

## Chapter Five

### PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. What historical events or changing circumstances made it possible to resume construction?
2. How does Darius' character compare with the previous king's?
3. What part did the people credit to God in their varying fortunes?
4. Do you think the letter of Tattenai was written to seek instruction and information or to direct and influence opinions: to help or to hinder the reconstruction?

### OUTLINE

In chapter five, the work of rebuilding the Temple is resumed.

- C. The work is resumed by the reign of Darius.
1. The work gets under way (vss. 1-5).
  2. A letter is sent to clarify the situation (vss. 6-17).

### TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- C. The work is resumed by the reign of Darius.
1. The work gets under way.

#### TEXT, 5:1-5

- 1 When the prophets, Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them,
- 2 then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God which is in Jerusalem; and the prophets of God were with them supporting them.
- 3 At that time Tattenai, the governor of the province beyond the River, and Shethar-bozenai and their colleagues came to them and spoke to them thus, "Who issued you a decree

to rebuild this temple and to finish this structure?"

- 4 Then we told them accordingly what the names of the men were who were reconstructing this building.
- 5 But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until a report should come to Darius, and then a written reply be returned concerning it.

### COMMENT

*Verse 1* mentions the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah which prodded the people into resumption of the Temple reconstruction. To see how this was accomplished, read the books which bear these prophets' names, especially Hag. 1:4-11 and Zech. 1:16, 17. Zechariah is called the son of Iddo; actually he was his grandson (Zech. 1:1). This word, "son," is used in this way frequently in genealogies. Note again that the meaning of the word, "prophecy," is not restricted to foretelling, but has to do with the conveying of the total message of God: with being God's spokesman.

Speaking in God's name, as is mentioned here, meant more than affixing His name to the proclamation. "Name" indicates "character" in the Bible; to know one's name signifies a knowledge of one's character. The message of Haggai and Zechariah, then, reflected the character of God, according to Ezra's statement.

This verse is peculiar in that it contains several names for God's people: Jews, Judah, Jerusalem, and Israel, all used interchangeably. This could not have been done in every age, especially during the Divided Monarchy, but it was done from Ezra's time on; therefore it is the policy we will follow herein.

Some cultists today try to distinguish between Judah and Israel. They contend that the Jews rejected Jesus but Israel did not; they attempt to link the British (and Americans) with Israel, genealogically, and to say these are God's Chosen People today. It is obvious that Ezra knew nothing of such a distinction. Many other passages in Ezra call the returnees by the name

of Israel (or Sons of Israel): see 2:2, 59, 70; 3:1, 11; 4:3; 6:16, 21. He even calls them "all Israel" in 6:17, which see. We gather from the N.T. (Rev. 3:9) that God is not pleased with those who call themselves Jews and are not. Or Israelites, or Christians, we presume.

Those who returned from captivity were predominantly of the former tribe of Judah, with a healthy sprinkling of persons from the tribes of Benjamin and Levi. It is reasonable to suppose that many from Israel who were carried away by the Assyrians also joined the returnees from Babylon, particularly in the later expeditions. Even without these, however, the company of Judah contained representatives of the other tribes of Israel, who had not been able to go along with the Northern Kingdom's corrupted religious practices during the period of the Divided Monarchy, and who therefore fled to the Southern Kingdom of Judah long before the Captivity had begun (II Chr. 15:9).

This terminology is continued in the N.T., where Matthew (3:5) tells us that "all Jerusalem and Judea" went up to hear John the Baptist, and Luke (Acts 13:24) speaks of John the Baptist's preaching to Israel; and Paul, of the tribe of Benjamin, still refers to himself as an Israelite (Rom. 11:1).

For an explanation of the meaning of these names, see the Word Studies at the end of this chapter.

The main import of *verse 2* is that the influence of four persons, Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Haggai, and Zechariah, was combined to resume the rebuilding of the House of God. One of the events of history that probably affected it was that Darius had become king of Persia, as noted in Ezra 4:24. He was a man of much greater stature and nobility than the previous two; he was more in the mold of Cyrus, a decade earlier.<sup>1</sup> This may have

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1. Historians are particularly generous in their estimates of Darius' reign. For a discussion of the comparative merits of these four rulers in Ezra, see Will Durant, *Story of Civilization*, "Our Oriental Heritage," p. 353, where Darius is called the greatest monarch whom Persia ever produced. In the National Geographic Society's *Everyday Life in Bible Times*, p. 291, it is said that at his death he left the greatest empire the world had ever known.

fostered a confidence that they would receive more generous treatment and support in the future.

