

# Triennial Torah Study – 3<sup>rd</sup> Year 29/12/2012

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We continue this weekend with our regular Triennial Torah reading which can be found at [https://sightedmoon.com/sightedmoon\\_2015/files/TriennialCycleBeginningAviv.pdf](https://sightedmoon.com/sightedmoon_2015/files/TriennialCycleBeginningAviv.pdf)

Num 34		Ezra 3-7	1 Corin 16 & 2 Corin 1
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## Boundaries and Tribal Allotments (Numbers 34)

Eleazar the priest and Joshua are given the responsibility of dividing up the inheritance of the land. Eleazar is chosen because he was the high priest and had the breastplate with the Urim and Thummim. Joshua is selected because he would soon be successor to Moses (verse 17). The boundaries of the entire area are described. East of the Jordan River, Reuben, Gad and half of the tribe of Manasseh have already received their inheritance (verse 14; Numbers 32). The other half of Manasseh will have its inheritance in Canaan. It should be noted that the land is not actually divided up in Numbers 34. That actually occurs in Joshua 14-19, after the land is surveyed.

Some of the more modern names will help in defining the territory described here. The Salt Sea (Numbers 34:3) is, of course, the Dead Sea. The Great Sea (verse 6), from the perspective of the Promised Land, is the Mediterranean. The Sea of Chinnereth (verse 11) is better known by us as the Sea of Galilee. The River or Brook of Egypt (verse 5) is probably the Wadi al-Arish, in the western Sinai Peninsula, not too far from the present Israeli-Egyptian border. Some have argued that no other river than the Nile could properly be called the River of Egypt. However, this cannot be true since the Israelites had to leave Egypt and go to the Promised Land. If the boundary of the Promised Land were the Nile, then the Israelites would have been in the Promised Land while they were yet in Goshen! Finally, "Mount Hor," located in the north (verse 7), cannot be the same Mount Hor upon which Aaron died in the south. According to the Jamieson, Fausset & Brown Commentary: "The Hebrew words...Hor-ha-hor, properly signify 'the mountain of the mountain'—'the high double mountain,' which, from the situation, can mean nothing else than the mountain Amanah (Song 4:8), a member of the great Lebanon range" (note on Numbers 34:7-9).

Don't worry if you cannot trace the borders accurately. Some of the names are lost to us today. Notice that the Levites did not receive a land territory for their inheritance as all the other tribes did. Their locations are described in the next chapter.

## The Restoration Begins (Ezra 3:1-4:5)

Ezra 3 begins with the seventh month of the Hebrew calendar, Tishri, corresponding to September-October. Cyrus' decree had been delivered in 538 B.C., sometime after March-April. It probably took several months to prepare and mobilize for the return. If it then took three and a half to four months to actually travel to Judea—as it later took Ezra's group (see Ezra 7:9; 8:31)—there is no way the Jews of the first return could have been settled in the Promised Land by Tishri of 538 B.C. More than likely it was 537. Many have even suggested 536. Probably the Jews had arrived in the land some months before—enough time for them to be resettled in the cities as noted in Ezra 3:1.

Tishri is an important month on the sacred calendar, containing four of God's seven annual festivals. Mentioned first in this chapter, because of his religious duties relevant to the festivals, is Jeshua, or Joshua, the high priest

(Haggai 1:1; Zechariah 3:1). He is referred to as the son of Jozadak (Ezra 3:2, 8) or Jehozadak (Haggai 1:1). The high priest prior to the exile was named Seriah, who was captured by the Babylonians: “And the captain of the guard took Seraiah the chief priest” (2 Kings 25:18). He was executed along with others (verses 19-21). But his son survived. For in giving the high priestly genealogy, 1 Chronicles 6:14 says: “...Seraiah begot Jehozadak. Jehozadak went into captivity when the LORD carried Judah and Jerusalem into captivity by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar.” And now we see that Jeshua or Joshua was the son of Jehozadak. Once more, it is worth noting how historically consistent the various books of the Bible are.

Zerubbabel, the governor, is referred to as the son of Shealtiel (Ezra 3:2, 8). In 1 Chronicles 3:17-19, Shealtiel is listed as a son of the former Jewish king Jehoiachin or Jeconiah. Yet the same passage in 1 Chronicles lists Zerubbabel as the son of Pedaiah—another son of Jeconiah. “It may be that Shealtiel died childless and his brother Pedaiah married his widow, following the custom of Levirate marriage (see Deut. 25:5-10; 1 Chr. 3:18)” (Nelson Study Bible, note on Ezra 1:8). That would make Zerubbabel the son of Pedaiah through biology and identification with him as the one who raised him—but the son of Shealtiel by name and inheritance. Note also that Zerubbabel, a Davidic prince, was appointed governor and not a vassal king under Cyrus. Recall God’s stern dictate that no descendant of Jeconiah would sit on the throne of Britain and reign as king over Judah (see Jeremiah 22:24-30). The throne of Britain had been transferred elsewhere (see our online publication, *The Throne of Britain: Its Biblical Origin and Future*). In that light, it is interesting to see that there is no hint of the people trying to promote Zerubbabel as king—despite the desire for the restoration of Jeconiah’s line at the beginning of the exile. It seems they had come to accept the prophecies of Jeremiah as divinely authoritative.

Indeed, we see a restored religious zeal in Ezra 3—a genuine desire to please God. The returned Jews rebuilt the destroyed altar at the site of the Jerusalem temple. “They set the altar on its bases” (verse 3)—that is, on the foundations where it had originally stood—and reinstated the sacrifices they had been unable to offer in Babylon (as Jerusalem was the only place God designated acceptable for such sacrifices). Jamieson, Fausset & Brown’s Commentary says: “This was of urgent and immediate necessity, in order, first, to make atonement for their sins; secondly, to obtain the divine blessing on their preparations for the temple, as well as animate their feelings of piety and patriotism for the prosecution of that national work” (note on verse 2). And this reinstatement of the sacrificial system was despite their fear of adversarial national neighbors (same verse). “We can measure our faith by what we do when we’re afraid, despite our fears!” (Bible Reader’s Companion, note on verse 3).

The sacrifices recommenced on the first day of Tishri (verse 6), which is the Feast of Trumpets (see Leviticus 23:23-25; Numbers 29:1-6). The tenth day of the same month is the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:26-32; Numbers 29:7-11). And from the 15th through the 21st is the Feast of Tabernacles, the 22nd then constituting another festival (Leviticus 23:33-44). The people kept the Feast of Tabernacles, which God always intended to be a major highlight of the year for His people, with the appropriate number of sacrifices (verse 4; see Numbers 29:13-38). The Feast of Tabernacles symbolizes the coming rule of Jesus Christ over all nations (see our free booklet *God’s Holy Day Plan—The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*). Indeed, on one level, this observance of the Feast of Tabernacles by the returned exiles prefigures the wonderful observance of this same festival by a regathered Israel following Christ’s return (Zechariah 14:16).

The foundation of the temple was not yet laid, but the obtaining of materials for the building’s construction was underway. In building the first temple, King Solomon had purchased materials from Tyre and Sidon (in modern Lebanon) and had them shipped to Joppa (just south of modern Tel Aviv), paying for them with grain, oil and wine (see 2 Chronicles 2:10-16; 1 Kings 5:1-11). We see almost the exact same details under Zerubbabel and Joshua, who had permission from Cyrus for such business (see Ezra 3:7).

Construction on the second temple began in the second month of the second year since returning to Judea (verse 8). The second month, Iyyar, corresponding to April-May, was also the month in which the building of Solomon’s temple had begun (see 1 Kings 6:1). “As the Jews probably returned to [Judea] in the spring of 537, the second year would be the spring of 536” (Expositor’s Bible Commentary, note on Ezra 3:8). Yet some date the return to 536, which would make the second year 535. Interestingly, this is 70 years from the first captivity of Jews at the hands of the Babylonians in 605 B.C.

The Levites were appointed as overseers over the laborers (verses 8-9). The Jeshua of verse 9 is not the high priest but a Levite (see 2:40).

“The returnees to Jerusalem celebrated laying the temple’s foundation in almost the same way that the previous generation had celebrated the first temple (see 2 Chr. 5:13). Two choruses were sung responsively. One group sang For He is good; the other group responded with For His mercy endures forever (see Neh. 12:31)” (Nelson Study Bible, note on Ezra 3:10-11). The New Bible Commentary says regarding this: “The singing was antiphonal, with either two choirs, or a choir and a priest-soloist. This is a feature of many psalms. The words preserved in our text would be the chorus (cf. 1 Ch. 16:34; 2 Ch. 5:13; 7:3; Ps. 136)” (note on Ezra 3:11).

“Laying the foundation was a cause of celebration. The descriptive ‘great shout of praise’ (v. 11) reflects the typically loud expression of both grief and joy in the Middle East. The old remembered the glory of Solomon’s temple [destroyed 50 years before] and were heartbroken that this temple was less than half as large. The young were excited at the prospect of what lay ahead” (Bible Reader’s Companion, note on verses 10-13). A lesser temple was better than no temple. God had brought judgment, but He had led a remnant here to begin again.

### **“It Is Not for You and For Us” (Ezra 3:1-4:5)**

In chapter 4, the Jewish people encounter a serious problem. Note that the people are referred to as Judah and Benjamin (verse 1)—once again showing this was not a return of all the tribes of Israel but just those who, along with many of the Levites, had made up the southern kingdom of Judah.

Certain “adversaries” come to offer help on the temple’s construction. These were evidently the people now inhabiting the territory of the former Israelite northern kingdom of Samaria, though that is not explicitly stated here. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus does explicitly refer to these people as Cuthaeans or Samaritans (Antiquities of the Jews, Book 11, chap. 2, sec. 1; chap. 4, sec. 3), people of Babylonia and Syria relocated by the Assyrians to the land of Israel after the deportation of the Israelites. Those in the delegation here mention their forefathers of nearly a century and a half earlier having been brought over by the Assyrian emperor Esarhaddon, who reigned from 681 to 669 B.C. (verse 2).

The governor, high priest and elders reject the Samaritan offer of help: “You may do nothing with us is not a rude rebuff; it is a righteous [and wise] refusal. The people offering help were not friends, but adversaries (v. 1). They may have sacrificed to the Lord, but they were idolatrous at the same time (see 2 Kin. 17:29-35)” (Nelson, note on Ezra 4:3). Indeed, 2 Kings 17:33 says of them, “They feared the LORD, yet served their own gods—according to the rituals of the nations from among whom they were carried away.” Their offer of assistance may even have been a hypocritical ruse to infiltrate the Jews, gain more influence and sabotage their project. “A man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet” (Proverbs 29:5).

