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The Prophets Restart the Building of the Temple
Ezra 5:1-17 and Haggai 1:1, 14-15

The prophets restart the building of the Temple DIG: In what way do the events of 5:1-2 represent a new start (see Ezra 4:24; Haggai 1:1; Zechariah 1:1)? Why does the Chronicler retrace the building effort to Shealtiel (see 5:2; First Chronicles 3:17-19)? "At that time" (5:2 can be dated to the period from August 29 to December 18 520 BC. How does that help the account for what's going on in 5:3-5? What about this episode is seen as a blessing from God? Why? How is God's hand of blessing evident in Tattenai's letter to Darius (5:6-17)? What human instruments has God evidently been using to bless and discipline his people? What is the status of this rebuilding project to date? Who is being credited (or blamed) for the "rapid progress" (5:8)? For the "unfinished task" (5:16)?

REFLECT: In 536 BC Sheshbazzar presided over laying the Temple foundation (5:14-16), and in 520 BC Zerubbabel presided over laying a second foundation (Haggai 1:14-15). How do you account for those 16-years (Zechariah 4:6-10). In your life, what has taken sixteen plus years to get right? How do you account for the delay? In the work God has given you to do, when is his hand of blessing obvious to you? When something is not progressing according to plan are you likely to conclude that it must not be God's will? Explain.

520 BC During the ministry of Zerubbabel (**to see link click Ag – The First Return**).
Compiled by the Chronicler from the Ezra memoirs
(see **Ac – Ezra-Nehemiah from a Jewish Perspective: The Ezra Memoirs**).

Ezra 4:8 to 6:18 is written in Aramaic, the language the Persians used in official documents (much like the Roman Empire used Greek).



Now Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the prophet, the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Isra'el, who was over them (Ezra 5:1). In the second year of King Darius (see the commentary on **Dani'el, to see link click Ag – Cyrus and Darius**)**, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of ADONAI came through Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah (Haggai 1:1).** Since this was **the first day of the month**, **the day** of a new moon, it was probably a holy festival day in **Jerusalem.** This provided **Haggai and Zechariah** a ready-made audience to listen to **the word of God.**

Then ADONAI stirred the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Jeshua son of Jozadak, cohen gadol, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people, and they came and resumed the work on the House of ADONAI-Tzva'ot their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month, in the second year of King Darius (Haggai 1:14-15). It had been sixteen years since opposition had stopped the work on **the Temple** (see **At – Opposition During the Reign of Cyrus**). **Then Zerubbabel and Jeshua arose and began to rebuild the House of God in Jerusalem** in spite of the Persian **king's** decree (see **Aw – The Resumption of Work Under King Darius**)**. And the prophets of God were with [the people] supporting them (Ezra 5:2).**

Representatives of the Persian government became aware of the **Temple**-building project and decided to investigate. Coincidentally, at that time, **Darius** was still attempting to establish **himself** as ruler after putting down rebellions in the Persian

Empire. **His** officials would have been very concerned about any unusual activity among a subject people. That would be especially true if they heard rumors that **the** rebuilt **Temple** was considered to be the center of a nationalistic movement – a movement that would **shake all the nations (Haggai 2:7)**. **At that time Tattenai, governor of Trans-Euphrates, Shethar-bozenai, and their associates came to them and asked them, "Who gave you the authority to build this House and to complete this structure?" They also asked them, "What are the names of the men who are constructing this building" (Ezra 5:3-4)?** The legal and political importance of the list of **names** compiled when **the Jews** first arrived in **Jerusalem** now becomes clear (see **Ak – Numbering the Exiles Who Returned Under Zerubbabel**).[100]

But the watchful **eye of their God,** and the hand of **God's** protection, **was upon the elders of the Jews. They would not stop** building **until a report could go to Darius and a written reply about it be returned (Ezra 5:5).**

Tattenai reported to **King Darius** that **the Jews** were violating **his** official decree that was in place. **This is a copy of the letter that Tattenai, governor of Trans-Euphrates, his** scribe **Shetar-bozenai, and his colleagues, officials of Trans-Euphrates, sent to King Darius (Ezra 5:6).** It would have been **Tattenai's** responsibility, on hearing of this building, to investigate it. **He** was just doing **his** job as a loyal subject of **the king**. There is nothing in the text to demand that **Tattenai's** inquiry be understood as hostile,[101] and thanks to the preaching of **Haggai** and **Zechariah**, **the exiles** didn't view **Tattenai** as an adversary.

