

EZRA 1-6

THE EXILES RETURN

¹In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order that the word of YHWH by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, YHWH stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom, and also in a written edict declared: ²“Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: YHWH, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. ³Any of those among you who are of his people – may their God be with them! – are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of YHWH, the God of Israel. He is the God who is in Jerusalem. ⁴Let all survivors, in whatever place they reside, be assisted by the people of their place with silver and gold, with goods and with animals, besides freewill offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem.”

⁵The heads of the families of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites – everyone whose spirit God had stirred – got ready to go up and rebuild the house of YHWH in Jerusalem. ⁶All their neighbours aided them with silver vessels, with gold, with goods, with animals, and with valuable gifts, besides all that was freely offered.

⁷King Cyrus himself brought out the vessels of the house of YHWH that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods. ⁸King Cyrus of Persia had them released into the charge of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah.

⁹And this was the inventory: gold basins, thirty; silver basins, one thousand; knives, twenty-nine; ¹⁰gold bowls, thirty; other silver bowls, four hundred ten; other vessels, one thousand; ¹¹ the total of the gold and silver vessels was five thousand four hundred. All these Sheshbazzar brought up, when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem.

Cyrus became king of Anshan in 559. After defeating Astyages of Media and capturing Sardis in Asia Minor, he entered Babylon in triumph in 539.

The author sees the working of YHWH in the rebuilding of the temple, which was destroyed in 586 and re-consecrated in 516. He links this with the seventy years prophesied by Jeremiah (verse 1; see Jeremiah 29:10). He portrays Cyrus as being directed by YHWH. We are reminded of the authors of the Isaiah scroll who saw Cyrus as YHWH's messiah (see Isaiah 45:1, 13).

The Chronicler chose to conclude his re-writing of the story of the kings of Judah by quoting from Ezra 1:1-3 (see 2Chronicles 36:22-23). He is pointing the reader to go to the Book of Ezra to continue the survey of Judah's history.

Some of the exiles were inspired by God to return to Judah. Others were inspired to assist them in whatever way they could (verses 5-6). Cyrus handed back the vessels that had been taken from the temple by Nebuchadnezzar (see 2Kings 24:13; 25:13-16; Jeremiah 52:17-19). 'Mithredath' (verse 8) is named after the god Mithra. 'Treasurer' translates a loan word from Persian. The leader of the returning exiles is Sheshbazzar, a 'prince of Judah' (verse 8; see page 11). We are meant to recall the Israelites who were brought up from Egypt to Canaan (Exodus 33:1).

The authors of Ezra 1-6 provide a list, from the archives, of those who came from exile to Judah. We are not told when they came. Zerubbabel and Jeshua head the list (verse 2; see page 12). They will be mentioned together later in Ezra 3:2 and 8 as being in charge of the rebuilding of the temple.

This is the first of many lists in Ezra and Nehemiah. First and foremost these lists demonstrate the importance of belonging, as well as the importance of remembering YHWH's fidelity over the generations to this people who saw themselves as especially chosen by God.

The list may have been originally compiled to legitimate claims to land that had been occupied by others during their absence. It may also have served as a guarantee that those listed were genuine Judahites.

A slightly different list is found in Nehemiah 7. This appears to be part of Nehemiah's memoirs. If so it would antedate the list here in Ezra. Both would have relied on archive material.

Verses 3-20 list the returning exiles according to their families.

¹Now these were the people of the province who came from those captive exiles whom King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had carried captive to Babylonia; they returned to Jerusalem and Judah, all to their own towns.

²They came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelai-ah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, and Baanah.