Expositor’s comments: “Even after the destruction of the temple, worshipers from Shiloh and Shechem in the north came to offer cereals and incense at the site of the ruined temple (Jer 41:5). Moreover the northerners did not abandon faith in Yahweh, as we see from the Yahwistic names given [in the book of Nehemiah] to Sanballat’s sons, Delaiah and Shelemaiah.... But they retained Yahweh, not as the sole God, but as one god among many gods; Sanballat’s name honors the moon god Sin. Though Ezra-Nehemiah does not explicitly mention the syncretistic character of the northerners, evidence suggests that the inhabitants of Samaria were syncretists.... In 1962 the Ta’amireh Bedouins who had found the DSS [Dead Sea Scrolls] discovered a cave in Wadi Daliyeh with fourth-century B.C. papyri. Paul Lapp in 1963 found there a great mass of skeletons, numbering between two hundred to three hundred men, women, and children: the remains of the leading families of Samaria who had fled in 331 from Alexander. A good proportion of their personal names included the names of such deities as Qos (Edomite), SHR (Aramaic), Chemosh (Moabite), Ba’al (Canaanite), and Nebo (Babylonian)” (note on Ezra 4:1-2).

Syncretism (blending of beliefs or ecumenism—compromising truth for the sake of cooperation and unity) was the sin that had led to the deportations of both Israel and Judah. It would have been foolish for the returned Jews to blend with those who were still practicing it. Yet interestingly, as was mentioned, this is not given as the reason for the refusal. According to Expositor’s, the wording of verse 3 “is literally ‘it is not for you and for us’.... The Jews tried tactfully to reject the aid proffered by the northerners by referring to the provisions of the king’s

decree” (note on verse 3). In fact, Josephus says that the Jews replied “that it was impossible for them to permit them to be their partners, whilst they {only} had been appointed to build that temple at first by Cyrus...although it was indeed lawful for them to come and worship there if they pleased” (sec. 3).

Despite the non-condemnatory and even hospitable approach, the refusal nevertheless provoked hostility and opposition from the Samaritans. These adversaries “tried to discourage the people of Judah. They troubled them in building” (verse 4). “‘To discourage’ is literally ‘to weaken the hands,’ a Hebrew idiom.... The opposite idiom is ‘to strengthen the hands’.... ‘Make them afraid’ [NIV, or ‘trouble’]—the verb *balah* means ‘to terrify’ and often describes the fear aroused in a battle situation” (Expositor’s, note on verse 4). So it appears the Samaritans may have resorted to forms of sabotage or terrorism.

They also “hired counselors against them” (verse 5)—“or lawyers, probably to represent them against the Jewish community at the Persian court. The Samaritans persisted in these attacks until the reign of Darius as much as fourteen years later” (Nelson, note on verse 5). Before looking ahead to that time, however, the setting of our next few readings is still the reign of Cyrus.

### **Introduction to Esther (Ezra 4:6; Esther 1)**

The second Jerusalem temple was completed in response to the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah early in the reign of the Persian king Darius the Great (also known as Darius II or Darius Hystaspes). Darius expanded the reach of the Persian Empire. By 516 B.C., around the time of the temple’s completion, “he had pressed east as far as India and then returned to deal with the Libyans. His northward penetrations were not so successful, however, for he met stiff resistance from the Scythians and was forced to retreat. Still unsatisfied he set his sights on Europe. His first attempt to bring the independent Aegean [Greek] states under his control failed when the Ionian states [between Greece and southern Italy] which were already under Persian suzerainty broke free to assist their harassed kinfolk. He eventually prevailed, however, and incorporated all of western Asia into his realm. Flushed with success Darius made an ill-advised sweep across the Aegean Sea in the year 490 with the intent of conquering Athens and the other city-states of the Greek peninsula.... The Athenians met Darius head-on. In the decisive battle of Marathon the Persians underwent a humiliating defeat and were forced to retreat to the Asian mainland. Convinced that victory had eluded him only because of insufficient manpower, Darius resolved to return once more to Greece to finish what he had begun. A revolt in Egypt preempted this action, however.

“Before Darius could completely resolve his new problem and resume his European operations, he died, leaving his grand design to his son Xerxes....the Old Testament Ahasuerus. He had for some years been designated heir by his father, so the change in leadership was without contention. By virtue of his governorship of Babylon, Xerxes was admirably prepared to undertake the formidable responsibilities of his new office. Xerxes’ first interest lay in the completion of the royal palace at Susa [the biblical Shushan] and further aggrandizement of Persepolis, the latter project occupying him on and off for the twenty-one years of his reign (486-465). A more pressing concern, however, was with Egypt, which rebelled at once upon his accession. In less than two years he was able to resolve this problem....” (Eugene Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*, 1987, pp. 490-491, 498). Ezra 4:6, which we earlier read in arrangement order of Ezra, tells us that the Samaritans wrote an accusation against the Jews of Judea in the beginning of his reign—to which he apparently paid no heed, perhaps because he was occupied with these other concerns at the time during his first two years as king. This brings us then to the third year of Xerxes’ reign, 484-483 B.C., which is when the book of Esther begins (see Esther 1:1-3).

The book of Esther is about a beautiful young Jewish woman—raised by her older cousin Mordecai—who becomes Xerxes’ queen and later bravely acts to thwart an evil adversary’s plot to exterminate the whole Jewish race. The remarkable deliverance from this genocidal plot is still celebrated in the Jewish festival of Purim, the institution of which is explained near the end of the book.

Esther is one of five books among the Writings division of the Old Testament that are read during holy festivals. These are collectively known as the Megilloth (“Scrolls”). The book of Esther is called the Megillah (Scroll) because of its great popularity among Jewish readers. “Against a background of centuries of persecution, it is understandable why the Feast of Purim became such a favorite of the Jews. It recalls a time when they were

able to turn the tables on those who wanted to destroy them. Purim is celebrated today amid a carnival-like atmosphere, with masquerade parties, noisemaking, and revelry. The story is reenacted in synagogues with the audience hissing Haman and cheering Mordecai. The Book of Esther is a profound statement about the heroic resistance necessary for survival in the face of violent anti-Semitism that continues to the present day” (The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, introductory notes on Esther).

However, Esther has long been a controversial book because of what many have reckoned as indefensible moral conduct on the part of Esther and Mordecai and the absence of any mention of God. On the first matter, we will examine the issues in that regard as we come to them in the account. But we may note up front that none of the Bible’s human heroes are perfect except for Jesus Christ.

This brings us to the second matter of objection. It is certainly true that God is not named or directly referred to in a surface reading of the book (as is also the case with the Song of Solomon). Some have postulated that the reason God is not directly mentioned is that the book was intended as a Persian state chronicle explaining to the Persians the Jewish celebration of Purim. And that is certainly possible, though we still might expect a reference to “the God of the Jews” or something similar. The absence of a direct reference to God seems quite deliberate.

Some have proposed that God’s name is hidden in four separate verses in Esther in acrostic style (1:20; 5:4, 13; 7:7), i.e. spelled out by the first or last letters of each word in the verse. This is supported by the fact that carefully structured acrostic spellings appear in several books of the Old Testament. In these four examples in Esther, the divine name Yhwh is spelled out from the first or last letters of the words in these verses. This may point to the nature in which God is revealed in the book. God is hidden in the story, but His presence is evident beyond measure. Certain important circumstances in the story contributing to the amazing outcome are clearly beyond mere time and chance. Furthermore, the reliance on fasting and Mordecai’s certainty of “deliverance...from another place” if Esther failed to act (see Esther 4:3, 13-16) are veiled references to beseeching God and trusting in His providence. Indeed, the main theme of Esther is God’s miraculous intervention and preservation of His people. Jews the world over consider the story of this book to be one of the greatest evidences of God’s hand in the course of human history to preserve them as a people. (While the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Old Testament dating back to Christ’s time—adds a number of explicit references to God, these are generally understood to have been added by people seeking to correct perceived spiritual inadequacy in the book.)

As for who wrote the book, no explicit statement is given. “A strong Jewish spirit pervades the book.... Moreover, the author was acquainted with Persian culture, as the extensive descriptions of the palace complex at Shushan (also called Susa) and the domestic details about the reign of King Ahasuerus [Xerxes] indicate. For these reasons, some [such as the third-century church father Clement of Alexandria and the medieval Jewish sage Ibn Ezra] have ascribed the authorship of the book to Mordecai, one of its principal characters” (Nelson Study Bible, introductory notes on Esther). Yet others object to this because of the book’s concluding statements praising Mordecai (see 10:2-3)—though these could easily have been added by a later editor such as Ezra. In fact, Ezra has also been suggested as the book’s author. Whoever the author was, one commentator says that he must have used “sources, such as some of the writings of Mordecai (9:20), books of the annals of the Median and Persian kings (2:23; 6:1; 10:2), and certain familiar oral traditions” (Expositor’s, introductory notes on Esther).

Because of the way the book begins—“now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus (this was the Ahasuerus who reigned...)”—it must have been written after the king’s reign, and thus no earlier than 465 B.C. This is confirmed by the mention of the deeds of Mordecai in the past tense (10:2). “Yet the fact that Greek words do not appear in the book rules out a date after about 300 B.C. when [because of the conquests of Alexander the Great and the rule of his successors] the Greek language became more prominent in the ancient Middle East. On the other hand, the numerous words of Persian origin in the book point to its being composed during the latter half of the fifth century B.C. For example, the book calls Xerxes by the Hebrew name [Akhshurosh, Anglicized as] Ahasuerus, a spelling derived from the Persian Khshayarsha. If it had been written after 300 B.C. a spelling closer to the Greek form Xerxes would be expected” (Nelson, introductory notes on Esther).

“While the historicity of the Book of Esther has been challenged, it meets every reasonable test. Descriptions of the Persian court and the customs of the times, the provision of precise dates, and the use of Persian names current in the era, as well as the characterization of Xerxes, are completely accurate. Independent confirmation of Mordecai’s rise to power comes from a cuneiform tablet found in Borsippa, which identifies Marduka (Mordecai) as an official in the royal court at Susa in the early years of Xerxes’ reign!” (Lawrence Richards, *The Bible Reader’s Companion*, introductory notes on Esther).

