straightforward. It is very hard to misunderstand his message – Consider your ways! Get busy! Be pure! Do what is right!

But the message of Zechariah is very different! It is long and obscure. Zechariah is a difficult book. It has many signs and symbols and visions that are hard to understand, and, in fact, it has been called

the Apocalypse of the Old Testament. The book of Revelation quotes Zechariah about 30 times making Zechariah second only to Ezekiel in that regard.

Zechariah is anything but straightforward, and it was especially so to those who initially received it. Why do I say that? Because when we study the book of Zechariah, we have the New Testament to help us understand it – they did not.

And even with the New Testament as a guide, many have given up trying to understand the book. One commentary I have is called *The Evasive Text: Zechariah 1-8 and the Frustrated Readers*. In the preface, the author of that commentary (if we can call it that!) confesses that he doesn't understand Zechariah! He writes:

“It is finally concluded that Zechariah lacks a concrete symbolic logic, defies grammatical conventions, and is unreadable as it stands - and always was this way.”

That statement is, of course, completely wrong, as we saw when we studied those chapters, but it does show the problems some have had with this book. And the book doesn't get any easier after Chapter 8. Martin Luther began his commentary of Zechariah Chapter 14 by writing:

“In this chapter I surrender, for I am not certain of what the prophet treats.”

One of the most important lessons we got from our own study of Zechariah is that the Bible can be understood. We went through that book verse by verse, using the rest of the Bible as our guide along with our own common sense and secular history, and we made sense of that book, which many say is the most difficult book in the Bible to understand.

And one thing we saw is that a major goal of Zechariah was to open the eyes of the people to the great King who was coming from among them – a great king who was coming to bless the entire world and establish his unshakable, immovable, eternal kingdom.

Zechariah is second only to Isaiah in its number of Messianic prophecies. It is wonderful to think about the returned exiles listening to Zechariah in 520 BC. They were focused on their current situation and the need to restore their temple – and Zechariah was preaching Christ to them! It makes me think of Matthew 12:6 – “But I say unto you, That in this place is one greater than the temple.”

Here are some of the key prophecies in this short book, and, as I read them, think about the people who first heard them – who they were, where they were, and what they were doing. God lifted the

curtain for them to provide a glimpse of the perfect priest-king who was to come – including both his eternal glory and his perfect sacrificial death.

Zechariah 3:8 – For, behold, I will bring forth my servant the BRANCH.

Zechariah 6:12-13 – And speak unto him, saying, Thus speaketh the LORD of hosts, saying, Behold the man whose name is The BRANCH; and he shall grow up out of his place, and he shall build the temple of the LORD: Even he shall build the temple of the LORD; and he shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule upon his throne; and he shall be a priest upon his throne: and the counsel of peace shall be between them both.

Zechariah 9:9 – Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass.

Zechariah 11:12-13 – And I said unto them, If ye think good, give me my price; and if not, forbear. So they weighed for my price thirty pieces of silver. And the LORD said unto me, Cast it unto the potter: a goodly price that I was prised at of them. And I took the thirty pieces of silver, and cast them to the potter in the house of the LORD.

Zechariah 12:10 – And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn.

Zechariah 13:7 – Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow, saith the LORD of hosts: smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered: and I will turn mine hand upon the little ones.

Zechariah 14:8 – And it shall be in that day, that living waters shall go out from Jerusalem; half of them toward the former sea, and half of them toward the hinder sea: in summer and in winter shall it be.

Zechariah proclaimed Christ to God's people 520 years before Christ came into this world – and some of the descendants of those people were ready and waiting when that great day came.

Luke 2:25 – And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same

man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel.

Why? Why was the temple there? Why were faithful people there? Why were they waiting? How did they know? Ezra and Zechariah answer all of those questions.

Zechariah was preaching about Jesus at the same time as the events we see in Ezra 5, and his message, along with that of Haggai, caused the people to get back to work and do what God wanted them to do. What they were doing was vital to God's plan to later bless the entire world as he had promised to Abraham.

Now let's get back to Ezra 5.

## 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. And so, 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' trouble making 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 any large structure without royal permission could signal an action against the interests of the throne, so this was considered a very serious matter.