The number of the Israelite people: ³the descendants of Parosh, two thousand one hundred seventy-two. ⁴Of Shephatiah, three hundred seventy-two. ⁵Of Arah, seven hundred seventy-five. ⁶Of Pahath-moab, namely the descendants of Jeshua and Joab, two thousand eight hundred twelve. ⁷Of Elam, one thousand two hundred fifty-four. ⁸Of Zattu, nine hundred forty-five. ⁹Of Zaccai, seven hundred sixty. ¹⁰Of Bani, six hundred forty-two. ¹¹Of Bebai, six hundred twenty-three. ¹²Of Azgad, one thousand two hundred twenty-two. ¹³Of Adonikam, six hundred sixty-six. ¹⁴Of Bigvai, two thousand fifty-six. ¹⁵Of Adin, four hundred fifty-four. ¹⁶Of Ater, namely of Hezekiah, ninety-eight. ¹⁷Of Bezai, three hundred twenty-three. ¹⁸Of Jorah, one hundred twelve. ¹⁹Of Hashum, two hundred twenty-three. ²⁰Of Gibbar, ninety-five.

Lists of those who returned

²¹Of Bethlehem, one hundred twenty-three. ²²The people of Netophah, fifty-six. ²³Of Anathoth, one hundred twenty-eight. ²⁴The descendants of Azmaveth, forty-two. ²⁵Of Kiriatharim, Chephirah, and Beeroth, seven hundred forty-three. ²⁶Of Ramah and Geba, six hundred twenty-one. ²⁷The people of Michmas, one hundred twenty-two. ²⁸Of Bethel and Ai, two hundred twenty-three. ²⁹The descendants of Nebo, fifty-two. ³⁰Of Magbish, one hundred fifty-six. ³¹Of the other Elam, one thousand two hundred fifty-four. ³²Of Harim, three hundred twenty. ³³Of Lod, Hadid, and Ono, seven hundred twenty-five. ³⁴Of Jericho, three hundred forty-five. ³⁵Of Senaah, three thousand six hundred thirty.

³⁶The priests: the descendants of Jedaiah, of the house of Jeshua, nine hundred seventy-three. ³⁷Of Immer, one thousand fifty-two. ³⁸Of Pashhur, one thousand two hundred forty-seven. ³⁹Of Harim, one thousand seventeen.

⁴⁰The Levites: the descendants of Jeshua and Kadmiel, of the descendants of Hodaviah, seventy-four.

⁴¹The singers: the descendants of Asaph, one hundred twenty-eight.

⁴²The descendants of the gatekeepers: of Shallum, of Ater, of Talmon, of Akkub, of Hatita, and of Shobai, in all one hundred thirty-nine.

Verses 21-35 list the returning exiles according to the towns to which they returned.

Verses 36-39 list the priestly families. One of the families includes Jeshua, the first high priest who returned with Zerubbabel (see 2:2).

Verses 40-42 list the Levites, and those who ministered as singers and gate-keepers.

Verses 43-54 list those responsible for the more menial tasks related to the temple. They may be descendants of prisoners of war.

Verses 55-57 appear to draw on a tradition that traces some of the prisoners of war back to the time of Solomon.

Those listed in verses 59-63 were unable to prove their Jewish lineage (were their records lost in the destruction of Jerusalem or during the exile?) Verse 60 lists lay people; verses 61-63 lists priests. They had to be excluded from being involved in the cult, until an answer could be obtained by consulting God using the Urim and Thummim (verse 63; compare 1Samuel 14:41).

⁴³The temple servants: the descendants of Ziha, Hasupha, Tabbaoth, ⁴⁴Keros, Siaha, Padon, ⁴⁵Lebanah, Hagabah, Akkub, ⁴⁶Hagab, Sham-lai, Hanan, ⁴⁷Giddel, Gahar, Reaiah, ⁴⁸Rezin, Nekoda, Gazzam, ⁴⁹Uzza, Paseah, Besai, ⁵⁰Asnah, Meunim, Nephisim, ⁵¹Bakbuk, Hakupha, Harhur, ⁵²Bazluth, Mehida, Harsha, ⁵³Barkos, Sisera, Temah, ⁵⁴Neziah, and Hatipha.

⁵⁵The descendants of Solomon's servants: Sotai, Hassophereth, Peruda, ⁵⁶Jaalah, Darkon, Giddel, ⁵⁷Shephatiah, Hattil, Pochereth-hazzebaim, and Ami.