In *verse 3* Tattenai and Shethar-bozenai are both known from, and their names and offices verified by, contemporary Aramaic correspondence.<sup>2</sup> Tattenai was governor of all the province west and south of the Euphrates River; on a map this triangle of land would include everything from the border of Babylon to the northeastern tip of the Mediterranean Sea, and down to the border of Egypt. The governors of Syria, Samaria (former Israel), and several other lands would be under his supervision. Shethar-bozenai seems to have been his secretary. The nature of their question was apparently not so much censure as a request for information. Governmental systems such as the Persians are always embarrassed if something is accomplished without their direction and control.

The reply, in *verse 4*, indicates the Jews' willingness to reveal the names of their leaders, with no effort to escape the consequences of their actions. The "we" in this passage is a puzzle, since Ezra was not involved at that stage. One suggestion is that this should be amended to "they"; there would be only a slight difference in the Aramaic, and the change could be accounted for as a scribal error. Or Ezra may be copying official accounts here, and the "we" may be the original participants. Or Ezra may be speaking of his nation as including himself; as a sports fan may say of his team, "We won the game." The fact is, the language of the O.T. abounds in such changes in the use of pronouns; the people did not make the precise differentiations which we are accustomed to in English. An example would be Psalm 23, with its switch from third to second person and back to third person again.

Translations differ also on whether the reference to the names of the men is a statement or a question, as in the KJV. If a question, then it would appear to be saying that they gave adequate answer, and then listed the question which they answered. The text indicates that they were asked the name of

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2. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 608.

the person who authorized the construction; they replied with the names of the builders in charge of the reconstruction. Verses 9, 10 will show that both questions were asked by Tattenai.

*Verse 5* relates that it was God's approval and power which was basically responsible for the continuation of the work without obstruction. All was being done under His watchful eye. They were determined now to continue their work unless prevented by official action of Darius in written form. Tattenai therefore allowed the work to go on while he continued his investigation.

## 2. A letter is sent to clarify the situation.

### TEXT, 5:6-17

- 6 This is the copy of the letter which Tattenai, the governor of the province beyond the River, and Shethar-bozenai and his colleagues the officials, who were beyond the River, sent to Darius the king.
- 7 They sent a report to him in which it was written thus: "To Darius the king, all peace.
- 8 "Let it be known to the king, that we have gone to the province of Judah, to the house of the great God, which is being built with huge stones, and beams are being laid in the walls; and this work is going on with great care and is succeeding in their hands.
- 9 "Then we asked those elders and said to them thus, 'Who issued you a decree to rebuild this temple and to finish this structure?'
- 10 "We also asked them their names so as to inform you, and that we might write down the names of the men who were at their head.
- 11 "And thus they answered us, saying, 'We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth and are rebuilding the temple that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished.'

- 12 'But because our fathers had provoked the God of heaven to wrath, He gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this temple and deported the people to Babylon.
- 13 'However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, King Cyrus issued a decree to rebuild this house of God.
- 14 'And also the gold and silver utensils of the house of God which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, and brought them to the temple of Babylon, these King Cyrus took from the temple of Babylon, and they were given to one whose name was Sheshbazzar, whom he had appointed governor.
- 15 'And he said to him, "Take these utensils, go and deposit them in the temple in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be rebuilt in its place."
- 16 'Then that Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem; and from then until now it has been under construction, and it is not yet completed.'
- 17 "And now, if it pleases the king, let a search be conducted in the king's treasure house, which is there in Babylon, if it be that a decree was issued by King Cyrus to rebuild this house of God at Jerusalem; and let the king send to us his decision concerning this matter."

### COMMENT

According to *verse 6*, what follows is an actual copy of Tattenai's letter. It is not accusative nor angry; in fact, it praises Israel's workmanship. It appears to be an honest inquiry concerning a situation which had arisen, for which the governor had insufficient instruction to act.

In the KJV, the "Apharsachites" are mentioned. The KJV has a similar name at Ezra 4:9. Some see this as the name of an unknown tribe. The term is translated "officials" in the NASB. The problem here stems from the fact that the Hebrew alphabet has no separate capitals, therefore it is always difficult to tell

when such a word is a proper noun and should be transliterated, and when it is a description or title and should be translated. However, in the Hebrew text the word has the definite article, which usually means it is to be translated. Thus, "the officials" is preferred, as in the NASB.

