

# May 3, 2009

## A Joyful Celebration

To encourage us to appreciate and celebrate our places of worship

Key Bible reference: Ezra 6

Key Verse: Ezra 6.16

### Biblical Background

The building of the second Temple following the return from exile was drawn out, complicated, and beset by numerous obstacles. Yet when the Temple was finished at last, the people responded with joy and celebration. Just so, our places of worship are worthy of celebration as the places where we have encountered the power and presence of God.

Some of the best biblical evidence we have for the years following the Exile comes from Ezra and Nehemiah. Indeed, First and Second Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah form a connected history of Israel from the reign of David to the restoration following the Babylonian exile. The relationships among First and Second Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah are complicated; however, it appears that the same writer or editor (sometimes called the Chronicler) assembled all four books out of a variety of sources, including old genealogical lists; lists of returnees from exile; the autobiography of Nehemiah; and assorted official documents written in Aramaic, the administrative language of the Persian Empire.

Indeed, Ezra 4:7-6:18, which sets the stage for the Passover celebration described in the final four verses of this lesson, is written in Aramaic. These chapters detail the correspondence about the rebuilding of Jerusalem between the officials of the Persian "province Beyond the River," in which Judah was located, and the

Persian court. The correspondence is out of chronological order. Listed first are letters to and from Artaxerxes I [ahr-tuh-ZUHRK-seez I] (465 B.C.-424 B.C.), regarding the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls (Ezra 4:7-22; see also the reference to Artaxerxes in Ezra 6:14b). Next comes correspondence with Darius [duh-RI-uhs] (522 B.C.-486 B.C.) related to the rebuilding of the Temple (Ezra 5:6-6:12). These verses appear to be copies of actual letters, perhaps grouped together here because they all concern the rebuilding of Jerusalem and to give a sense of the changing relationships between Judah and Persia.

In Ezra 5:1-5, the efforts of Zerubbabel [zuh-RUHB-uh-buhl] the governor, Joshua the high priest (here called "Jeshua son of Jozadak"), and the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to rebuild the Temple prompt Tattenai [TAT-uh-ni], governor of "the province Beyond the River," to look into the matter. He, together with other officials of the province, sends a request for information to Darius in the second year of Darius's reign (Ezra 4:24).

Ezra 6:1-12. Darius ordered a search of the archives, which turned up an Aramaic copy of Cyrus's original decree calling for the rebuilding of the Temple (6:2-5). This discovery prompted Darius to issue his own decree (6:6-12). Darius insured that the rebuilding Cyrus ordered would actually be carried out by providing funding for the project "from the royal revenue, the tribute

of the province Beyond the River" (6:8b). Further, he directed that the sacrificial worship conducted in the rebuilt Temple be likewise supported by the province (6:9-10). Finally, Darius ordered that anyone who resisted his edict was to be put to death and his or her home be made a dunghill (6:11).

The degree of interest Darius expressed in tracking down and enforcing Cyrus's old edict is entirely in keeping with what we know about Darius's actions elsewhere in the Persian Empire. In his monumental inscriptions, Darius expressed the Persian idea that order in the universe was established by the will of the creator god Ahura-Mazda [uh-hoor-uh-MAZ-duh] and manifested through the words and works of the kings Ahura-Mazda appointed. Therefore it was not at all strange that Darius should order an intensive search of all the archives to determine if Cyrus had ordered the building of the Jerusalem Temple or that he should take pains to insure that the rebuilding was accomplished once the edict had come to light.

Further, Darius was particularly concerned with maintaining order in the secular and religious lives of his people. Ancient inscriptions reveal Darius's support of and involvement with local religious institutions. It is perfectly in keeping with what we know about Darius that he should direct that the Jerusalem Temple be supported by the state "so that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king and his children" (6:10).

Verses 13-15. Given Darius's commitment to the project, it is little wonder that the resistance to the rebuilding of the Temple evaporated. Tattenai and Shethar-bozenai [shee-thahr-BOZ-uh-ni] went from questioning

the project to supporting it; as a result, the rebuilding was completed in four years. Some scholars have objected that this is far too short a time for the completion of a project as monumental as the building of a temple. However, the second Temple was a relatively modest structure, especially when compared to the first Temple. One might wonder why the struggling community of returnees should have bothered, in the face of limited resources and political opposition, to build a structure that proved to be in many ways such a disappointment. Why did they need a temple?

Ancient peoples wrestled with the same questions we do, questions concerning the meaning of life and death and suffering. For them, as for us, these questions wrapped around the larger questions, Who is God? What is God like? and most pressingly, Where is God when we need help? We attempt to answer these questions intellectually, with the tools of theology and philosophy. But in the ancient Near East, the problem of the presence of a god was addressed in more tangible terms, through the symbolism associated with temples.