⁵⁸All the temple servants and the descendants of Solomon's servants were three hundred ninety-two.

⁵⁹The following were those who came up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addan, and Immer, though they could not prove their families or their descent, whether they belonged to Israel:

⁶⁰the descendants of Delaiah, Tobiah, and Nekoda, six hundred fifty-two. ⁶¹Also, of the descendants of the priests: the descendants of Habaiah, Hakkoz, and Barzillai (who had married one of the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and was called by their name). ⁶²These looked for their entries in the genealogical records, but they were not found there, and so they were excluded from the priesthood as unclean; ⁶³the governor told them that they were not to partake of the most holy food, until there should be a priest to consult Urim and Thummim.

⁶⁴The whole assembly together was forty-two thousand three hundred sixty, ⁶⁵besides their male and female servants, of whom there were seven thousand three hundred thirty-seven; and they had two hundred male and female singers. ⁶⁶They had seven hundred thirty-six horses, two hundred forty-five mules, ⁶⁷four hundred thirty-five camels, and six thousand seven hundred twenty donkeys.

⁶⁸As soon as they came to the house of YHWH in Jerusalem, some of the heads of families made freewill offerings for the house of God, to erect it on its site. ⁶⁹According to their resources they gave to the building fund sixty-one thousand darics of gold, five thousand minas of silver, and one hundred priestly robes.

⁷⁰The priests, the Levites, and some of the people lived in Jerusalem and its vicinity; and the singers, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants lived in their towns, and all Israel in their towns.

Though the total given for the assembly [קָהָל, qāhāl] in verse 64 does not tally with the numbers given in the previous lists, it is repeated in Nehemiah 7. Perhaps it includes those who remained behind in Judah.

Verses 68-69 record voluntary contributions to the temple. Nehemiah 7 gives different numbers.

As we would expect the priests and Levites settled in Jerusalem where their services were required in the temple. Others, with minor roles in the cult, lived in nearby towns and had to travel to the temple when their services were required.

We are not told how those who remained behind in Judah worshipped God with the temple in ruins (though see Jeremiah 41:5). Here we have Zerubbabel and Jeshua ‘building an altar ... as prescribed by Moses’ (verse 2). The returned exiles were determined to do this even though it did not go down well with the ‘neighbouring peoples’ (verse 3). This may include local Judahites who had not been in exile.

Jeshua and Zerubbabel represent the theology of the priest-prophet Ezekiel. They knew the importance of the temple and the temple cult in the life of the people of Israel. We should not presume, however, that all opposition to the rebuilding of the temple came from ill-will. From the very beginning there were those who were suspicious of the role of the temple in the religious life of the people. This is clear from a reading of 2Samuel 7:4-11.

Many of the prophets criticise cult when it does not reflect faith or justice. Jeremiah points out the dangers of relying on the temple (see Jeremiah 7:1-15). In the post-exilic period the disciples of the Isaiah School were especially critical (see Isaiah 56:6-8 and 66:1-2). Some saw the monarchy as part of the problem. There were those who were uneasy about the role played by the temple.

One of the best ways to understand the positive role of the temple and the cult is to pray the psalms. True, God cannot be contained in the temple, but it was a place for the people to assemble, to remember and to pray.

On this altar they offered the prescribed morning and evening sacrifices. They kept the Festival of Booths (Sukkot; see Leviticus 23:34), and carried out the cult prescribed for the beginning of each month ‘and all the sacred festivals of YHWH’ (verse 5). However, for reasons touched on in pages 11-13, resistance from the locals and also from the Samaritans, meant that, in spite of the authorisation given by Cyrus in his edict (see Ezra 1:1-11) ‘the foundation of the temple was not yet laid’.

¹When the seventh month came, and the Israelites were in the towns, the people gathered together in Jerusalem.