The story of the miraculous salvation of the Jews was inspiring in the fourth century B.C., and this book became one of the most important literary pieces of Jewish history. Its inspiration continues for God’s people today. Even as God protected the people of ancient Judah, though scattered from their homeland, from an enemy bent on destroying them, so will God protect His spiritual people today, scattered throughout the present evil world, from the great enemy who would destroy them. In the end, ultimate victory will belong to God and all His people—followed by triumphant joy and celebration.

### **The Deposing of Vashti (Ezra 4:6; Esther 1)**

The account begins with a reference to Ahasuerus or Xerxes reigning over 127 provinces or districts. Some have argued that this is a mistake, since there were only 20 satrapies in the empire of Xerxes’ father Darius. But the Hebrew word used here, *medinah*, referred to a subdivision of a satrapy, and it is reasonable that there would be 127 of these. (Another Hebrew-Aramaic word meaning satrapy could have been used if that was intended.)

Next we see the mention of two feasts—one for all the officials, royal servants, nobles and provincial governors lasting for six months (verses 3-4) and the other, at the end of the six months to cap it all off, a week-long celebration for all the people in Shushan (or Susa), both great and small (verse 5). Some have objected to a feast lasting six months, questioning how all the officials of the realm, particularly the provincial ones, could be away from their duties for so long. Yet it could well be that the officials came by groups in rotation. Xerxes’ display of wealth and regalia over this period may have been to recruit needed support from all the regions of his realm, both near and far-flung, for his soon-coming resumption of his father’s plan to conquer Greece.

The remainder of the chapter concerns the refusal of Xerxes’ queen Vashti to answer the king’s summons so he might show off her beauty. A major objection “raised against the historicity of Esther is that the only known wife of Xerxes was called Amestris, the daughter of a Persian general Otanes. Persian records do not mention a queen by the name of Vashti who was deposed, nor do they mention the name of Esther as Xerxes’ wife [as the following chapters of the book of Esther show her to have become]. Amestris was known for her cruelty; [the Greek historian] Herodotus says she had the mother of her husband’s paramour brutally mutilated and had fourteen noble Persian young men buried alive in an act of religious devotion.... A number of answers have been proposed: (1) in a polygamous society a king may have had more than one wife... (2) Esther may have [become] a subordinate wife or chief concubine... (3) the most persuasive explanation is one...which shows the similarity of the names ‘Vashti’ and ‘Amestris’ and concludes that they were one and the same person” (Expositor’s Bible Commentary, introductory notes on Esther).

No specific reason is given as to why Vashti would not come. Perhaps she did not want to be degraded by being paraded before the king’s drunken guests.

For counsel the infuriated ruler turned to the “wise men who understood the times” (verse 13). “Like their Babylonian counterparts, these wise men were astrologers and magicians who gave counsel according to their reading of celestial phenomena (cf. 1 Chronicles 12:32; Isa 44:25; 47:13; Jer 50:35-36; Dan 2:27; 5:15). It was the king’s custom to consult experts in matters of law and justice and to hear their opinions before he acted on any matter. There were seven of these wise men, all with Persian names, called ‘the seven nobles’ [NIV] (‘the seven princes,’ KJV, RSV) of Persia and Media.... They were probably the Council of Seven mentioned in Ezra 7:14 and Herodotus 3.1.... ‘Seven advisers’ corresponds with the Persian tradition (Herodotus 1.31; 3.84; 7.8; 8.67; Xenophon *Anabasis* 1.6.4f)” (notes on Esther 1:13-14 and Ezra 7:14).

Speaking for the others, Memucan says that the queen’s behavior, if tolerated, would lead to the wives of officials throughout the realm rebelling against their husbands—thus elevating the issue beyond a royal

domestic dispute to that of a state concern, as the increase of ruling officials experiencing such trouble at home would weaken the empire. Perhaps these men were also thinking of their own personal domestic situations.

The proposal, to which the king agrees, is that Vashti be stripped of her position of chief wife and that this honor be given to another. It does not say that the king would divorce Vashti, though her complete removal from royal favor and from right to the king's presence effectively amounted to that.

### **The Samaritan Antagonism Continues (Ezra 4:6-24)**

The chronology of this passage is debated based on differing opinions regarding the identity of the Persian kings mentioned within it. Recall from verses 4-5 that the Samaritans were constantly attempting to thwart the Jews who had returned to Judea (the tiny Persian district of Yehud), efforts that often included accusing them before the Persian court. This continued throughout the reign of Cyrus the Great.

Yet Cyrus, whom God had foretold would give the word to restore Jerusalem and its temple, was not swayed by the Samaritan arguments. But he eventually passed from the scene. As historian Werner Keller writes: "Cyrus, the liberator, died on an expedition to the east in 530 B.C., and was buried in the royal palace of Pasargadae near Persepolis [30 miles northeast of Shiraz in southern Iran]. His palace was built in the form of individual pavilions: each one lay in the centre of a magnificent garden: the whole area was enclosed by a high wall. On the southern slopes of a long range of hills there still stands among the rough grass of the highlands a small unpretentious stone building dating from the time of Cyrus. Six square blocks form the steps which lead up to a small chamber, above the entrance to which there could at one time be read the following plea: 'O man, whoever you are and whenever you come, for I know that you will come—I am Cyrus, who gave the Persians their empire. Do not grudge me this patch of earth that covers my body.' Alas, the small stone chamber in which a golden sarcophagus enclosed the mortal remains of the great Persian is now as empty as the place above the entrance which bore the inscription. Occasionally shepherds with their flocks pass unconcernedly by this forgotten spot, as they did in olden times, across the wide plateau where the lion is still lord of the chase.

"Cyrus was followed by his son Cambyses II. With the conquest of Egypt [in 525 B.C.] Persia became under him the greatest empire that the world had ever seen: it stretched from India to the Nile" (The Bible As History, 1980, p. 303).

According to verse 5, the Samaritans would continue to present their grievances against the Jews "until the reign of Darius king of Persia." This is generally recognized as referring to Darius Hystaspes (Darius I)—not to be confused with the earlier Darius the Mede mentioned in Scripture.

### **Royal Identity Dispute (Ezra 4:6-24)**

The identity controversy mentioned above starts in the very first verse of our present reading, verse 6, with the identity of the Ahasuerus mentioned there and continues through the rest of the chapter over the identity of Artaxerxes. The Darius of verse 24 is the same as the one in verse 5 (as the temple was rebuilt during the reign of Darius I).

Notice the succession of Persian emperors (dates are B.C.):

Anglicized Greek Form Persian Form Dates of Reign

Cyrus II (the Great) Koorush 559-530

Cambyses II Kambujiya 530-522

Pseudo-Smerdis (Comates) Bardiya (Gaumata) 522

Darius I (the Great) Hystaspes Darayavahush/Darryoosh 522-486

Xerxes I (the Great) Khashayarsha 486-465

Artaxerxes I (Longimanus) Artakhshathra or Ardashir 465-425

Xerxes II Khashayarsha 424

Secydianus/Sogdianus (Known only in Greek) 424

Darius II (Ochus/Nothus) Darayavahush/Darryoosh 423-404

Artaxerxes II (Mnemon) Artakhshathra 404-359/8

Artaxerxes III (Ochus) Artakhshathra 359/8-338/7

Artaxerxes IV (Arses) Artakhshathra 338/7-336

Darius III (Codomannus) Darayavahush/Darryoosh 336-330

So who is the Ahasuerus of Ezra 4:6? This name is now generally understood as a parallel to the Greek name Xerxes. Notice that the Persian form is Khashayarsha. Where the name Ahasuerus occurs in Scripture, the actual Hebrew form is Akhshurosh, much closer to the Persian form of Khashayarsha. Of Xerxes the Jewish Encyclopedia states, "The Babylonian tablets spell his name Khisiarshu, Akhshiyarshu, etc." ("Ahasuerus," <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=967&letter=A>).

And what of the name Artaxerxes? Where this name appears in Scripture, the actual Hebrew form is Artakhshasta. The Jewish Encyclopedia explains: "In the Persian name Artakhshathra...the 'thr'...is pronounced with a hissing sound, and is therefore represented in other languages by [an s or sh]. Thus in Babylonian, Artakhshatsu, Artakhshassu, and numerous variations; in...Hebrew... Artakhshasta...in Greek, [Artaxesses]...and by assimilation with the name Xerxes [it becomes Artaxerxes]" ("Artaxerxes I," <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=1827&letter=A>).

It would seem, then, that Ahasuerus in Ezra 4:6 is King Xerxes I, the husband of Esther. And Artaxerxes in verses 7-23 would appear to be Artaxerxes I, the king under whom Nehemiah later served. If that is the case, as most scholars now maintain, then chapters 4-6 are out of sequence. Here's how The Expositor's Bible Commentary explains Ezra 4: "This chapter summarizes various attempts to thwart the efforts of the Jews. In vv. 1-5 the author describes events under Cyrus (539-530), in v. 6 under Xerxes (485-465), in vv. 7-23 under Artaxerxes I (464-424). He then reverts in v. 24 to the time of Darius I (522-486), when the temple was completed (cf. Hag 1-2). The author drew on Aramaic documents from [Ezra 4] v. 8 to 6:18, with a further Aramaic section in 7:12-26" (note on 4:1-5). Chapters 5-6 concern events during the reign of Darius I. Chapter 7 advances the story to the time of Artaxerxes I.

Following the above interpretation, Eerdman's Handbook to the Bible has this to say in its note on Ezra 4: "Verses 1-5, 24: the opposition succeeds in bringing the work [on the temple] to a standstill for 15 years, until Darius is king. Verses 6-23 interrupt the chronological sequence to carry the account of the opposition through to the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. Here the bone of contention is the rebuilding of the city walls ([verse] 12)." This would mean Ezra interrupted the sequence of the book to drop in an overview of the antagonism even beyond the time of Darius, which seems a likely conclusion, especially given the mention of the city and its walls in the correspondence rather than the temple.

