

LESSON 3

EZRA 3 & 4

EZRA



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*“And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord,
because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid.”*



BUILDING THE ALTAR

EZRA 3:1-6

Three months after the Jews arrived in Judea and had settled in their towns, the call went out for them to assemble in Jerusalem. The matter needing attention was spiritual in nature. Therefore, Jeshua the priest is mentioned first, ahead of the civil leader, Zerubbabel (3:2).

The immediate need was the erection of the altar of burnt offerings on which sacrifices would be made on many occasions, for many purposes. Regularly, a lamb was sacrificed each morning at 9:00 a.m. and each evening at 3:00 p.m., and twice that number on the Sabbath day. Occasionally, sacrificial offerings were made at the time of the new moon and on the three major festivals of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. In addition, there were other public and private offerings.

The altar was, so to say, the meeting place between God and man, where the two were made at-one (at-one-ment) through the sacrifice, symbolic and anticipatory of the sacrifice of the Lamb of God on the altar of the cross.

“The new immigrants wanted the altar built in order to have a place where they might gather to implore God’s help against the people of the land round about them.” Roehrs.

The altar was massive in size, with a ramp leading up to it. Alongside it was the laver or huge washbowl called the “sea.” Drainage was supplied to carry away the bloody water, refuse, and waste; it emptied into the brook Kidron.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION OF THE TEMPLE*EZRA 3:7-13*

The next project was the building of the temple. Enthusiasm ran high. The freewill offerings kept coming in. Moreover, Cyrus had decreed that the costs of the temple were to be paid from the royal treasury (6:4b). So, why not plan ahead and have cedar and pine logs floated in on rafts from Lebanon to the port of Joppa, as Solomon had done in the days of Hiram (I Kings 5:2-12). Masons and carpenters were engaged to come to Jerusalem and to do a lot of preparatory work (3:7).

Little did the planners suspect it would take years before the temple reached completion. As of now, however, Zerubbabel went ahead with having the foundation laid. He enjoyed willing cooperation on the part of his “good man Friday,” Jeshua the high priest, and of the head of all Levites who also bore the name Jeshua (3:9), plus friends and all who had returned from the captivity.

What a day of jubilation it was when the foundation of the temple was in place. The priests were decked out in their vestments with their trumpets at the ready; the Levites were prepared to strike their cymbals or percussion instruments; the antiphonal choirs took a long deep breath; and the celebration got underway. The theme was: “He [God] is good; His love toward Israel endures forever.”

And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid.

However, emotions were mixed. Many of the oldsters who had seen the former temple wept in bitter disappointment. A foundation, naturally, is not as impressive as the superstructure. Others could not contain themselves for joy. If someone far away heard the outcry, he could not tell whether the sound of the shouts was one of joy or of distress. The only way he could describe it to others was in terms of “so much noise.”

OPPOSITION BEGINS, MOUNTS, INTENSIFIES, AND PERSISTS*EZRA 4:1-5*

Now that the foundation of the temple had been laid and the construction of the Sanctuary itself was about to begin, opposition rose toward the repatriated exiles. The enemies

of Judah and Benjamin, i.e., the people of Samaria, sought to wiggle their way into the temple enterprise. Their main background was one of idolatrous beliefs and practices. They wished to add Jehovah to their pantheon. However, it would not do for the people of the sovereign Lord to consort with them in matters spiritual. If they did, they would incur, as they knew from past experiences of their race, the disfavor and wrath of the one and only true God.

Therefore, when the enemies suggested they become partners in the religious undertaking, they were given a resounding NO. “You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it for the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us” (4:3 NIV).

The rebuff by the leaders of Israel exasperated the enemies. They counterattacked. They set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building. They did more. They hired lawyers to appear at the Persian court to delay building operations. Sure enough, the strategy worked. Through the entire reign of Cyrus and down to the reign of Darius (15 years later), no building permit was granted. Thus, did the people of the land and the lawyers succeed in delaying the building program.

That opposition would persist for more than one hundred years, with a brief interval during the reign of Darius who temporarily squelched the obstruction techniques in no uncertain terms (6:11-12), and in whose reign the temple was completed, in 515 B.C.

But for the time being, work on the temple came to a halt. The fourth chapter concludes with the statement: “Thus the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius King of Persia.” (4:24, NIV).

ARTAXERXES IS PETITIONED TO HALT THE REBUILDING OF THE CITY WALLS*EZRA 4:6-16*

Note: Remember, what is here recorded took place 70 years after the completion of the temple.

The author leaps forward in point of time (4:6), and then

returns to continue the narrative of the building of the temple (4:24). The leap in the narrative is from Cyrus to Xerxes, especially to Artaxerxes (4:6-23), after which the writer returns to Darius (4:24).