²Then Jeshua son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel with his kin set out to build the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as prescribed in the law of Moses the man of God. ³They set up the altar on its foundation, in spite of the fear they had of the neighbouring peoples, and they offered burnt offerings upon it to YHWH, morning and evening.

⁴And they kept the festival of booths, as prescribed, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the ordinance, as required for each day, ⁵and after that the regular burnt offerings, the offerings at the new moon and at all the sacred festivals of YHWH, and the offerings of everyone who made a freewill offering to YHWH. ⁶From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to YHWH. But the foundation of the temple of YHWH was not yet laid.

Temple foundations are laid

⁷So they gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and the Tyrians to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the grant that they had from King Cyrus of Persia. ⁸In the second year after their arrival at the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua son of Jozadak made a beginning, together with the rest of their people, the priests and the Levites and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity. They appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to have the oversight of the work on the house of YHWH. ⁹And Jeshua with his sons and his kin, and Kadmiel and his sons, Binnui and Hodaviah along with the sons of Henadad, the Levites, their sons and kin, together took charge of the workers in the house of God.

¹⁰When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of YHWH, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise YHWH with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, according to the directions of King David of Israel; ¹¹and they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to YHWH, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel." And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised YHWH, because the foundation of the house of YHWH was laid. ¹²But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, ¹³so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away.

Verse seven links back to the edict of Cyrus (see 1:1-11).

Verses 8-13 refer to what happened 'in the second year after their arrival' (verse 8). However the year of their arrival is not given. Under the direction of Zerubbabel and Jeshua (see 2:2) a beginning was made to rebuild the temple. They seem not to have got beyond the foundations (see verse 10).

The task of the Levites was to supervise the work to ensure that it was in accordance with the requirements of the law.

Verses 10-11 describe the celebrations 'because the foundation of the house of YHWH was laid'.

Amid the festivities, we are reminded that the older people who remembered the earlier temple were weeping. Nothing could equal the magnificence of Solomon's temple (verse 12; see also Haggai 2:3).

Attempts to re-build the temple were constantly thwarted by ‘the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin’ (verse 1). This went on ‘throughout the reign of King Cyrus of Persia and until the reign of King Darius of Persia’ (verse 5).

Chief among their adversaries were the mixed race inhabitants of the province of Samaria just north of Jerusalem. 2Kings 17:24-41 describes how the conquering Assyrians deported many of the leading citizens of Israel and

brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria in place of the people of Israel; they took possession of Samaria, and settled in its cities.

– 2Kings 17:24

This mixing of populations took place mainly under Sargon II and Sennacherib after the fall of Samaria in 721, but the practice went back to Esar-haddon, who ruled Assyria 681-669 (verse 2). These foreigners learned to worship YHWH, the god of the land, but continued their own cults as well (see 2Kings 17:41).

When the Jewish exiles started to return and wanted to re-build the temple, the Samaritans wanted to help, since YHWH was one of the gods they worshipped (verse 2). The returned exiles, however, were determined to guarantee the purity of their cult and would not allow the people of Samaria to cooperate.

Religious groups struggle with the line between inclusion and exclusion. On its own inclusion can mean that the group stands for nothing. On its own exclusion issues in irrelevance. Ezra 6:21 warns against exaggerating the tendency to exclusion of the returned exiles.

Resistance came also from ‘the people of the land’ (verse 4; not the same as the ‘peoples of the land’, 6:20-21; 10:2, 11), the landowners, now reduced to poverty, on whom the cost of building mainly fell. The impasse had to await the reign of King Darius.

¹When the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to YHWH, the God of Israel, ²they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of families and said to them, “Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of King Esar-haddon of Assyria who brought us here.” ³But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of families in Israel said to them, “You shall have no part with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to YHWH, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus of Persia has commanded us.”

⁴Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and made them afraid to build, ⁵and they bribed officials to frustrate their plan throughout the reign of King Cyrus of Persia and until the reign of King Darius of Persia.