Temples were believed to correspond to the heavenly dwelling of a god. For this reason, temples were built according to a plan revealed to the builder—just as the pattern for the Tabernacle was revealed to Moses (Exodus 25:1-9). By precisely corresponding to this plan, the earthly temple could become a place where human beings could have access to the presence of the god being worshiped. This idea is expressed in Solomon's Temple dedication prayer: "I have built you an exalted house, a place for you to dwell in forever" (1 Kings 8:13).

Later in Solomon's prayer, the idea of God's presence in the Temple is qualified somewhat.

It is not God but rather God's name that inhabits the Temple, for no mere building could ever hold the Lord (1 Kings 8:27-30). However, the idea of the Temple as the place where God's presence can be experienced continued powerfully through Israel's religious consciousness. Psalm 48:12-14 says,

For this ancient Israelite poet, to see the Temple on Zion was to have a vision of God.

As the home of God, the place of God's particular presence, the Temple was believed to be the source of life and fertility. So, in Ezekiel's temple vision, a river flowing out of the perfect temple brings healing and fertility to the entire land, even transforming the Dead Sea into a freshwater lake (Ezekiel 47:1-12; for this idea, see also Psalm 46:4; Haggai 1:7-11).

The connection made in our Bible lesson between the completion of the Temple and the law "written in the book of Moses" (Ezra 6:18) points to another important function of the Temple. The worship in the Temple in Jerusalem was intended to continue the experience of Sinai. The description of the coming of God to the Temple on Zion in Psalm 50:1-6 sounds very much like the manifestation of God's presence in fire and storm on Sinai (Exodus 19:16-20; see also Deuteronomy 4:11-14, 33-36; 5:4, 22-26; 9:10; 10:4). Further, Psalm 24 shows that the worship in the Temple was not divorced from the ethical and moral concerns of the law but was in fact inseparably joined to them: (Psalm 24:3-5)

As the place where God's presence could be experienced and celebrated, as the source of life and fertility in the land, and as the center for the continued experience of God's commanding appearance on Sinai, the Temple

was indispensable for the religious experience of the people of Israel. Rebuilding the Temple was not an option; for these ancient people of faith, it was a necessity.

Verses 16-18. The completed Temple was dedicated to the Lord by a sacrifice of "one hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel, twelve male goats" (6:17)—a huge offering, but puny in the face of the 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep said to have been offered by Solomon at the dedication of the first Temple (1 Kings 8:63). Again, the day of the return is shown to be a "day of small things" (Zechariah 4:10). However, the community of returnees was not discouraged: "The people of Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy" (Ezra 6:16).

Note that the sin offering of twelve goats, one for each of the twelve tribes, was intended to purge the Temple from any contamination brought by the sins of the people, in keeping with the old priestly conception of sacrifice and purity (Leviticus 4:15:13; see also Ezekiel 43:18-27, where this idea is applied to the consecration of the altar). Although only the remnants of the southern kingdom of Judah were represented in the restoration community, offerings for all twelve tribes showed that this community deemed itself the new, restored Israel. For the divisions of the priests and the courses of the Levites, see 1 Chronicles 23-26.

Verses 19-22. The Temple was completed on the third day of the month of Adar (6:15), the last month of the Jewish year. On the fourteenth day of the next month, the first of the new year, the community celebrated the

Passover (6:19; the date is as stipulated in Numbers 28:16-25; see also Ezekiel 45:21). The invitation to the people of the land who had joined them and separated themselves from the pollutions of the nations of the land (Ezra 6:21) in order to join the feast marked the first time that the people of the land had been included in their community by the returnees (Contrast Ezra 4:1-3, where the offer of the people of the land to assist in the rebuilding of the Temple is rebuffed.).

The celebration of this feast at this time, following the completion of the Temple, was especially significant. Remember the connection between the Passover and the liberation of Israel from bondage in Egypt (Exodus 12:1-13:10). Second Isaiah had described the return from exile as a second Exodus (Isaiah 43:14-21). Now, the celebration of the Passover in Jerusalem, centered on the new Temple, represented the fulfillment of those hopes and dreams. The theme of fulfillment and restoration is also emphasized when the writer refers to Darius as "the king of Assyria" (Ezra 6:22). Just as the destruction of the people Israel had begun with the fall of the Northern Kingdom to Assyria in 722/21 B.C., so the foreign king Darius's support for the Temple marked the end of Israel's shame and the beginning of a new era.

### **Prayer**

O God, may we always remember that we worship in your house, not in places of our own possession. We thank you for your presence among us and for the inspiration and guidance of your Holy Spirit. Perfect us in love that we may better love one another, serve you more faithfully, and make all your children welcome

in the space you entrust to our care. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.