The writer had just finished describing how the Israelites were heckled, put in alarm, and prevented from building the superstructure of the temple after the foundation had already been laid (4:4-5). Then, apparently, he called to mind that the same pattern of resistance appeared years later, long after the completion of the temple, when the Jews were engaged under Nehemiah in reconstructing the city walls.

Inasmuch as he had now referred to that fact and had thereby aroused the reader's curiosity, he must have deemed it only fair that he expound somewhat on the one incident: the interaction of the adversaries of the Jews and Artaxerxes (not Xerxes his predecessor). Not much came of that intercommunication. One verse suffices to state that Xerxes had been contacted (4:6).

The enemies sought to persuade Artaxerxes to take definitive action against Jerusalem, otherwise, that rebellious and wicked city would secede from the empire, influence contiguous nations to do likewise, and the flow of revenues into the royal coffers would be greatly diminished. What better inducement for the king to act promptly could be offered?

A committee was formed with Rehum serving as chairman and Shimshai as secretary (4:8-10). They wrote to Artaxerxes, calling attention to a previous petition which had been submitted to his Royal Highness, but that letter had not been answered. The letter was written in Aramaic script (letters) and in the Aramaic language, commonly used in international diplomacy of that day.

Rehum and his associates wanted the monarch to know that they fully agreed with the thought and sentiments expressed in the previous document and that they were herewith submitting a copy of that letter (4:2-11a).

Note: The letter is self-explanatory and needs no additional comments. Read it for yourself in 4:11-16. The king sent the following reply. Read this in 4:17-22.

THE ENEMIES ACT

EZRA 4:23

Chairman Rehum and Secretary Shimshai "went immediately to the Jews in Jerusalem and compelled them by force to stop" building the city walls.

THE AUTHOR NOW RETURNS TO HIS PREVIOUS STORY – EZRA 4:24

Now that the inspired writer has finished with his example of continuing stubborn opposition to God's people, even as far down as 70 years after the completion of the temple, he turns back to tell how opposition to the building of the temple was overcome in the days of Darius, third king of the Persian empire (4:24).

Note: If all this sounds baffling, it is, for Old Testament history, matched with secular history, is not easy to discern. But take heart. Possess your soul in patience. Matters will be cleared up in the sweet by and by, when we get down to consideration of detailed incidents.

PERSONAL APPLICATION – EZRA 5 & 6

Blessed Lord, who has caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning, grant that we may hear them, read, mark, learn, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life given us in our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

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Ezra 5:1-5

1. Who were the prophets active in the days of Zerubbabel?
2. In what activity did the leaders Zerubbabel and Jeshua engage in spite of harassment from the people of the land?
3. Evidently, the enemies of Judah registered a complaint with the governor or satrap of the Trans-Euphrates area which included Palestine. Why did they think Tattenai and his legal advisors might be able to stop the building operations on the site where once stood the temple of Solomon?
4. Why would Tattenai's investigating committee ask for the names of the building committee?

Ezra 5:6-17

5. What information did Tattenai consecutively bring to the attention of Darius in his letter?
5:8

5:9-10

5:12

5:13

5:14-15

6. Who was the co-leader with Zerubbabel and Jeshua in governing the people, laying the foundation of the temple and, particularly, in keeping watch over the sacred temple treasures? (1:8, 5:14b, 16)
7. What prime request did Tattenai make of Darius?

Ezra 6:1-12

8. What was Darius' response to the request of Tattenai?

9. State the information found in the records.

10. How were the building costs to be met?

11. What instructions did King Cyrus (6:2b-5) give concerning the gold and silver articles which Nebuchadnezzar had taken away as booty from the temple in Jerusalem?

12. Give the directives King Darius gave Tattenai in the matter of dealing with the builders of the temple and meeting building costs.

13. What requests did Darius make in return for his favorable decisions? (6:10b)

14. How were the transgressors of his mandate to be punished?

Ezra 6:13-18

15. How did the edict of Darius affect Tattenai?

The elders of the Jews?

The workmen?

16. Who lent spiritual encouragement to the leaders and workers?

17. On what occasion were the hearts of the priests, Levites, and the rest of the exiles filled with exceeding joy?

18. The fat of each animal was completely burned and the blood fully spilled. Compare the number of sacrifices offered. (6:17)

Solomon's temple (1 Kings 8:5)

Ezra 6:19-22

19. What special significance did the returned exiles attach to their keeping of the Passover?

20. Which Christian festival, celebrated by our churches, do you personally find the most joyful and why?

Share a family tradition you enjoy in celebrating any of the Christian festivals.