However, there is another school of thought that sees Ezra 4 as presented in chronological order—wherein the Ahasuerus or Xerxes of verse 6 is another name for Cyrus' son Cambyses (530-522) and the Artaxerxes of verses 7-23 is a reference to the imposter king Gaumata (522), who posed as Cambyses' slain brother Bardiya (Smerdis). Expositor's notes: "Some scholars claim that the parallel account in Josephus (Antiquities of the Jews, Book 11, chapters] 21-25...), which substitutes Cambyses for Artaxerxes I, gives the correct order" (note on verse 7). Yet what of the fact that the names Xerxes and Artaxerxes are specifically applied to other kings? "Some historians believe that the names Akhshurosh [Ahasuerus/Xerxes] and Artakhshasta [Artaxerxes] were general titles for kings, such as 'Pharaoh' and 'Shah' or 'His Majesty' and that they were not specific names" (Allyn Huntzinger, Persians in the Bible, chap. 6, <http://www.farsinet.com/persiansinbible/images/chapter6.pdf>).

Yet it seems more likely that the majority opinion is correct—that these names refer to Xerxes I and Artaxerxes I. This would seem to be more consistent with other passages and avoids the problem of assigning these appellations to whomever "seems" to fit. Indeed, one might wonder why these names are used in Scripture if they provide no identification of particular kings. Regarding Josephus' identification, Expositor's notes: "[H.G.M.] Williamson (Israel [in the Books of Chronicles, 1977], p. 50) points out that 'at Ezra [4]...it seems likely that the author has grouped by theme rather than by chronology. Josephus' corrections, therefore, which rest from one point of view on accurate historical knowledge, result in the end in unhistorical confusion' (cf. also [C.G.] Tuland, ["Ezra-Nehemiah or Nehemiah-Ezra?" Andrews University Seminary Studies, 12] 'Josephus,' [1974]" (note on verse 7).

The truth is that we can't know the answer to this matter for sure either way. It should be noted that if the majority opinion is correct, as seems likely, then we are reading the current passage out of chronological sequence. However, that is really no dilemma since, in any case, we are reading the verses in order of scriptural arrangement—which, if not in chronological sequence, is nevertheless thematically consistent here. We will note these verses again where they more likely occur chronologically.



## **Letter Writing Campaign Against Jewish Rebuilding (Ezra 4:6-24)**

Whoever the Ahasuerus of verse 6 is, whether Cambyses or the great Persian emperor known as Xerxes I (see previous comments), he apparently paid no heed to the Samaritan complaints. In verse 7 Artaxerxes, whether pseudo-Smerdis or Artaxerxes I (again see previous comments), at first pays no heed either. But another letter in verses 8-16 gets his attention.

Verses 9-10 identifies the plaintiffs as descendants of those the Assyrians had transplanted from the east into the land of Samaria after the northern tribes of Israel had been deported. Osnapper is evidently another name for the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal (668-626 B.C.). His resettlement of people into Samaria was in addition to that of Esarhaddon (681-668 B.C.) mentioned in verse 2. Where the NKJV has “the Dinaites, the Apharsathchites, the Tarpelites, the people of Persia and Erech and Babylon and Shushan, the Dehavites, the Elamites” (verse 9), the NIV has instead, “the judges and officials over the men from Tripolis, Persia, Erech and Babylon, the Elamites of Susa” (see *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* for a technical explanation of the differences here). In identifying their nationalities, the Samaritans emphasize the kinship many of them share with the Persian authorities.

Furthermore, the Samaritans refer to themselves in the letter as “your servants” (verse 12)—implying a faithful vassal relationship. By contrast, they refer to Jerusalem as “the rebellious and evil city” (verse 12) and warn that the Jews will again revolt if they manage to rebuild and fortify it (verses 13-14). “A search of the king’s official records confirmed the Samaritans’ allegation of rebellion and sedition on the part of the people of Jerusalem, no doubt referring to the revolts under Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah (see 2 Kin. 24:1-20). The fact that these revolts were against the Babylonians and not against the Persians was not important. The Persians had become the heirs of the Babylonian Empire, and they would take such a report seriously” (*The Nelson Study Bible*, note on Ezra 4:19). Evidently Cyrus’ decree regarding the Jews and Jerusalem had been forgotten by this point, as the Persians had an important precedent of unchangeable law (see Daniel 6:8, 12, 15).

It is also interesting to note in the king’s response that he discovered that past kings of Jerusalem had ruled over all the region west of the Euphrates River (Ezra 4:20)—evidently referring to David and Solomon and perhaps a few later kings who had experienced periods of dominance over nearby nations.

The Persian ruler commands that the restoration of Jerusalem be brought to a halt but he leaves open the possibility of a change in policy, saying that “this city may not be rebuilt until the command is given by me” (verse 21). If the Artaxerxes here is pseudo-Smerdis, it would appear that the directive is later overturned when the next king, Darius I, finds the earlier decree of Cyrus (see Ezra 6). If the Artaxerxes in chapter 4 is the one known to history as Artaxerxes I, as most scholars believe, then the king ends up reviewing his own decision and issuing commands regarding rebuilding to Ezra and Nehemiah.

One important factor to note is that if the chapter is in chronological sequence, then the Jews were evidently forced to stop work on the temple (Ezra 4:24) when imperial decree and force of arms brought the rebuilding of Jerusalem to a halt (verses 17-23). But if the chapter is, according to the majority view, out of sequence, then the Jews simply gave up in the face of ongoing resistance (Ezra 4:4-5, 24). Once again, the latter seems more likely given that there is no reference to the work having been forced to cease when the rebuilding is questioned in chapter 5. The latter also seems more in line with Haggai’s criticism of the Jewish neglect of temple reconstruction in the second year of Darius (see Haggai 1:1-11).

In any case, Ezra 4 ends with the fact of temple reconstruction ceasing until Darius’ second year (verses 24). The recommencement and completion of the temple during the reign of Darius is the subject of the next two chapters in Ezra.

It may be of interest to note significant events transpiring elsewhere in the world at this time. It was during this period that Gautama Siddharta (Buddha) lived and taught in India (ca. 563-483 B.C.) and K’ung Fu-tzu (Confucius) lived and taught in China (ca. 551-479 B.C.). This was nearly a thousand years after the time of Moses (and nearly half a millennium from Solomon’s building of the first temple).

## **Opposition to Jewish Rebuilding in Jerusalem (Ezra 4:7-23)**

We read this passage earlier in following the arrangement order of the book of Ezra because of a widespread

belief that the book is written entirely in chronological order—making the Artaxerxes mentioned in this passage the same as the ruler known to history as the imposter king Gaumata (also known as pseudo-Smerdis), who preceded Darius the Great. However, as explained in the prior Bible Reading Program comments on this passage, the majority view sees the Artaxerxes in this passage as the Persian emperor known to history as Artaxerxes I Longimanus—the king who issued the decree allowing Ezra to lead a group of Jewish exiles to Jerusalem. This seems more likely (see earlier comments from June 16-18), which is why we are reviewing this section here and considering some other reasons for this conclusion.

The Samaritans resisting the Jews of Judea write to Artaxerxes (verses 7-16), complaining about the building up of the city walls and foundations of Jerusalem (verse 12). There is no corroborating reason to believe the city fortifications were built up under those of the first Jewish return from Babylon under Zerubbabel. Cyrus' decree had permitted them to rebuild the temple, not the city. Again, it seems more likely that the rebuilding referred to in the letter was done by those who returned with Ezra in the days of Artaxerxes I.

Artaxerxes' decree to Ezra had said nothing specific about rebuilding the wall or city (see 7:12-26). However, beyond the provision for religious offerings and temple refurbishment, the emperor did say, "And whatever seems good to you and your brethren to do with the rest of the silver and the gold, do it according to the will of your God" (verse 18). Not long after arriving in Judea, Ezra says of God, "He extended mercy to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to revive us, to repair the house of our God, to rebuild its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem" (9:9). Most people see this last phrase as a figurative expression of God's protection, as no literal wall had yet been built. But neither was the temple refurbishment complete in so short a time. This must all speak of what God had allowed the Jewish exiles to come to do—not of what they had already accomplished.

Consider also that Artaxerxes' decree of 457 B.C. appears to be the starting point of the 70-weeks prophecy of Daniel 9, the fulfillment of which was to commence with the command to rebuild not merely the temple but Jerusalem itself (verse 25; see the Bible Reading Program comments on Daniel 9). Moreover, as we will soon read, Nehemiah is not long afterward grieved over Jerusalem's wall being broken down and the city gates burned (Nehemiah 1:3)—these developments seeming to concern recent events rather than the Babylonian destruction more than 140 years before. Given all this, it appears that Ezra must have interpreted Artaxerxes' decree as allowing for the refortification of the city—as indeed it implicitly had. And so at some point it seems likely that Ezra and the returned exiles began on that project.

Yet perhaps the fact that Artaxerxes' decree had not explicitly mentioned the rebuilding of the city defenses gave the Samaritan resistance what they saw as a window of opportunity to bring an accusation against the Jews. Reminiscent of a modern legal challenge, the Samaritans saw and exploited a loophole in the initial decree. The result was a legal injunction that stopped the reconstruction project. And there were other factors at work that could explain why Artaxerxes, who had himself decreed the Jewish return and entrusted great authority to Ezra, would now heed such accusations and order the rebuilding stopped (see Ezra 4:17-22).

Recall from the Bible Reading Program comments on Ezra 7 that Egypt had rebelled against Persian authority by allying with the Greeks. Artaxerxes had sent his brother-in-law Megabyzus, governor of Syria and Palestine, to wage war against Egypt to bring it back into submission to Persia—which was accomplished in 456 B.C. It seems likely that the sending of Ezra and his company to Judea the year before this was intended to strengthen loyalty to Persia in that region prior to the attack on Egypt.

But a few years later things changed dramatically in the region. "After Megabyzus, the Syrian governor, had subdued Egypt, he took the Greek and Egyptian commanders with him to Susa [the Persian capital called Shushan in Scripture] under promise of protection there. For several years the promise was kept, but in 449 Amestris, the widow of Xerxes and queen mother [who was possibly the Vashti of the book of Esther], demanded their execution. The fulfillment of her demands so infuriated Megabyzus that he fled Susa, returned to Syria, and from there declared the independence of the trans-Euphratean satrapy [of which Judea was part]. He had sufficient following to repel at least two campaigns against him" (Eugene Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, p. 508).

This could well explain why Artaxerxes would now be suspicious of Judean loyalty to Persia. It was now part of a rebellious satrapy, and the refortification of Jerusalem could have played into the emperor's fears. He orders

the Samaritans, who have professed loyalty to him by their letter, to see to it that the refortification is halted. And this they do—by military force (verse 23). Yet the king leaves open the possibility of future rebuilding (4:21), helping to set the stage for the book of Nehemiah.