In order to fulfill **His** purpose, **ADONAI** used and coordinated the preaching of **the prophets**, the work of the leaders, the determination of the whole community, and the decisions of pagan government officials. **The Jews** continued **their** work even though there was a possibility **the king** would stop the project and thus nullify all **their** efforts. This persistence and perseverance indicates **the people's** faith that **God** would continue to keep the door open for the continuing work. It also shows the influence of **Haggai** and **Zechariah**.[102]

The report they sent to him was written in Aramaic **as follows:**

To King Darius. All Shalom!

Be it known to the king that we went to the province of Judah, to the House of the great God (Ezra 5:8a). That the Persian officials should say **the**

great God may seem strange. But they liked to use the religious language of their subject peoples.[103] In addition, this did not mean that **Tattenai** believed that **the God of Isra'el** was the supreme **God**. In the Near East there was a highly developed belief in local deities. Most likely **he** meant that the **God** to whom **the Jews** were building **the Temple** for was the major **God** of the area.[104] **The Temple is being built with large stones and timber is being set in the walls. Now this work is being done diligently and is succeeding in their hands (Ezra 5:8b). An idea of the size of the stones may be obtained from the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. Some of them are twenty-six feet long, six feet high and seven feet wide.** It is not clear what stage the building had reached; but since **Tattenai** took the time to write **Darius** and wait for the reply without stopping the work, it probably was still in its early stages. The whole transaction of sending this report to **Darius**, searching for the records, and sending back a reply would have taken four or five months.

Then we questioned those elders, asking them, "Who gave you the authority to build this House and to complete this structure?" We also asked them their names in order to inform you, so that we might write the names of the men who were in charge of them (Ezra 5:9-10). The questions were legitimate. Apparently **the Jews** were courteous and answered correctly. No doubt **their** integrity had something to do with **Tattenai's** positive attitude.[105]

Tattenai's report then included **the Jews'** answers to **his** questions. It was a model of religious and political diplomacy. **The Jews** had caught the vision of **their** great task. **They** saw **themselves** continuing a work that had begun centuries ago: **We are servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the House that was built many years ago. Solomon, the great king of Isra'el built and finished it (Ezra 5:11). The Jews** gave a good testimony. One the one hand, **they** did not hide **their** allegiance to **ADONAI**. Normally, in the ancient Near East, the god of the subjected nation was considered to be inferior to the god or gods of the conquering nation. So **their** words bristled with defiance. **YHVH** was not just a local deity, **He** governs the whole earth. More than that, **He** is **the God of heaven and earth**. **The God** of tiny little **Isra'el**, the forty-three thousand or so who had returned – a small fraction of the world's population at the time – was the only **God** there is![106]

But because our fathers angered the God of heaven, He gave them into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, the Chaldean. He

destroyed this House and carried the people away to Babylon (Ezra 5:12). But on the other hand, there were no excuses here. **The exile** had happened as a result of generations of disobedience to **YHVH**. Yet **they** were not blaming **their** forefathers in order to exonerate **themselves**. Rather, the tone of **their** words shows that **they** had taken to heart the rebuke of **Haggai** and **Zechariah**, and included **themselves** in the punishment. The recognition of **their** guilt was the first step in **their** rediscovery of **their** true identity as **the people of God**.[107]

Zerubbabel and Jeshua stated that **in the first year of Cyrus, king of Babylon** (see the commentary on **Dani'el Ag – Cyrus and Darius**)**, he issued a decree to rebuild this House of God** (see **Ah – Cyrus Decrees: Rebuild the Temple**)**.** That was important because **they** had legal backing, and **Cyrus** was still honored as the great founder of the Persian Empire. In fact, **Darius** consciously tried to follow the policies **Cyrus** had started. **The decree** certainly existed, but might be hard to find after so many years. **Even the gold and silver vessels of the House of God that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the Temple in Jerusalem and had carried away to the temple** of Nabu and Marduk **in Babylon** were to be returned **(Ezra 5:13-14a).** However, the fact that they were taken in the first place was regarded as a major catastrophe by **the Jews,** and the fact that **the vessels** were placed in **the temple** of another god was regarded as shameful. The **decree** of **Cyrus** that commanded that those **vessels** be returned to **the Jews** had been received with much thanksgiving and joy.

