

## **EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 5**

**by Dr. Ralph Davis**

### **God is the Ruler Yet (Ezra 5-6)**

Strictly speaking, chapters 4-6 may belong together. There is a kind of idiom that occurs in 4:4 and in 6:22; in the former it is “making the hands of the people of Judah drop,” and in the latter “to strengthen their hands.” It is an idiom for discouragement/encouragement. It may have been placed deliberately near the beginning of this section and at the close of it in order to contrast in bookend style the state of the people of God. Here, however, we are treating chapters 5 and 6.

The bulk of these two chapters consists of the inquiry of Tattenai (Ezra 5:3-17) and the favorable response of the Persian court (6:1-13).<sup>1</sup> Remember the situation from the end of chapter 4: the worked on the temple had ceased/stopped.

#### **I. The Word that Stirs Us – Ezra 5:1-5**

We meet here...

##### **A. A demanding word**

Note how Ezra 5:1 speaks of Haggai and Zechariah prophesying “in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them.” As Kidner notes, this clause is a “gentle reminder of man’s accountability and heaven’s help” (p. 53). Ultimately, neither the king of Persia nor any other ruler is our master. Only the God of Israel is “over” us; we are under his sway and his word.

##### **B. An energizing word**

The prophets Haggai and Zechariah “prophesied” (Ezra 5:1) and then Zerubbabel and Jeshua “arose and began to rebuild” (Ezra 5:2) the temple. That is what the word of God does. It enables God’s servants to do God’s will. The word packs power that moves and sustains obedience. This is especially necessary in light of the fear and intimidation that the community had endured (Ezra 4:24). We see the same theology in 1 Thessalonians 2:13, where Paul alluded to “the word of God, which also is at work in/among you who believe.” The word of God is not only a demanding force (see above), but also a driving one.

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<sup>1</sup> Williamson, *New Bible Commentary*, 428.

### C. A tested word

No sooner do Judah's leaders obey God's word than they run into renewed opposition (Ezra 5:3-5). Tattenai and Shethar-bozenai are asking Judah for authorization for this project, but apparently theirs is not the blatant opposition related in chapter 4. One can understand their inquiry, I suppose. After all, no work had been taking place for something like fifteen years.

## II. The Providence that Surrounds Us – Ezra 5:6[5:5]-6:15

### A. Background items

Tattenai (Ezra 5:6):

In 1944 A. T. Olmstead cited a document dated to June 5, 502 B.C., which refers to Ta-at-tan-ni as the governor who was subordinate to the satrap over Ebir-nari.<sup>2</sup>

The dimensions of the temple in Ezra 6:3:

60 cubits high and broad, possibly indicating the limits of what the Persians would underwrite.

Time required to make an inquiry like that of Tattenai:

“Darius the Great introduced several changes in the way the empire was administered, and the highway system was one of his high priorities. The Persian Royal Road stretched some seventeen hundred miles from Susa through Arbela (near Nineveh) to Sardis... The road was carefully maintained, and rough stretches were paved. It was the Persians who invented horseshoes to facilitate mail moving over this Royal Road. Post stations were positioned on average every fifteen miles so Persian couriers could mount fresh horses. This communication network functioned so well that a letter written in Susa would reach Sardis in one week.”<sup>3</sup>

Hoerth indicates that a courier could average 240 miles a day, while a caravan would average 19 miles/day. If Darius' road system was fully operational early in his reign, the correspondence noted in chapters 5-6 could have been completed in a month or two at most.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Yamauchi, *EBC*, 4:636.

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Hoerth, *Archaeology and the Old Testament*, 393.

<sup>4</sup> Alfred Hoerth, *Archaeology and the Old Testament*, 394.

### **B. Negative providence – Ezra 5:5**

Note the use of the Aramaic verb *betel* (“stop” NASB; as in Ezra 4:21,23,24). By *negative* providence here I mean what God does *not* allow to happen (compare Pss. 124 and 129). Judah may have been under investigation, and there was another potential frustration pending, but “they did not stop them.” Judah was allowed to keep building in the meantime.

### **C. Disciplinary providence – Ezra 5:12**

Note that in Ezra 5:11-16 Tattenai and Shethar-bozenai quote the response that the people of Judah gave them when they challenged them about their authority for rebuilding. In one sense these words are a response of praise. And yet they are also words of confession, as verse 12 makes clear. Judah admits that they are a people who have been under Yahweh’s wrath, that he had taken temple and land from them.

### **D. Extravagant providence – Ezra 6:6-12(13)**

Not only did they find a copy of Cyrus’ original decree in the archives (Ezra 6:1-5), confirming what the people of Judah had said, and not only was Judah granted freedom from interference from Tattenai and company (Ezra 6:6-7), but the elders of Judah received provision for the maintenance of the temple worship as well. Darius would underwrite the functioning of the temple with state funds (Ezra 6:8-10)!

This is what we have come to call “vintage Yahweh.” God usually does not exercise a bare providence. There is so often a richness, a “who would have guessed?” aspect to his ways (cf. the argument in Isa. 49:5-6 around the phrase “too light a thing”). This occasion in Ezra 6 is very much like that in Exodus 2:1-10 where Moses’ mother not only got her own baby back, but raised him under state protection, and with a salary for taking care of her own kid to boot! God’s ways seem to be marked with such generosity, such promiscuity. He delights to go far beyond all that we ask or think (Eph. 3:20). So too here: they received far more than mere permission to build. Providence strikes again!