### **The Decree of Darius (Ezra 5:3-6:13)**

The Jewish rebuilding project elicits an inquiry by Persian officials. The account here is not precisely dated. The phrase “at the same time” (5:3) tells us that it was close to the commencement of the project in the second year of Darius (4:24-5:2)—that is, 520-519 B.C. The foundation was newly laid in December of 520 B.C., as we saw in Haggai 2:18, and the visit of the Persian officials had to come after that because of the report of timber now being laid in the walls (Ezra 5:8). Zechariah’s night visions, the subject of our previous readings (Zechariah 1:8-6:15), came in February of 519 B.C., two months after the new foundation was completed (see 1:8). The Persian visit might have come shortly before Zechariah’s visions but it seems more likely to have come after them. Either way, the time required for the matter to reach the emperor, be researched and then responded to would place the conclusion of the matter several months later—definitely beyond Zechariah’s night of visions (thus explaining the placement of our current reading).

The two leading figures in the official visit are “Tattenai the governor of the region beyond the River and Shethar-Boznai” (Ezra 1:3). The italicized words here, “the region,” have actually been added to the text. The designation “Beyond the River” (Hebrew *Abar nahar*, equivalent to Aramaic *Ebir-nari*) was actually the proper name of the Persian province containing Syria and Judea. The name denoted the region west of the Euphrates from a Mesopotamian and Persian perspective. Confirming the accuracy of the biblical record, archaeologists have found “a document that can be dated to 5 June 502 B.C., which cites Ta-at-tanni as the *pahat* (‘governor’) who was subordinate to the satrap over *Ebir-nari* [‘Beyond the River’]. Shethar-Boznai may have functioned as a Persian official known as the *patifrasa* (‘inquisitor’) or *frasaka* (‘investigator’)” (Expositor’s Bible Commentary, note on verses 3-5).

Just what brought the Persian sub-governor and his retinue is not stated. He may have simply been conducting a general inspection of his territory. However, it seems likely that the Persians had informants all over the place and that the activities in Judea would have caused regional authorities some concern. Moreover, given that there was a history of Samaritan antagonism and reporting to the imperial authorities, this may well have been another instance of it.

The Persian inquiry was conducted among the Jewish elders—probably a governing council (verse 9). It perhaps seems odd that Zerubbabel does not appear more prominently here. He is mentioned in the official Jewish response, evidently being referred to as *Sheshbazzar* (verses 14-16), which was probably his Persian name (see the Bible Reading Program comments on Ezra 1). And Darius specifically refers to him, though not by name (6:6). Why then does it appear in the passage that the Persian governor did not deal directly or particularly with him? And why did not Zerubbabel himself, rather than the Jewish elders, give the official response to Tattenai recorded in the letter to Darius? It is conceivable that the Jewish elders purposely downplayed the role of Zerubbabel.

As explained in the Bible Reading Program comments on Zechariah 4, Darius had recently put down a number of rebellions instigated by claimants to the royal thrones in various areas of the empire. As Zerubbabel was of the line of David, grandson of a former Jewish king, this may have been recognized as a potential Persian concern. In fact, as pointed out in the same comments, some of Haggai and Zechariah’s prophecies might well have sparked rumors that Zerubbabel was the promised Messiah—further fueling the Persians’ concerns if they learned of this. It would not be out of character for the Samaritans to have made an issue of this. Given the circumstances, perhaps Zerubbabel himself and the other Jewish leaders decided to downplay his role as a precaution. Whatever the reason, there is no hint that the position of Zerubbabel was even an issue at this time as far as Tattenai was concerned.

Verse 5 says that the Persian entourage “could not make [the Jews] cease till a report could go to Darius.” Perhaps Tattenai’s initial response called for a temporary halt to construction but the Jewish elders, now emboldened by the national spiritual renewal, did not just throw up their hands and comply. It is likely that they pressed the legality of their actions based on Cyrus’ decree (we know this information came out at some point,

as it appears in Tattenai's letter to Darius)—and Tattenai may have been satisfied with that until word came back from the emperor.

The decree of Cyrus would have been an enormously powerful factor in support of the Jewish rebuilding because of the Medo-Persian precedent of unchangeable law (see Daniel 6:8, 12, 15).

Historian Werner Keller writes: "The official exchange of letters with the Persian court on this matter can be found in the Book of Ezra (5:6-6:12). Many experts are convinced of the historicity of these documents although others are doubtful. If they are not genuine, however, they are very clever imitations both as to form and content. The Bible here even uses the Aramaic of the empire, the commercial language of the Achaemenide Empire"—that is, the Persian Empire ruled by the Achaemenid Dynasty (The Bible As History, 1981, pp. 303-304).

The reference to finding a copy of Cyrus' decree in Achmetha, the capital of Media more commonly referred to today as Ecbatana, is rather interesting. French archaeologist Roland de Vaux says: "Now we know that it was the custom of the Persian sovereigns to winter in Babylon and depart in the summer to Susa or Ecbatana...and we also know that Cyrus left Babylon in the spring of 538 B.C.... A forger operating in Palestine without the information which we possess could hardly have been so accurate" ("The Decrees of Cyrus and Darius on the Rebuilding of the Temple," The Bible and the Ancient Near East, 1971, p. 89, quoted by Expositor's, note on Ezra 6:2).

As verses 3-11 show, Darius endorses Cyrus' decree and even adds to it in his new decree, ordering that the Jews be left alone in their work, that the project be funded out of the taxes on the "Beyond the River" province, that the Persian state provide a steady stream of animals and other products necessary to the continued offerings of the Jewish national worship in Jerusalem, and that violation was punishable by death. The word "hanged" in verse 11 "does not mean hanged by the neck from a rope. It refers to impaling the dead body of the condemned on a pole as a public display and a grim warning to others" (Nelson Study Bible, note on verses 11-12).

Werner Keller states: "Numerous other contemporary texts confirm...the extent to which Darius fostered the indigenous [religions] of the peoples incorporated in his empire, not only in Palestine but also in Asia Minor and Egypt. For example the inscription of Usahor, an Egyptian doctor, runs as follows: 'King Darius—may he live for ever—commanded me to go to Egypt...and make up once more the number of the holy scribes of the temple and bring new life into what had fallen into decay....'" (p. 304). This happened about the same time as Darius' decree regarding Jerusalem, around 519 B.C. (see Expositor's, note on 6:12).

Illustrating his concern for local religious matters even above palace concerns, Darius wrote to Gadata, the steward of his estates, taking him to task over his attitude toward the sacredness of the temple of Apollo in Magnesia: "I hear that you are not carrying out my instructions properly. Admittedly you are taking trouble over my estates, in that you are transferring trees and plants from beyond the Euphrates to Asia Minor. I commend this project and the Court will show its gratitude. But in disregarding my attitude to the gods you have provoked my displeasure and unless you change your tactics you will feel its weight. For you have taken away the gardeners who are sacred to Apollo and used them for other gardening jobs of a secular character, thereby showing a lack of appreciation of the sentiments of my ancestors towards the god who has spoken to the Persians..." (quoted by Keller, p. 304).

Clearly, Darius' statements regarding the true God in his decree are no indication of any real belief regarding Him. This was more of a public policy issue. Yet how interesting it is that this was the Persian policy. And how remarkable it is that this turn of events came to pass at this particular point—just in time to enable the temple to be completed within the 70-year time frame God had foretold long before. And how wonderful an encouragement this was for the Jewish nation. They had returned to God. And now, as He promised, He returned to them (Zechariah 1:3)—looking out for their national welfare and blessing and ensuring it by the mouth of the most powerful man and greatest political power on earth.

Turmoil at the Beginning of Darius' Reign (Ezra 5:1-2; Haggai 1)

The Samaritan resistance to the Jews of Judea had taken its toll. The Jews quit the rebuilding of the temple and went about their own affairs. This resulted in a period of national punishment, as the prophet Haggai explains.

Yet rather than seeing events in this way, the people looked on their “misfortunes” as simply more reasons to not resume the construction. As time went on, the orientation of the people changed until the rebuilding of the temple perhaps seemed like something that would never happen.

“The reconstruction project may have faltered also because of the unstable political situation that followed the death of Cyrus in [530] B.C. [His son] Cambyses came to the throne and reigned for seven years. His major accomplishment was his bringing Egypt under Persian control. The passage of his armies through the land of Israel may have worked a hardship on the native population. Demands for food, water, clothing, and shelter may have greatly diminished the meager resources of a people engaged on a building project well beyond their means” (Expositor’s Bible Commentary, introduction to Haggai).

Ezra 4:24 gives the time frame for the first two verses of Ezra 5: the second year of the Persian king Darius (ca. 520 B.C.). His accession was a time of major change in the empire. An overview of this period provides us with a context for events in Judea described in our current and subsequent readings.

John Bright’s *A History of Israel* states: “Beginning in 522, the Persian Empire was racked by a series of upheavals that bade fair to rend it asunder. In that year, as Cambyses was en route through Palestine on his return from Egypt, news reached him that one Gaumata had usurped the throne and been accepted as king in most of the eastern provinces of the empire. This Gaumata gave himself as Cambyses’ own brother Bardiya [Smerdis], whom Cambyses had had secretly assassinated some years previously. Cambyses thereupon, under circumstances that are obscure, took his own life. An officer in his entourage, Darius, son of the satrap Hystaspes, and a member of the royal family by a collateral line, immediately claimed the throne. Accepted by the army, he marched eastward into Media, brought Gaumata to heel, and executed him” (2000, p. 369).

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* notes, “Some modern scholars consider that [Darius] invented the story of Gaumata in order to justify his actions and that the murdered king was indeed the son of Cyrus” (“Darius I,” *Micropaedia*, Vol. 3, 1985, p. 887). Yet this is mere conjecture, as there is no way at present to really know.

Bright goes on to say: “But Darius’ victory, far from establishing him in his position, set off a veritable orgy of revolt all over the empire. Though Darius in his great trilingual inscription on the cliff of Behistun sought to belittle the extent of the opposition to him, it is clear that unrest exploded from one end of the realm to the other. Rebellions broke out in Media, Elam and Parsa, in Armenia, all across Iran to the farthest eastern frontier, while in the west both Egypt and Asia Minor were affected” (p. 369).

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* further explains, “In Susiana, Babylonia, Media, Sagartia, and Margiana, independent governments were set up, most of them by men who claimed to belong to the former ruling families” (p. 887).