The "eye of their God" in verse 5 refers to God's loving providential care over his people. We find the same expression elsewhere.

Deuteronomy 11:12 – A land which the LORD thy God careth for: the eyes of the LORD thy God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year even unto the end of the year.

Psalm 33:18 – Behold, the eye of the LORD is upon them that fear him, upon them that hope in his mercy;

The message of this reference to the eyes of God is clear – God knows what was happening, and God cares about what was happening. Nothing escapes his notice. And God knows who is on his side, and who is not.

2 Timothy 2:19 – Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his.

Persian kings had spies who were called the King's Eye or the King's Ear. And so what we see here is that the eyes of God were watching the eyes and ears of Darius and what they were saying and doing to his people. Would the work stop again? Verse 5 gives us some important foreshadowing!

The whole transaction of sending the report to Darius, searching the records, and sending back a reply could have taken four or five months. (The letter exchange would have taken just a few weeks, but the search would have taken longer.) The governor could have easily stopped the work while he waited for that reply, but he did not. Why? Verse 5 tells us why not – the providence of God.

The providence of God and how it works are often not easy to explain, but it is easy to recognize when we see it. We see it here in Ezra 5:5, and we see it today as God continues to providentially care for his people.

But providence is often a two-way street. God does the main part, but he often relies on his people to also do their part by responding in faith and obedience.

And how did the people respond here? They continued to work even though they must have known that it all might be torn down again. Earlier they had become discouraged and stopped. What was different now? Haggai and Zechariah!

The people now 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.

What we see next is the actual letter that Tatnai sent back to King Darius. In chapter 4, we saw an actual letter sent to King Artaxerxes, but keep in mind that that letter in Ezra 4 was written long after this letter in Ezra 5. The letter in Ezra 4 concerned the rebuilding of the city and the walls, while this letter concerns the rebuilding of the temple.

## 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 both well organized and official – a remarkable historical document even apart from its religious significance.

The letter from these Persian officials will present (1) an account of their inspection of the Jews' 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 official 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 (1 Kings 6:36 and 7:12). Archaeologists have discovered other buildings constructed in this way, and they speculate that it may have been useful to counter earthquakes.

And these officials were writing down names! That was likely a bit worrying, as it always is when government officials start writing down names! But God also knew everyone's name!

The letter continues in verse 5.

## 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 how it was later ordered by Cyrus to be rebuilt.

Usually Cyrus is called the king of Persia (as in the decree itself in Ezra 1:2-4), but in verse 13 Cyrus is called the king of Babylon. Archaeologists 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 to add legitimacy to his own reign.

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 5:16 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. The Jews could have been mistaken in their answer, or the Persians could have mistakenly recorded their answer. All we know from inspiration is that we have a true record of the letter that they sent the king. Inspiration tells us that the Persian governor wrote it, and inspiration tells us that we have an accurate record of what the Persian governor wrote, but inspiration does not tell us that what the Persian governor wrote was true.

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.”

Was that statement true? No, it was not.



Verse 16 says “and since that time even until now hath it been in building.” But verse 24 of the previous chapter tells us that the work had stopped, and we know from this chapter that the work did not resume until about 16 years later. Why then 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 to it for quite some time 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 later.

Others note that Sheshbazzar is credited in this Persian context (where crediting a Persian would have been helpful to the Jews’ cause), while 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 Sheshbazzar 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!)

Again, 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 is an attack on God’s authority. And that applies to all leaders. How do we know that?

 1 Peter 2:17 – Honor the emperor.

That command was written when Nero was the emperor!

## 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 that he do. Darius 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 Achmetha.

The city called Achmetha in verse 2 by the KJV was called Ecbatana or Agbatana by the Greeks. The ESV uses Ecbatana.

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 from extra-Biblical sources that Cyrus spent the summer of 538 BC there, which is when this decree was written.

Ecbatana was located in the Zagros mountains of northwest Iran between Tehran and Baghdad, and tradition alleges that the tombs of Esther and Mordecai lie in the middle of the city.

That the decree was found in Ecbatana is a clue about how long this process likely took. Why? Because it is very doubtful that Ecbatana was the first place they looked!

#ezra-esther