

September 25

Ezra 4-6

We ended September 23rd's reading with the first few verses of Ezra Chapter 4, and today we pick up with the rest of chapter 4, all of chapter 5, and partway through chapter 6. Today's reading can be a little confusing with names and dates, so I'll try to simplify things as much as possible.

In 4:6, the one referred to as "Xerxes" is Cyrus's son Cambyses. Xerxes was a title of position, not to be confused with the later Persian ruler who was known by that name.

During his reign, Cambyses went off to war, and his half-brother Smerdis was killed by Cambyses's aides. Later on, there was a coup by a man name Guamata, claiming to be Smerdis, and he ruled for a short time. The references of Artaxerxes in the rest of Chapter 4 are actually describing Guamata, and once again, don't confuse this Artaxerxes with the later one!

The building of the temple is stopped under Cambyses and Gaumata, and then under Darius the temple is rebuilt but the city walls are still not rebuilt. Xerxes and Artaxerxes follow Darius and renewed opposition to the Jerusalem project get their attention and support until Nehemiah, the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes wins the favor of the king and gains permission to return to Jerusalem and complete the walls. If you don't get this basic chronology in mind, the first few paragraphs of Ezra 4 will likely confuse you.

First, we should identify the key people from today's reading. The first person is Zerubbabel. He's the main character and the principal actor in the rebuilding of the wall. Zerubbabel was the last man in the line of David to have a recognized leadership role in Judah until the Messiah comes. He would have had a great deal of credibility among the returning exiles, because he was in the line of David.

Next there are the two prophets Haggai and Zechariah. They were the spiritual leaders who stood shoulder to shoulder with Zerubbabel and in the face of tremendous opposition committed themselves to finishing the task of rebuilding God's house.

The principal "enemies" of Judah mentioned here are Rehum and Shimshai—officials of the Trans-Euphrates province (a.k.a. Palestine) during Artaxerxes reign—and Tattenai, an earlier governor of the province of Trans-Euphrates during the reign of Darius.

It was not until the accession of Darius that the temple project was allowed to proceed. There is a great deal of extra-biblical evidence that proves that Darius had a well-established policy of assisting projects designed to rebuild temples in occupied lands.

A rebuilt temple meant that it was once again possible to celebrate the feasts of Israel—especially the feast of Passover. The date of the reinstatement of Passover would have been about April 21, 515 BC. By the way, "Since the destruction of the temple by Titus in AD 70, Jews have not been able to sacrifice Passover lambs but have substituted eggs and roasted meat." Only the Samaritans continue to slaughter lambs, for their place of worship for them is on Mt. Gerizim, though their temple has also been destroyed."

Can you imagine how good it felt for the Jews to be able again to sacrifice and worship their God? Remember, forgiveness of sin was dependent upon sacrifice but without a temple there could be no sacrifices. No wonder Zerubbabel and Haggai and Jeshur and Zachariah were so anxious for the day of sacrifice to return.

Zerubbabel pretty well disappears from our story at this point, though he will be mentioned again in Nehemiah. There is some thought that he was recalled to Babylon, perhaps because he was suspected of being involved in a plot to overthrow the Persian government.