Resistance to the re-building of Jerusalem

⁶In the year of the beginning of the reign of Xerxes, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.

⁷And in the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam and Mithredath and Tabeel and the rest of their associates wrote to King Artaxerxes of Persia; the letter was written in Aramaic and translated.

⁸Rehum the royal deputy and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to King Artaxerxes as follows ⁹(then Rehum the royal deputy, Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their associates, the judges, the envoys, the officials, the Persians, the people of Erech, the Babylonians, the people of Susa, that is, the Elamites, ¹⁰and the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Osnappar deported and settled in the cities of Samaria and in the rest of the province Beyond the River wrote – and now ¹¹this is a copy of the letter that they sent):

“To King Artaxerxes: Your servants, the people of the province Beyond the River, send greeting. And now ¹²may it be known to the king that the Jews who came up from you to us have gone to Jerusalem. They are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city; they are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations. ¹³Now may it be known to the king that, if this city is rebuilt and the walls finished, they will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and the royal revenue will be reduced. ¹⁴Now because we share the salt of the palace and it is not fitting for us to witness the king’s dishonour, therefore we send and inform the king, ¹⁵so that a search may be made in the annals of your ancestors.

Verses 6-23 record other examples of resistance to the rebuilding of Jerusalem, which continued under Xerxes (486-465; verse 6) and Artaxerxes (465-424; verses 7-23), prior to the mission of Ezra and that Nehemiah. These verses relate to the rebuilding, not of the temple, but of the city wall.

‘Osnappar’ appears to be a corruption of the name of the last great Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal.

Without a wall, Jerusalem had no defence, no security for the city and its inhabitants. However, as the letter to Artaxerxes makes clear, they have no authorisation from the Persian king to build a wall. The letter warns the king of the rebellious history of Jerusalem.

They warn Artaxerxes that the Judahites are rebuilding the wall as a step towards rebellion. Their argument was especially strong at the time of Artaxerxes’s accession to the throne, as the Persian treasury had been seriously depleted as a result of the wars against Greece.

The king is advised to consult the archives. They will support the accusations against Jerusalem.

In verses 15-16 it is claimed that a fortified Jerusalem poses a threat to the whole of the Persian satrapy west of the Euphrates.

Artaxerxes takes the warning seriously. Note that the letter to him was written in Imperial Aramaic, the language of diplomacy throughout the Persian Empire. It is translated into Persian for the king (verse 18).

The archives show that Jerusalem had to pay tax to previous empires. The king sees the importance of keeping Jerusalem weak.

Artaxerxes decrees that the building of the walls was to cease (verses 21-22). Jerusalem had no choice but to submit (verse 23).

In verse 24 the author returns to the rebuilding of the temple by Zerubbabel and Jeshua (see 3:8) in 'the second year of the reign of King Darius of Persia'.

¹⁵You will discover in the annals that this is a rebellious city, hurtful to kings and provinces, and that sedition was stirred up in it from long ago. On that account this city was laid waste. ¹⁶We make known to the king that, if this city is rebuilt and its walls finished, you will then have no possession in the province Beyond the River."

¹⁷The king sent an answer: "To Rehum the royal deputy and Shimshai the scribe and the rest of their associates who live in Samaria and in the rest of the province Beyond the River, greeting. And now ¹⁸the letter that you sent to us has been read in translation before me. ¹⁹So I made a decree, and someone searched and discovered that this city has risen against kings from long ago, and that rebellion and sedition have been made in it. ²⁰Jerusalem has had mighty kings who ruled over the whole province Beyond the River, to whom tribute, custom, and toll were paid. ²¹Therefore issue an order that these people be made to cease, and that this city not be rebuilt, until I make a decree. ²²Moreover, take care not to be slack in this matter; why should damage grow to the hurt of the king?"

²³Then when the copy of King Artaxerxes' letter was read before Rehum and the scribe Shimshai and their associates, they hurried to the Jews in Jerusalem and by force and power made them cease.