Then King Cyrus took those gold and silver vessels from the temple in Babylon and gave them to a man named Sheshbazzar, whom he had appointed governor (Ezra 5:14b). So here the rebuilding had been reported to the authorities as the work of **Sheshbazzar**, whose official responsibility it was, and whose name could be verified from **the royal archives**. This verse tells us that **King Cyrus** had appointed **Sheshbazzar** as **governor** sixteen years previously (see **Aj – The Return to Isra'el Under Sheshbazzar**), a position currently held by **Zerubbabel. Then he said to him, "Take these vessels and go and deposit them in the Temple in Jerusalem and let the House of God be built in its place" (Ezra 5:15)! So this Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the House of God in Jerusalem.** However, for sixteen years **(from that time until now) it has been under** sporadic **construction, yet it is not yet finished (Ezra 5:16).**

Now, if it pleases the king, let a search be made in the royal archives there in Babylon, to see if in fact King Cyrus issued a decree to rebuild

this House of God in Jerusalem. Then let the king send us his decision about this matter (Ezra 5:17). The archives of **the Babylonian** Empire would have been stored in **Babylon**, but one would expect those of **Cyrus** the Persian to be in Susa, **his** capital. In the next chapter we see they were actually found **in the citadel of Ecbatana (Ezra 6:2), Cyrus'** summer capital.

Haggai ends **his** brief ministry with a final message addressed to **Zerubbabel governor of Judah.** As **the people** had needed encouragement to rebuild, perhaps **Zerubbabel** also needed encouragement to lead the seemingly insignificant group of **Jews** who resided in a corner of the vast Persian Empire. **Then the word of ADONAI came to Haggai. Say to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, "I am going to shake the heavens and the earth, and I will overturn the throne of kingdoms and destroy the strength of the kingdoms and nations. I will overturn the chariot and its rider, so horses and their riders will fall, each by the sword of his brother" (Haggai 2:20-22).** This is reminiscent of the destruction of the Gentile world powers represented by the great statue in **Dani'el 2**. There, the worldwide Messianic Kingdom will replace the Gentile Kingdoms (see the commentary on **Revelation Ax – The Messianic Kingdom: A Rock Not Cut by Human Hands**).

"On that day of future Gentile judgment**" – it is a declaration of ADONAI-Tzva'ot – "I will take you Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, My servant" – it is a declaration of ADONAI-Tzva'ot – "and I will set you like a signet ring. For I have chosen you" (Haggai 2:23a). The fact that Zerubbabel is in the line of messianic descent (Matthew 1:12) confirms that he is a representative of the Messiah Himself.** The title **My servant** frequently pointed to the Davidic king **(Isaiah 42:1-9, 49:1-13, 50:4-11, 52:13** to **53:12;** and also **Second Samuel 3:18; First Kings 11:34;** and **Ezeki'el 34:23-24, 37:24-25)**. **Haggai's** contemporary, **Zechariah**, used the messianic title **Branch** to refer to **Zerubbabel (Zechariah 3:8, 6:12;** also see **Isaiah 11:1; Jeremiah 23:5-6** and **33:14-16).**

The significance of comparing **Zerubbabel** to **a signet ring** (a seal of royal authority) is clarified by the imagery of **Jeremiah** (see the commentary on **Jeremiah Dv – The Curse of Jeconiah, Also Known as Jehoiachin or Coniah**). **ADONAI** said that if **Jehoiachin** (**Zerubbabel's** grandfather) were **His signet ring**, **He would pull him off** and **hand him** over to **Nebuchadnezzar**. **Therefore, Haggai was saying that in Zerubbabel, God was reversing the curse pronounced on Jehoiachin.**

It is a declaration of ADONAI-Tzva'ot (Haggai 2:23b). Fittingly, the last words in **Haggai's** scroll are **ADONAI-Tzva'ot, the LORD God of heaven's** angelic **armies.** The sovereign covenant-**God** is able to bring about all **He** promised through **Haggai**. There will be a Messianic Temple where **Yeshua Messiah** will reign for a thousand years; the final **Son of David** will rule the earth in peace and righteousness. Therefore, **the righteous of the TaNaKh** were to be faithful during **the days of Zerubbabel** to the task to which **He** had called **them.**

It is stimulating to know that we are about **the Lord's** business. No matter what the threats may amount to, fulfillment and peace can ultimately be found only in knowing that we are engaged in Kingdom work. Those returnees had a moment of spiritual clarity after the preaching of **Haggai** and **Zechariah**, and for the time being, what mattered most was the worship of **God**. Worship is the ultimate thing. **Yeshua** told **the Samaritan woman: But an hour is coming – it is here now – when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people as His worshipers. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24).** The question that we must ask ourselves is this: Are we driven by a concern to worship **ADONAI** with a singular, determined resolve, no matter what the cost? When **the Spirit of God** comes, as **He** did in 520 BC to **Yerushalayim**, this is **His** purpose: to equip us with a similar determination and resolve that gripped **the righteous of the TaNaKh** in **Tziyon** when confronted by a vastly superior power – a resolve to put **God** first, second, and last.[108]