Continuing in Bright’s account: “In Babylon, one Nidintu-bel, who claimed to be—and possibly was—a son of [the last Babylonian king] Nabonidus, set himself up as king under the name of Nebuchadnezzar III and managed to maintain himself for some months before Darius seized him and executed him. The following year saw another rebellion in Babylon, the leader of which likewise called himself Nebuchadnezzar [IV] and claimed to be a son of Nabonidus. He, too, made trouble for some months until captured and impaled by the Persians, together with his chief supporters. Throughout his first two regnal years Darius had to fight without cessation on one front after another in order to win through. It was probably not until late in 520 that his position was actually secure.

“Meanwhile, it must have seemed that the Persian Empire was literally flying to pieces. As nationalistic feeling exploded everywhere a tense excitement was created from which the little community in Judah was by no means immune. Dormant hopes were awakened. Perhaps the awaited hour, the hour of the overturn of the nations and the triumphant establishment of Yahweh’s rule, had come at last!” (2000, p. 369).

For those focused on the world scene at the time, certain statements in the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah, who then preached to the people of Judea, could easily have been interpreted in that way. This might well have played a part in the positive response of the people to their exhortations. Moreover, it was less than four years until the end of the 70 years since the destruction of Jerusalem and the first temple (586-516 B.C.). It was time to get busy and get the job done. Through world events, the inspired preaching of His prophets

and directly stirring the hearts of Judah's leaders and people, God provided the needed motivation to ensure the fulfillment of His promises.

### **Introduction to Haggai (Ezra 5:1-2; Haggai 1)**

As Ezra 4:24-5:1 makes clear, in the second year of Darius (ca. 520 B.C.), two prophets came on the scene in Judea exhorting the Jews who had returned from Babylonian captivity to resume work on the temple of God. These two prophets were Haggai and Zechariah. Recall that in the Hebrew Bible, the 12 "Minor Prophets" constitute a single book of Scripture—concluding the Prophets division of the Old Testament. Haggai is the 10th book of the Minor Prophets. It is the first of the last three—Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi—which together are known appropriately as the Postexilic Prophets.

The name Haggai means "Festive," "Festal One" or "My Feast"—the Hebrew *hag*, the word for festival, coming from the concept of moving or dancing in a circle. "It has been suggested that the name was given him because he was born on some feast" (Charles Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets*, 1952, p. 237). Some think this name might be a shortened form of Haggiah (a name borne by another individual in 1 Chronicles 6:30), which means "Feast of Yhwh" (see *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, introduction to Haggai). It is interesting that the prophet Haggai's mission was to call on the Jews to restore the temple and its worship—making it once again the center of Jewish festivity and of God's sacred feasts in particular. In any event, as *Expositor's* states in a footnote to Ezra 5:1, Haggai "was a popular name. It was borne by eleven individuals at [the fifth-century-B.C. Jewish community at Aswan in Egypt on the Nile island of] Elephantine and by four in the Murashu texts [of Babylon] ([Michael] Coogan, [West Semitic] Personal Names [in the Mura?û Documents, 1976], p. 23)."

Nothing else is known about Haggai apart from his short book, the two occurrences of his name in the book of Ezra (5:1; 6:14) and an allusion to him in Zechariah 8:9. Some have seen Haggai 2:3 as an indication that the prophet himself saw the earlier temple of Solomon, which would put Haggai in his 70s or older. His old age is given as the reason for the brevity of his work and writing—cut short, it is presumed, by death. Yet the verse in question does not actually say that Haggai saw the former temple. Perhaps he merely knew of its dimensions—or was afforded a glimpse of it in inspired vision. So we really have no clue as to the prophet's age. He could well have been a young man. The placement of Haggai before Zechariah in Ezra and of Haggai's book before Zechariah's in scriptural arrangement could indicate that Haggai was older, but that is not really telling of age as Zechariah himself was young (see Zechariah 2:4). Moreover, the book placement could simply signify the fact that Haggai's book began first (see Haggai 1:1; Zechariah 1:1).

Haggai's book was meant for the people of his own day but its scope clearly goes far beyond this. "He begins with the rebuilding of the temple, but goes on to speak of the shaking of all nations, the coming of the Lord, and the glory of His millennial reign" (Feinberg, p. 237).

The word Haggai consistently uses for the temple in His book, as in many other places in Scripture, literally means house, as the King James Version renders it. The idea is that of a dwelling place for God. Of course, since God is in heaven, we realize that it is through His Spirit that He dwelt in the temple Solomon had built. We should consider that the temple of God today is His people, the New Testament Church in which He now resides through His Holy Spirit (see Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 1 Timothy 3:15). And so the book of Haggai has much to say to true Christians. Indeed, there have been times over the centuries where the temple-building tasks God has delegated to His servants—preaching the gospel as the means by which He calls new members and nourishing those members to steady and strengthen them in the structure—has been neglected. And yet God has always stirred some to resume the work. Even now, we must realize that God is still in the process of building His spiritual temple, adding people to it. We must be careful, then, not to neglect participating in God's work of building His temple today. In fact, we should consider that God considers each of us individually as His temple (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). So part of our work is to, with God's help, take care of ourselves—body, mind and spirit—cooperating with Him in His work of spiritually building each of us up personally, growing and overcoming with His help to become the kind of temple He desires. And in that light we must also work to serve and help the interests of every individual in whom God's Spirit dwells.

God's Word through Haggai today is the same as it was to the people of the prophet's own time: "...Build the temple, that I may take pleasure in it and be glorified," says the Lord" (Haggai 1:8). This is the message of the whole book.

## **“Wages...Into a Bag With Holes” (Ezra 5:1-2; Haggai 1)**

The date on which Haggai’s first message commences corresponds to August 29, 520 B.C. It is immediately directed to the leaders of Judea—Zerubbabel the governor and Joshua or Jeshua the high priest (Haggai 1:1). Yet it is evidently also announced to all Jews of the land (see Ezra 5:1).

The people maintained that it was not the appropriate time for reconstruction (Haggai 1:2). We can look at this in two ways. First, circumstances did not appear “ideal” to them. They had given up the reconstruction in the face of the Samaritan antagonism. That antagonism had probably not abated. God had not seen fit to remove the Samaritans from the land and replace them with people friendly to the Jews and their efforts. The Persian overlords had not quashed the Samaritan resistance and given new declarations of support and provided financing for the Jewish rebuilding effort. The Jews were waiting for some forthcoming miraculous circumstances. But God had already given them the task and provided miraculous assistance in the past. Their responsibility now was to step out in faith to continue in obedience to God—and He would continue to see them through.

If we wait until circumstances are “ideal” to obey God, we will never obey Him. Our faith is tested through adversity. God wants to see how we will handle His commands even in the hard times. Moreover, we must never put off obedience to God until some later, more “propitious” time. Consider when a person has a new job and learns that his employer expects him to work on the Sabbath. He might think, “Well I’d better not try to take off on Saturdays now. My supervisors won’t go for that. I’d better wait until I’ve been here a few more months or a few more years and then press my case.” This attempt to “work matters out to obey God,” thereby delaying obedience, is still disobedience—sin against God. In such a situation, the person should immediately inform his employer, politely and respectfully of course, that he henceforth will be unable to work on the Sabbath—and then stand by his convictions. This is the attitude God will bless, not an attitude of compromise and faithlessness.

The second sense of it not being time to renew work on the temple involves the idea of there not being enough time. “How modern an objection!” notes The Bible Reader’s Companion, “Sorry, there just isn’t time right now for prayer. I’d like to read my Bible, but I have to get up so early for my work. And at night I’m too tired to do anything but read [or watch] the news [or some relaxing entertainment]. The people of Judea were also busy: too busy with their own affairs to have time or money to invest in rebuilding the temple of God. As a result they lost out!” (note on verse 2).

In verses 3-4 and 9, the Jews are chided for somehow finding enough time and money to build up and adorn their own houses—running to serve themselves—while letting God’s house lie in ruins. He tells them to take stock of their situation (verse 5). All of their efforts produce little income. Their food and drink is not enough to satisfy them. Their clothes are not sufficient to keep them warm. Their wages seem to go into a “bag with holes” (verse 6). The reference here is to a money sack, which people carried before pockets and purses came into use. The people’s income seems to leak away. The harder they work, the further they get behind.

“Haggai rebuked the people with a...play on words.... He proclaimed that because the Lord’s house had remained ‘a ruin’ (haleb, Hag 1:4, 9), the Lord would bring [or, rather, had already brought] ‘a drought’ (horeb, Hag 1:11) on the land” (Expositor’s, note on Ezra 5:1). Indeed, God had cursed the people’s efforts because of their failure to honor and obey him (Haggai 1:7-11; see also 2:16-17). “There’s a lesson here for us. God is the one who makes any effort bear fruit. We need to put Him first. When we do, the Lord will bless” (Bible Reader’s Companion, note on 1:5-6).

The irony is that the reason the people did not have the time or substance to expend on the work of God is that they did not expend time and substance on the work of God first. People often feel that they “cannot afford” to support God’s work. Yet they have it backwards. The truth is that they cannot afford to not support it. They cannot afford to not take time to pray, to study God’s Word, to meditate on His laws and to obey Him and support His work. If we put God first, devoting ourselves to His service—in our hearts and minds, in our time and energy, in our finances, in every area of our lives—God will take care of us. If we support His work through our time and means, He will see to it that our remaining time and means are sufficient for the rest of our needs. God promises this in regard to His command about tithing in Malachi 3:8-12—and in regard to proper prioritizing of life’s demands in Matthew 6:25-34.

After presenting God's rebuke, Haggai has the distinction of being one of the few prophets in the Bible whose words were positively heeded. The leaders and people, with an appropriate fear of further neglecting their relationship with God, determine to now obey Him and renew work on His temple (Haggai 1:12). God then encourages them with the wonderful news that He will be with them (verse 13)—a necessity for their success in this and every spiritual venture. Verse 14 reveals that God Himself has inspired the national recommitment. The work recommences a little more than three weeks from Haggai's initial message (same verse). Perhaps the intervening time was "spent in taking inventory of their supplies, assessing and assigning jobs, and completing plans" (Expositor's, note on verses 13-15). It seems likely from the wording of Ezra 5:1-2 that Zechariah had also preached to the people prior to their renewed work even though his book does not actually begin until afterward.