²⁴At that time the work on the house of God in Jerusalem stopped and was discontinued until the second year of the reign of King Darius of Persia.

A second attempt to rebuild the temple

¹The prophets, Haggai and Zechariah 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. ²Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua son of Jozadak set out to rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem; and with them were the prophets of God, helping them.

³At the same time Tattenai the governor of the province Beyond the River and Shethar-bozenai and their associates came to them and spoke to them thus, "Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?" ⁴They also asked them this, "What are the names of the men who are building this building?" ⁵But the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until a report reached Darius and then answer was returned by letter in reply to it.

Having inserted the account of the resistance which the returned exiles encountered right up to the coming of Ezra in the middle of the fifth century (see 4:6-23), the author of these introductory chapters 1-6 picks up once more the story of the building of the temple during the reign of Darius. Zerubbabel and Jeshua were encouraged by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah (verse 1). The scrolls that bear the names of these two prophets supplied further sources for the work of the authors of Ezra 1-6.

In spite of Jeremiah's claim that no descendant of Jehoiachin would ever rule from the throne of David (see Jeremiah 22:24-30), Haggai nurtured the dream that Jehoiachin's grandson, Zerubbabel would re-establish the Davidic dynasty. Zechariah was rather more vague in his hopes, but it was Jeremiah who proved to be right.

We know from Persian sources that the satrap of the Trans-Euphrates satrapy was a man called Ushtani. Presumably, Tattenai, assisted by Shethar-bozenai, led a delegation from the satrap to investigate what was going on in Jerusalem. Perhaps they came in response to a complaint from either the Samaritans, or the locals, or both. In any case they let the building continue pending an official response from King Darius.

Verse 5 makes the claim that 'the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews'. It is a beautiful way of speaking of divine providence. In the Introduction we attempted to make the point that God loves the world. God does not control it (see pages 18-19).

Verses 6-17 record the content of the letter sent to the Persian court by the envoys. They have been told that it was Cyrus who issued the edict for the rebuilding of the temple, and they suggest that this be checked from the archives kept in Babylon.

6The copy of the letter that Tattenai the governor of the province Beyond the River and Shethar-bozenai and his associates the envoys who were in the province Beyond the River sent to King Darius; **7**they sent him a report, in which was written as follows: **8**“To Darius the king, all peace! **8**May it be known to the king that we went to the province of Judah, to the house of the great God. It is being built of hewn stone, and timber is laid in the walls; this work is being done diligently and prospers in their hands. **9**Then we spoke to those elders and asked them, ‘Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?’ **10**We also asked them their names, for your information, so that we might write down the names of the men at their head.

11This was their reply to us: ‘We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the house that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished.

12But because our ancestors had angered the God of heaven, he gave them into the hand of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house and carried away the people to Babylonia. **13**However, King Cyrus of Babylon, in the first year of his reign, made a decree that this house of God should be rebuilt. **14**Moreover, the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem and had brought into the temple of Babylon, these King Cyrus took out of the temple of Babylon, and they were delivered to a man named Sheshbazzar, whom he had made governor. **15**He said to him, “Take these vessels; go and put them in the temple in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be rebuilt on its site.” **16**Then this Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem; and from that time until now it has been under construction, and it is not yet finished.’ **17**And now, if it seems good to the king, have a search made in the royal archives there in Babylon, to see whether a decree was issued by King Cyrus for the rebuilding of this house of God in Jerusalem. Let the king send us his pleasure in this matter.”

Cyrus's edict is discovered

¹Then King Darius made a decree, and they searched the archives where the documents were stored in Babylon. ²But it was in Ecbatana, the capital in the province of Media, that a scroll was found on which this was written:

“A record. ³In the first year of his reign, King Cyrus issued a decree: Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the house be rebuilt, the place where sacrifices are offered and burnt offerings are brought; its height shall be sixty cubits and its width sixty cubits, ⁴with three courses of hewn stones and one course of timber; let the cost be paid from the royal treasury. ⁵Moreover, let the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be restored and brought back to the temple in Jerusalem, each to its place; you shall put them in the house of God.”