### **E. Encouraging providence – Ezra 6:14**

The last of this verse reads: “And they finished building according to the command of the God of Israel and the decree of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia.” The very next verse brings everything back to Darius. Yet, verse 14 momentarily lets the timeline run down to Artaxerxes, omitting mention of Xerxes (Ahasuerus). Artaxerxes was king in Ezra’s time (see Ezra 7:1). If Ezra is the one writing the historical account in chapters 5-6 (including 6:14), then he may have included Artaxerxes’ name in his summary note because in his own time Artaxerxes had also supported the worship and life of the people of God (indeed, he did: Ezra 7:11-26). It may well be Ezra’s little hint acknowledging that God was showing the same providence in Ezra’s own time as he had shown to the previous generation about whom Ezra was writing. God’s providence is not locked up in

some past generation, but continues among his believing people in every age. In Ezra 4:6-23 Ezra extended the account of Judah's troubles beyond the time he was describing. Why couldn't he have done it here as well to indicate the favor they were shown?

#### **F. Hidden providence – Ezra 6:14**

Look at Ezra 6:14b again. The word *te'em* (“decree”) is used twice, though English versions do not translate it the same way. They finished building “according to the decree of the God of Israel” and “according to the decree of Cyrus” et al. There is God's decree, and there is the decree of Persian kings. The ultimate decree is God's, but he brings it to pass indirectly by clothing it in the decrees of men in order to hide or cover his way. Nevertheless it is clear that in their decrees and pronouncements even kings are only the servant-boys of the Most High God.

#### **G. On the date in 6:15**

Adar, the last Babylonian month, is equivalent to our February-March. The temple was finished on March 12, 515 B.C., a little over 70 years after its destruction. Renewed work had begun on 21 September 520 B.C. (see Hag. 1:4-15), so a sustained effort continued for over four years in order to complete it.<sup>5</sup>

### **III. The Joy that Seizes Us – Ezra 6:16-22**

We have kept verses 16-18 and 19-22 together (in the latter the language switches back to Hebrew). This whole section recounts their celebrating the temple dedication, the Passover, and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Note the emphasis on joy at the beginning and end of the section (Ezra 6:16,22). Here they express or experience joy by:

#### **A. Renewing scriptural worship – Ezra 6:16-18**

The number of sacrifices on this occasion is paltry compared to what Solomon had offered (see 1 Kings 8:63). Note that the sin offering is “for all Israel,” the 12-tribe nation, even though most of those present were from Judah, Benjamin, and Levi. Also, the ordering of the worship via priests and Levites was “as it is written in the book of Moses” (Ezra 6:18), i.e., it was orthodox worship.

#### **B. Celebrating a mighty redemption – Ezra 6:19-20**

This is the Passover celebration (cf. Exod. 12-13). There is a diligence and eagerness about the ceremonial preparation of the priests and Levites; they were not slovenly or indifferent about it. Would this post-exilic community have looked upon this Passover as commemorating a “second Exodus,” i.e., from Babylon?

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<sup>5</sup> Yamauchi, *EBC*, 4:645.

### C. Embracing converted people – Ezra 6:21

This verse shows that the attitude of Ezra 4:3 was not some narrow-minded nationalism. Here is a community open to others. Yet there is a price to pay: they must “separate themselves” from the impurity of the nations. The church does not win the world by becoming like the world; it must insist that the world leave the world when it enters the church. But this text shows the post-exilic “church” was not some closed-door group of bigoted, gentile-despising Jews. However, the way into this body was not through some loose-as-a-oose pagan ecumenism (Ezra 4:1-3), but through costly and decisive conversion.

### D. Marveling at sovereign providence – Ezra 6:22

The last half of the verse explains the joy of their celebration: “for Yahweh had made them joyful and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God.”

The king intended is Darius – but he was king of Persia. Why is he called the “king of Assyria” here? Is this a glitch? Probably not. Note F.C. Fensham’s comment:

On the other hand, the title “king of Assyria” might not be so farfetched as some scholars believe. We have evidence from the ancient Near East that new rulers or foreign rulers were incorporated into the king lists of a particular country. This is the case with a king list of Babylon, which starts with the Assyrian Kandalanu, mentions the Chaldeans Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar, refers to Cyrus, Cambyses, and Darius, and ends with the names of Seleucid kings. Because Darius was also the sovereign of Assyria, he could easily have been called the king of Assyria. The choice of this title might seem awkward. It is possible that the author wanted to refer here to a title which had for a long time in history inspired fear in the hearts of the Jews. The Assyrian kings were used by the Lord to chastise his people (cf. Neh. 9:32). But now the Lord has used the Assyrian king (Darius) to grant favor to the Jews.<sup>6</sup>

But don’t allow the perplexity over terminology to obscure the clear claim of the text: Yahweh had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them. Kings are the big honkers of this age, but the King of kings is the one who turns their hearts! Here in verse 22 is the praise that never thinks of the instrument without lauding the Craftsman (see Prov. 21:1).

As noted at the first of this section, the keynote is *joy*. Verse 22 makes clear the secret of that joy; they celebrated with joy because Yahweh had made them joyful. This reminds

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<sup>6</sup> NICOT, 96-97.

one of Franz Josef Haydn's response when his exuberant music was criticized by some more somber members of the church: "Since God has given me a cheerful heart, He will forgive me for serving him cheerfully." When Haydn was setting to music the words of the Mass (in English: "Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world"), he said that he was seized by an "uncontrollable gladness." He even had to apologize to the Empress Marie Therese on the matter, explaining that the certainty of God's grace had made him so happy that he wrote a joyful melody for the sober words.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Patrick Kavanaugh, *The Spiritual Lives of Great Composers*, 21-22.