### **The Temple Completed; Passover Celebrated (Ezra 6:14-22; Psalm 126)**

With the ongoing preaching and encouragement of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, the elders of the Jews built and at last finished the second temple (Ezra 6:14). Whether or not these elders included the governor Zerubbabel is not made clear (though they are differentiated in verse 7). That Zerubbabel's name is not mentioned in conjunction with the temple's completion could be an indication that he was no longer in office (see the Bible Reading Program comments on Zechariah 4). Yet again, the matter remains unresolved. The timing is of course significant. Solomon's temple had been destroyed in 586 B.C. Seventy years later, as foretold in Jeremiah 25, brings us to the sixth year of the Persian emperor Darius the Great (516-515 B.C.). The particular date, the third day of the 12th month Adar (Ezra 6:15), corresponds to March 12, 515 B.C.

Verse 14 says the temple was built in obedience to God and "according to the command of Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia." Artaxerxes (who reigned 465-425 B.C.) seems out of place here. He "did assist the rebuilding of the temple, although it was completed years before Artaxerxes came to power. Artaxerxes contributed to the welfare of the temple by issuing a decree regarding its maintenance (7:15, 21)" (Nelson Study Bible, note on 6:14). The king's purpose was "to beautify the house of the Lord" according to 7:27. Note that this was part of an Aramaic section of the book, which ends in verse 18 of chapter 6. So it may be that this was intended to be part of the Persian state records and that chronological consistency with the rest of Ezra's book was not the main consideration here. Since Ezra's mission came during the reign of Artaxerxes, it could be that Ezra placed the king's contribution in this spot to give him honorary mention in this particular state document.

At the dedication of the temple there is a great sacrifice, albeit not remotely approaching Solomon's dedicatory sacrifice. Yet, "although there were more than 200 times as many sheep and oxen offered in Solomon's dedication (see 1 King. 8:63), it should be noted that there were more people—and more wealthy people—participating in Solomon's dedication" (note on Ezra 6:17). Still it was an occasion of great joy (verse 6). By this time there is no mention of any sorrow over the smaller size and inferior quality of the second temple as compared to Solomon's, such as that described in 3:12, Haggai 2:3, and Zechariah 4:10.

Though the returned exiles are referred to the "children of Israel" in verse 16, we understand from other passages that the returned exiles were predominantly of the tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Levi (see Ezra 1:5)—with only a very few from the other tribes whose ancestors had become part of the kingdom of Judah. Nearly the whole of the other tribes remained scattered. Note that in verse 16, "children of Israel" is meant to designate the common people as opposed to the Levites and priests mentioned in the same verse. And all the Jews of Judea, as the remnant of Israel, were children of Israel. That being said, it is interesting to note that 12 male goats were offered as a sin offering for all 12 tribes of Israel (verse 17)—showing that God still viewed His people in terms of the 12 tribes.

In a matter of weeks after the temple dedication came the observance of the Passover and Days of Unleavened Bread. Verse 21 again refers to the children of Israel—but of course only those "who had returned from the captivity," who were almost all Jews. (For more on what happened to the other tribes of Israel, request, download or read online our free booklet *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*.)

Those who had "separated themselves from the filth of the nations of the land [that is, from the corrupt religious practices of the Samaritans]" (verse 21) were the few poor of the land whom the Babylonians had left in Judah as vinedressers and farmers (see 2 Kings 25:12).



“King of Assyria” (Ezra 6:22) is a somewhat surprising title for Darius. Yet it is a legitimate distinction as he was ruler of the former realm of Assyria. Persian rulers took the title “king of Babylon” for the same reason (see 5:13; Nehemiah 13:6).

It remains a time of great joy (6:22), as at long last, once again, the Jews celebrate before their own temple in their own land. And let us realize that this was only a tiny precursor to the awesome restoration of Israel and Judah that will come at the return of Jesus Christ.

“The Lord Has Done Great Things for Us” (Ezra 6:14-22; Psalm 126)

Psalm 126 is the seventh of a group of psalms known as “the Songs of Ascent (Ps. 120-134). This group of hymns was likely used by pilgrims making their way to Jerusalem to worship the Lord during the three annual national feasts—Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles (Lev. 23)” (Nelson Study Bible, note on Psalm 120). The 126th Psalm is distinctive in that it was composed following the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon. And given the great joy expressed within the song, it certainly fits with all that we’ve recently read regarding the restoration of God’s worship in Jerusalem and the newly rebuilt temple.

The return from captivity in Babylon had been anticipated for so long that when it came, it seemed like a dream (verse 1). Was this really happening? It was! And when the reality set in, joy was overflowing in laughter and song. The events that Judah experienced through the decrees of Cyrus and Darius and the temple reconstruction all stood as a great testimony among other nations (verse 2). And it was a great witness to themselves of the reality and power of their God. “The Lord has done great things for us,” they cried, “and we are filled with joy” (verse 3, NIV).

Still, all was not yet accomplished. God had “brought back the captivity of Zion” (verse 1). And yet the people pray in verse 4, “Bring back our captivity, O Lord...” Only a small percentage of the Jews who had been exiled to Babylon had returned. And the rest of the tribes of Israel remained scattered. Ultimately, this prayer was for the end-time work of Jesus Christ in bringing Israel and Judah back from around the globe. “...As the streams in the South [the Negev]” (same verse) is a request that this happen quickly and with great force. “The wadis in the steppe south of Hebron, around Beersheba, were generally dry; but on the rare occasions when during the winter months it rained even as little as one inch, the water ran down its ‘streams’ with great rapidity and often with destructive force.... Roads and bridges [have been] destroyed by the force of these torrential streams. The ‘streams in the Negev’ are not ordinary phenomena, as much as they represent proverbially the sudden unleash of God’s blessing” (Expositor’s Bible Commentary, note on verse 4).

Finally, The Nelson Study Bible notes on verses 5-6: “The people of Judah had gone to Babylon in tears. Yet their sorrow reaped tremendous rewards; the Lord came to the rescue of His humbled people (34:18; Is. 66:2; Matt. 5:4). Upon their return to Jerusalem and Judah, they were reaping a harvest of rejoicing.”

As we assemble annually to observe God’s feasts, let us all go with such a mindset—as if leaving the captivity of this world to rejoice before the Almighty King who has done great things for us, knowing that all our toil and sorrow in this age will ultimately reap a reward in His presence for all eternity.

### **The Decree of Artaxerxes (Ezra 7)**

We return now to the book of Ezra. The events of Ezra 6 occurred during the reign of Darius the Great. Chapter 7 jumps forward to the reign of his grandson Artaxerxes I, also known as Longimanus (464-424 B.C.). It was between these two chapters that the events of the book of Esther took place—during the reign of Xerxes, the son of Darius and father of Artaxerxes. With the death of Xerxes in 465 B.C., “the reins of government should have been handed over to [another] Darius, the eldest son of Xerxes, but instead Artaxerxes his brother murdered him, with the encouragement of Artabanus, captain of the guard, and took his place as king” (Eugene Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*, 1987, p. 499).

Artaxerxes’ reign was beset by “widespread unrest and even revolt, particularly in the more remote provinces. By 460 Egypt refused to pay further tribute and solicited and received support from the [Greek] Delian League in this bold act of defiance. Persia undercut this arrangement by bribing [the western Asia Minor city of] Sardis to go to war with Athens, a move that neutralized the league and jeopardized not only Egypt but Athens.... The orator-statesman Pericles had begun to lead Athens to a position of dominance amongst all the Greek states by

458, a situation that the latter feared and resented. The [Greek] civil wars which then broke out freed Artaxerxes of further concern for his western Asia provinces, allowing him to attend to matters closer to home” (p. 499).

It was in this time frame, specifically in 457 B.C., the seventh year of Artaxerxes (see verses 7-8) that the king gave permission to Ezra to lead a band of exiles back to Jerusalem. “Most scholars assume that the seventh year of Artaxerxes I should be reckoned according to the Persian custom of dating regnal years from spring to spring (Nisan to Nisan, which was also the Jewish religious calendar). Thus Ezra would have begun his journey on the first day of Nisan (8 Apr. 458) and arrived on the first day of Ab (4 Aug. 458.... [Yet] during the monarchy the Israelites had adopted a civil fall-to-fall calendar (Tishri to Tishri) as well.... [And some] have argued that the Jews resumed such a calendar after the Exile partly on the basis of an Elephantine papyrus [of the Jewish community in Egypt at the time]. The seventh year of Artaxerxes I would have run from Tishri 458 to Tishri 457. Ezra would have left on 27 March 457 and arrived on 23 July 457” (Expositor’s Bible Commentary, note on verses 7-9). These latter dates appear to be the correct ones. For the fall-to-fall reckoning is confirmed by comparing Nehemiah 1:1 and 2:1—as the Hebrew month Kislev (corresponding to November-December) there precedes Nisan (corresponding to March-April) in the same 20th year of Artaxerxes (whereas Nisan would mark a new regnal year if a Nisan-to-Nisan reckoning were used).

Ezra 7 gives us our first introduction to Ezra himself. Introduced with a long genealogy showing his priestly descent from Aaron (verses 1-5), he is called the “son of Seraiah” (verse 1)—which actually refers not to his immediate father but to his line of descent, as Seraiah was the high priest at the time of Jerusalem’s fall (see 2 Kings 25:18) and his son Jehozadak went into Babylonian captivity (see 1 Chronicles 6:15). The name Ezra (meaning “Help”) is apparently a shortened form of Azariah (“Yhwh Has Helped”), a name that occurs twice in the list of his ancestors.

Besides being a priest, Ezra was also a “skilled scribe” (verse 6)—“one who copied and studied the Law. After the Exile, the office of scribe came into prominence, in some ways replacing the prophet in importance, and eventually eclipsing even the role of the priest” (Nelson Study Bible, note on verse 6). Verse 11 shows Ezra’s deep spiritual commitment to studying God’s law, living by it and teaching it to others. He is here called “Ezra the priest, the scribe, expert in the words of the commandments of the LORD, and of His statutes to Israel.” Ezra became known in Jewish tradition “as ‘the scribe’s scribe’ or the teacher of scribes” (note on verse 11)—considered founder of the scribal movement, which had a formative impact on the Jewish religion of Christ’s day.

The king commits a remarkable degree of authority and wealth into Ezra’s hand. There is no question but that God was involved in the giving of this decree, as that is explicitly stated in verses 27-28. Indeed it is from this decree that we are to date the commencement of the 483 years of the 70-weeks prophecy of Daniel 9 leading to the appearance of the Messiah (for more on this, see the Bible Reading Program comments on Daniel 9).