Darius orders an investigation and the edict of Cyrus is found in the archives of Ecbatana. Ecbatana was the capital of the empire of the Medes. It was captured by Cyrus c. 550, and was the site of the summer palace of the Persian kings.

The details of the decree given earlier in Hebrew in chapter one verses 1-4 focused on the return. Here, in Aramaic, we are given details of the temple building that was to be restored.

Having located the edict, Darius demands that it be honoured. Tattenai is instructed not to interfere with the re-building of the temple. Furthermore he is to ensure that the Jews be assisted in every way to carry out the actions of the cult as prescribed by their law.

⁶“Now you, Tattenai, governor of the province Beyond the River, Shetharbozenai, and you, their associates, the envoys in the province Beyond the River, keep away; ⁷let the work on this house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site.

⁸Moreover I make a decree regarding what you shall do for these elders of the Jews for the rebuilding of this house of God: the cost is to be paid to these people, in full and without delay, from the royal revenue, the tribute of the province Beyond the River. ⁹Whatever is needed – young bulls, rams, or sheep for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, or oil, as the priests in Jerusalem require – let that be given to them day by day without fail, ¹⁰so that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king and his children.

¹¹Furthermore I decree that if anyone alters this edict, a beam shall be pulled out of the house of the perpetrator, who then shall be impaled on it. The house shall be made a dung-hill. ¹²May the God who has established his name there overthrow any king or people that shall put forth a hand to alter this, or to destroy this house of God in Jerusalem. I, Darius, make a decree; let it be done with all diligence.”

¹³Then, according to the word sent by King Darius, Tattenai, the governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their associates did with all diligence what King Darius had ordered.

¹⁴So the elders of the Jews built and prospered, through the prophesying of the prophet Haggai and Zechariah son of Iddo. They finished their building by command of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus, Darius, and King Artaxerxes of Persia; ¹⁵and this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.

¹⁶The 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. ¹⁷They offered at the dedication of this house of God one hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel, twelve male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel.

¹⁸Then they set the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their courses for the service of God at Jerusalem, as it is written in the book of Moses.

The edict of Darius is carried out.

It is interesting that neither Zerubbabel nor Jeshua is mentioned here, and that the focus is on 'the elders'.

The author sees Darius as being an instrument of 'the God of Israel'. In light of his earlier statement concerning the building up of the city (see 4:6-23), he mentions Artaxerxes (verse 14), another Persian king who carried out the will of YHWH.

The temple was completed in 516-515, 'the sixth year of the reign of King Darius' (verse 15).

In verses 16-17 the dedication of the restored temple is recounted. For the ceremony of the male goats see Leviticus 3:23ff and Numbers 7.

The organisation of the priests and Levites is 'as it is written in the book of Moses' (verse 18; see Leviticus 8).

Verses 19-21 recount the celebration of the first Passover in the newly dedicated temple. It was celebrated by ‘the returned exiles’, but included ‘all who had joined them’, provided they were judged to be ritually pure.

The ‘festival of unleavened bread’ was also celebrated (verse 22; see Exodus 12:15-20 and Leviticus 23:6-8).

‘King of Assyria’ is unexpected, though the Persian Empire included Assyria. The author is perhaps contrasting the way in which the new ‘king of Assyria’ is being used by God with the way the earlier kings were used. In the past God raised up the king of Assyria to punish Israel. Now he is raising up the new king of Assyria to ensure the restoration of his temple.

¹⁹On the fourteenth day of the first month the returned exiles kept the passover. ²⁰For both the priests and the Levites had purified themselves; all of them were clean. So they killed the passover lamb for all the returned exiles, for their fellow priests, and for themselves. ²¹It was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile, and also by all who had joined them and separated themselves from the pollutions of the nations of the land to worship YHWH, the God of Israel. ²²With joy they celebrated the festival of unleavened bread seven days; for YHWH had made them joyful, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel.