*Verse 7* gives the heading and salutation of the letter. The phrase, "All peace," is interesting; it is obviously an abbreviated form of a longer greeting such as, "I wish for you all the things that are included in the word, peace," or even, "In all your realm, may there be peace." It may have the force of our "Heartiest greetings."<sup>3</sup> The salutation, "Peace," has been used before (4:17), without the additional "all." It has been called the most beautiful word in the Hebrew language. Its Greek equivalent appears in the salutation of almost every letter in the N.T.: in fact, more often than its usual twin, "Grace"! For a fuller treatment of its meaning, see the Word Studies which follow.

*Verse 8* states the problem which caused the letter to be written: the resumption of construction on the House of God. A question arises about the placement of the adjective: is it the house which they called great, or is it God? To some, it seems more likely that foreigners would speak of the great temple, instead of the great (Hebrew) God.<sup>4</sup>

But the Temple was not an especially large building. Its dimensions, about 150 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet high (I Ki. 7:2), would provide floor space equal to a basketball gym seating a few hundred spectators, though it would be quite a bit taller. Many ancient buildings, particularly kings' palaces, were much larger than that. On the other hand, even these foreigners could acknowledge the greatness of the God who, from the testimony of the Jews, had influenced the mighty Cyrus to command the reconstruction of His Temple.

A description of the progress on the building follows. The basic material was stone. The wood beams probably were laid

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3. Luck; *op. cit.*, p. 40.

4. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 610.

across to support additional floors and the roof. The writer also speaks with commendation for the quality and dispatch of the construction work.

*Verse 9* shows their dilemma and repeats their question from verse 3. Rulers must be in charge of everything in their realm; something was going on without their leadership; therefore they must inquire into the authorization back of it.

The purpose of *verse 10* was to demonstrate to their superiors in Persia that they were faithfully looking after Persian interests, and were prepared to provide information about guilty persons if any crime was being committed.

In *verse 11 to 16*, the letter conveys the answer which the Jews gave to justify their actions. Three reasons are cited.

First, their action was a service to the Supreme God over all: heaven and earth (verse 11). The Persians would understand the reference to the God of Heaven; they used the phrase frequently themselves.

Secondly, *verse 11* continues, they were only repeating what one of their great kings (Solomon) had previously done. (The "thirdly" is in *verse 13*.)

*Verse 12* is an answer to an unspoken theological question: if their God is supreme, why had He permitted His Temple to be destroyed in the first place, and made necessary the work they were doing at present? Their answer, that God had become angry with them and was punishing them for their sins, shows that they had indeed come to believe the message of their prophets (cf. Amos 2:4, 5 for example), which had seemed so futile when it was given.

*Verse 13* gives the information for which the letter seeks confirmation or disproof. Thirdly, then (see *verse 11*), their action was claimed to be backed by the authority of a decree issued by Cyrus.

*Verse 14* repeats the information of Ezra 1:7, 8 regarding the temple utensils. Sheshbazzar is named as the governor at the time. Now, and in *verse 16*, we hear once more the name of Sheshbazzar.



*Verse 15* records the instructions that Cyrus gave to Sheshbazzar about the disposition of the utensils; this detail is lacking in the first chapter.

With *verse 16* the answer of the Jews is concluded. Sheshbazzar, we note, is credited with laying the foundations of the House of God. Yet Ezra 3:8-10 credits Zerubbabel with this act. Are these the same person, or are they two persons who successively held the same office? This is the last mention of either one in the book of Ezra; all the other references to Zerubbabel in Scripture (in Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah) recite incidents that occurred earlier; Sheshbazzar is mentioned nowhere else in the Scriptures. So at this point we have seen all that the Bible tells on the subject.

Every reference to Sheshbazzar has been in Babylonian or Persian surroundings. His name is itself an indication of Babylonian influence; it is a Babylonian name. In Ezra 1:8, 11 he is placed in charge of the returnees by Cyrus before they leave Babylonia. In Ezra 5:14, 16 his work is described in a letter to the Persian officials.