Nevertheless, God often works through typical human motivations of national leaders to bring about his intended results. Biblical historian Eugene Merrill comments: “It will be helpful to see if there were any political factors that motivated Artaxerxes [who had murdered his own brother to become king] to this beneficent policy [of helping the Jews], for, try as we might, it is difficult to believe that the king was operating out of purely charitable motives.

“We have already suggested that the neutralization of the [Greek] Delian League after 460 left Artaxerxes free to deal with matters closer to home. He instructed Megabyzus [his brother-in-law], an official who had bribed Sparta to attack Athens and had then been made governor of the satrapy of Syria, to lead Persian troops south from Cilicia [in what is now southern Turkey] to wage war on Egypt, the ally of Athens. After defeating Athenian troops at Prosopitus (an island in the Nile Delta), Megabyzus brought Egypt itself to submission in 456. Very possibly, then, in 458 [or 457] Artaxerxes viewed a loyal Judean province as an important asset for his anticipated disciplinary action against Egypt. And what better way to ensure Judean loyalty than to allow Ezra, no doubt a highly popular and powerful Jewish leader, to reestablish Jewish life and culture in that little land that was so crucial to Persian success?” (pp. 506-507). God was no doubt involved in the geopolitical circumstances that made such a decision appealing to Artaxerxes at this crucial time.

Ezra 7:7-9 briefly mentions the journey of Ezra and his company to the Promised Land—a journey that took four months, including an 11-day wait at the beginning as we will see in the next chapter, which gives more details about this second Jewish return from captivity (compare 8:31).

The decree itself, in 7:12-26, is written in Aramaic. In the decree, the Jews are referred to as “the people of Israel” (verse 13). While those represented were almost all from the tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Levi, they were nevertheless looked upon as the remnant of Israel, especially since Israel was the name of the nation in covenant with God—the God of Israel, a term also used in the decree. It might seem odd that Artaxerxes would himself use such terminology. More peculiar still is the phrase “priests and Levites” (same verse), as this seems a particularly Jewish distinction and not one the Persians would make. This wording has in fact aroused suspicion among scholars about the authenticity of the document. Yet it is likely that the king used Jewish officials—perhaps Ezra himself—to help draft the decree.

The “seven counselors” of verse 14 are parallel to those of Xerxes in Esther 1:14.

The support for local religions by the Persians is attested to in historical documents. “There are close parallels to the directive of vv. 15-16 [about specifics regarding offerings] in the Elephantine letters, i.e., in the so-called Passover Papyrus, in which [a later Persian emperor] Darius II ordered the Jews [of Elephantine Island in what is now the city of Aswan in southern Egypt] to keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread...and also in the temple reconstruction authorization [for the Jews of Elephantine to build their own temple]: ‘Let meal-offering, incense and burnt-offering be offered upon the altar of the God Yahu in your name’” (Expositor’s, note on verses 15-16).

There might have been some superstition on the part of the Persian rulers in their policy of promoting local religions. Perhaps they genuinely wanted to win the favor and avoid the wrath of the gods worshiped throughout their realm. Yet at the same time, it just may have seemed rather practical to them—to win the favor of subject peoples and keep order among them.

With the conclusion of the decree in verse 26, the text of verses 27-28 returns to Hebrew. These two verses, written by Ezra in the first person, begin a section that continues to the end of chapter 9 known as the Ezra Memoirs.

Ezra is greatly encouraged by the evident intervention of God to once again bless His people.

## **1 Corinthians 16**

A collection for the poor at Jerusalem. (1-9) Timothy and Apollos commended. (10-12) Exhortation to watchfulness in faith and love. (13-18) Christian salutations. (19-24)

The good examples of other Christians and churches should rouse us. It is good to lay up in store for good uses. Those who are rich in this world, should be rich in good works, 1 Timothy 6:17,18. The diligent hand will not make rich, without the Divine blessing, Proverbs 10:4,22. And what more proper to stir us up to charity to the people and children of God, than to look at all we have as his gift? Works of mercy are real fruits of true love to God, and are therefore proper services on his own day. Ministers are doing their proper business, when putting forward, or helping works of charity. The heart of a Christian minister must be towards the people among whom he has laboured long, and with success. All our purposes must be made with submission to the Divine providence, James 4:15. Adversaries and opposition do not break the spirits of faithful and successful ministers, but warm their zeal, and inspire them with fresh courage. A faithful minister is more discouraged by the hardness of his hearers’ hearts, and the backslidings of professors, than by the enemies’ attempts.

Timothy came to do the work of the Lord. Therefore to vex his spirit, would be to grieve the Holy Spirit; to despise him, would be to despise Him that sent him. Those who work the work of the Lord, should be treated with tenderness and respect. Faithful ministers will not be jealous of each other. It becomes the ministers of the gospel to show concern for each other’s reputation and usefulness.

A Christian is always in danger, therefore should ever be on the watch. He should be fixed in the faith of the gospel, and never desert or give it up. By this faith alone he will be able to keep his ground in an hour of temptation. Christians should be careful that charity not only reigns in their hearts, but shines in their lives. There is a great difference between Christian firmness and feverish warmth and transport. The apostle gave

particular directions as to some who served the cause of Christ among them. Those who serve the saints, those who desire the honour of the churches, and to remove reproaches from them, are to be thought much of, and loved. They should willingly acknowledge the worth of such, and all who laboured with or helped the apostle.

Christianity by no means destroys civility. Religion should promote a courteous and obliging temper towards all. Those give a false idea of religion, and reproach it, who would take encouragement from it to be sour and morose. And Christian salutations are not mere empty compliments; but are real expressions of good-will to others, and commend them to the Divine grace and blessing. Every Christian family should be as a Christian church. Wherever two or three are gathered together in the name of Christ, and he is among them, there is a church. Here is a solemn warning. Many who have Christ's name much in their mouths, have no true love to him in their hearts. None love him in truth, who do not love his laws, and keep his commandments. Many are Christians in name, who do not love Christ Jesus the Lord in sincerity. Such are separated from the people of God, and the favour of God. Those who love not the Lord Jesus Christ, must perish without remedy.

Let us not rest in any religious profession where there is not the love of Christ, earnest desires for his salvation, gratitude for his mercies, and obedience to his commandments. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ has in it all that is good, for time and for eternity. To wish that our friends may have this grace with them, is wishing them the utmost good. And this we should wish all our friends and brethren in Christ. We can wish them nothing greater, and we should wish them nothing less. True Christianity makes us wish those whom we love, the blessings of both worlds; this is meant in wishing the grace of Christ to be with them. The apostle had dealt plainly with the Corinthians, and told them of their faults with just severity; but he parts in love, and with a solemn profession of his love to them for Christ's sake. May our love be with all who are in Christ Jesus. Let us try whether all things appear worthless to us, when compared with Christ and his righteousness. Do we allow ourselves in any known sin, or in the neglect of any known duty? By such inquiries, faithfully made, we may judge of the state of our souls.

## **2 Corinthians 1**

The second epistle to the Corinthians probably was written about a year after the first. Its contents are closely connected with those of the former epistle. The manner in which the letter St. Paul formerly wrote had been received, is particularly noticed; this was such as to fill his heart with gratitude to God, who enabled him fully to discharge his duty towards them. Many had shown marks of repentance, and amended their conduct, but others still followed their false teachers; and as the apostle delayed his visit, from his unwillingness to treat them with severity, they charged him with levity and change of conduct. Also, with pride, vain-glory, and severity, and they spake of him with contempt. In this epistle we find the same ardent affection towards the disciples at Corinth, as in the former, the same zeal for the honour of the gospel, and the same boldness in giving Christian reproof. The first six chapters are chiefly practical: the rest have more reference to the state of the Corinthian church, but they contain many rules of general application.

The apostle blesses God for comfort in, and deliverance out of troubles. (1-11) He professes his own and his fellow-labourers' integrity. (12-14) Gives reasons for his not coming to them. (15-24)

We are encouraged to come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need. The Lord is able to give peace to the troubled conscience, and to calm the raging passions of the soul. These blessings are given by him, as the Father of his redeemed family. It is our Saviour who says, Let not your heart be troubled. All comforts come from God, and our sweetest comforts are in him. He speaks peace to souls by granting the free remission of sins; and he comforts them by the enlivening influences of the Holy Spirit, and by the rich mercies of his grace. He is able to bind up the broken-hearted, to heal the most painful wounds, and also to give hope and joy under the heaviest sorrows. The favours God bestows on us, are not only to make us cheerful, but also that we may be useful to others. He sends comforts enough to support such as simply trust in and serve him. If we should be brought so low as to despair even of life, yet we may then trust God, who can bring back even from death. Their hope and trust were not in vain; nor shall any be ashamed who trust in the Lord. Past experiences encourage faith and hope, and lay us under obligation to trust in God for time to come. And it is our duty, not only to help one another with prayer, but in praise and thanksgiving, and thereby to make suitable returns for benefits received. Thus both trials and mercies will end in good to ourselves and others.

Though, as a sinner, the apostle could only rejoice and glory in Christ Jesus, yet, as a believer, he might rejoice and glory in being really what he professed. Conscience witnesses concerning the steady course and tenor of the life. Thereby we may judge ourselves, and not by this or by that single act. Our conversation will be well ordered, when we live and act under such a gracious principle in the heart. Having this, we may leave our characters in the Lord's hands, but using proper means to clear them, when the credit of the gospel, or our usefulness, calls for it.

The apostle clears himself from the charge of levity and inconstancy, in not coming to Corinth. Good men should be careful to keep the reputation of sincerity and constancy; they should not resolve, but on careful thought; and they will not change unless for weighty reasons. Nothing can render God's promises more certain: his giving them through Christ, assures us they are his promises; as the wonders God wrought in the life, resurrection, and ascension of his Son, confirm faith.

The Holy Spirit makes Christians firm in the faith of the gospel: the quickening of the Spirit is an earnest of everlasting life; and the comforts of the Spirit are an earnest of everlasting joy. The apostle desired to spare the blame he feared would be unavoidable, if he had gone to Corinth before he learned what effect his former letter produced. Our strength and ability are owing to faith; and our comfort and joy must flow from faith. The holy tempers and gracious fruits which attend faith, secure from delusion in so important a matter.