On the other hand, every reference to Zerubbabel is in Jewish surroundings. The name itself is Hebrew. He is listed in the genealogies of Hebrew kings in I Chr. 3:19. Ezra (2:12; 3:2, 8; 4:2, 3; 5:2) identifies him with the return to Jerusalem and the leadership in the reconstruction of the Temple. Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah also deal with the return and reconstruction from the Jewish point of view, and use only the name, Zerubbabel. Further, there is no passage in which both names appear together. Since the Jewish account of the laying of the foundations uses the name, Zerubbabel, and since the letter addressed to the Persians and written by a Gentile uses the name Sheshbazzar in describing the same event, it seems logical that these are but the Babylonian and Hebrew names of the same person.

*Verse 16* closes with the information that the Temple was not yet completed; in the next chapter, verse 15, its completion will be reported.

In *verse 17*, Tattenai closes his letter with the request that

the government files be opened and search be made to see if Cyrus had indeed given such an order to rebuild the Temple at Jerusalem. Since it involved people who had been held by the Babylonians and who were being freed from bondage to them, therefore the logical place to look for the letter would be in the Persian offices in Babylon, which was one of the cities from which the Persians ruled their farflung empire.

### WORD STUDIES

**PEACE:** Aramaic, Shelam; Hebrew, Shalom: verse 7. The main idea is wholeness; the verb form is used of being whole, sound, safe, secure, or perfect. Some verses where it is used emphasize health; some, completion; some, peace or friendship; and others, prosperity or reward. Thus the whole round of things, physical and spiritual, that comprise one's well-being, are included in this word.

**JERUSALEM:** the name was possibly derived from a phrase meaning either "Possession of Peace" or "Foundation of Peace." Some also suggest that the first part of the word may come from the word, "light." Abraham's home town of Ur had this as its name, possibly from the light of many windows, or of fires where people gathered to form a community. It became the word for "city"; coupled with the word just discussed above, it would mean, "City of Peace."

**JEW:** Yehudi: the adjective form of **JUDAH:** Yehudah. It means, "celebrated, lauded, praised" (of God).

**ISRAEL:** "Warrior (soldier) of God." The first three letters mean to set in a row: hence, when used of people, to strive or contend (as rows of soldiers do). The ending, El, is the title, God. The person who would set troops in rows would be their chief, or prince: hence the name can mean, "Prince of God," or, "God is Chief."

In two locations (Deut. 32:15; 33:5, 26; Isa. 44:2), Israel is called by a nickname: **JESHURUN**. In Israel's early alphabet

both names would begin with the same letters. The word, Jeshurun, means, "Little straight ones." There may be a contrast between the "straightness" in this word and the "crookedness" in the name, Jacob, which follows.

**JACOB:** the basic meaning is "heel." It was used of "one who took another by the heel" to trip him up in order to "supplant" him. Since the heel is where there is a crook in the foot, it also meant "crooked, deceiver, one who defrauds." Also, since the heel is the last part of the body to leave a spot, it meant, "end, wages, recompense." So Jacob, who took his brother by the heel to supplant him, became a deceiver and eventually received the natural recompense: he himself was deceived. After this happened, he wrestled with God's messenger and was "straightened out." Perhaps the O.T. shows us similarities between the man and the nation which descended from him: first in their relations with God, and then in their history.

**HEBREW:** this word comes from the preposition, "beyond," appearing for example in Ezra 4:10; hence it describes the people who came from beyond (the Euphrates, Abraham's original home; Gen. 14:13). The name is derived also from Eber (Gen. 10:24f.) who was one of Abraham's ancestors. The verb form means "to pass over"; appropriately enough, God had allowed them to pass over the Red Sea and the Jordan River in going from Egypt to the Promised Land. Now once more they were coming from beyond the Euphrates.

The name is used interchangeably with "Israel," except that the term, "Hebrew," appears to be the name by which they were known to foreigners, and "Israel" was the name which they called themselves.

The last two terms, Jacob and Hebrew, do not appear in this chapter directly, but are discussed here to give a complete picture.

## SUMMARY

After years of inactivity, work on the Temple was resumed when two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, showed this to be

God's will. This raised questions among the next echelon of officials between them and Persia. The Jewish builders did not back down, but insisted that they had authority from the highest Persian ruler for their action, and that their subjection to the Supreme God further required it. A check of official documents was therefore initiated, while the construction work continued.

### REVIEW QUESTIONS

Identify the following persons, showing how they were related to the reconstruction of the Temple:

1. Cyrus
2. Darius
3. Haggai
4. Nebuchadnezzar
5. Sheshbazzar
6. Shethar-bozenai
7. Tattenai
8. Zechariah