

Ezra

Chapter 5

Tattenai's Letter to Darius

Now Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the prophet, a descendant of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them. ² Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua son of Jozadak set to work to rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem. And the prophets of God were with them, helping them. ³ At that time Tattenai, governor of Trans-Euphrates, and Shethar-Bozenai and their associates went to them and asked, “Who authorized you to rebuild this temple and restore this structure?” ⁴ They also asked, “What are the names of the men constructing this building?” ^a ⁵ But the eye of their God was watching over the elders of the Jews, and they were not stopped until a report could go to Darius and his written reply be received. ⁶ This is a copy of the letter that Tattenai, governor of Trans-Euphrates, and Shethar-Bozenai and their associates, the officials of Trans-Euphrates, sent to King Darius. ⁷ The report they sent him read as follows: To King Darius: Cordial greetings. ⁸ The king should know that we went to the district of Judah, to the temple of the great God. The people are building it with large stones and placing the timbers in the walls. The work is being carried on with diligence and is making rapid progress under their direction. ⁹ We questioned the elders and asked them, “Who authorized you to rebuild this temple and restore this structure?” ¹⁰ We also asked them their names, so that we could write down the names of their leaders for your information. ¹¹ This is the answer they gave us: “We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the temple that was built many years ago, one that a great king of Israel built and finished. ¹² But because our fathers angered the God of heaven, he handed them over to Nebuchadnezzar the Chaldean, king of Babylon, 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 He even removed from the temple ^b of Babylon the gold and silver articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem and brought to the temple ^c in Babylon. “Then King Cyrus gave them to a man named heshbazzar, whom he had appointed governor, ¹⁵ and he told him, ‘Take these articles and go and deposit them in the temple in Jerusalem. And rebuild the house of God on its site.’ ¹⁶ So this Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem. From that day to the present it has been under construction but is not yet finished.” ¹⁷ Now if it pleases the king, let a search be made in the royal archives of Babylon to see if King Cyrus did in fact issue a decree to rebuild this house of God in Jerusalem. Then let the king send us his decision in this matter.

5:1 *Now.* Or, “And,” indicating the second year of Darius (4:24), when the prophets Haggai and Zechariah roused the people to renew their efforts to build the temple (Hag 1:8; Zec 8:9). (TLSB)

Haggai ... Zechariah. Beginning on Aug. 29, 520 B.C. (Hag 1:1), and continuing until Dec. 18 (Hag 2:1, 10, 20), the prophet Haggai delivered a series of messages to stir up the people to resume work on the temple. Two months after Haggai’s first speech, Zechariah joined him (Zec 1:1). (CSB)

prophesied ... in the name. Spoke the Word of the Lord in His divine name, which had “dwelt” in the temple at Jerusalem. Cf 1Ki 5:5. (TLSBB)

Jews. Judeans. (TLSB)

5:2 *Zerubbabel.* A Babylonian name meaning “offspring of Babylon,” referring to his birth in exile. He was the son of Shealtiel and the grandson of Jehoiachin (1Ch 3:17), the next-to-last king of Judah. Zerubbabel was the last of the Davidic line to be entrusted with political authority by the occupying powers. He was also an ancestor of Jesus (Mt 1:12–13; Lk 3:27). (CSB)

Jeshua. See note on 2:2. (CSB)

Zerubbabel ... Jeshua. Directed the rebuilding project (2:2; 3:2, 8). (TLSB)

rebuild. Work was resumed on the temple despite opposition described in ch 4. (TLSB)

5:3 *Tattenai.* Probably a Babylonian name. (CSB)

Governor of the large satrapy Beyond the River (4:10) investigated the project. (TLSB)

Shethar-Bozenai. Perhaps a Persian official. (CSB)

Perhaps the scribe (cf 4:8).(TLSB)

decree. Rebuilding a temple required official approval, given under Cyrus (1:3). (TLSB)

5:4 **WHAT ARE THE NAMES** – The royal officials asked, Who had commanded them to build? The Jews told them the names of those who had undertaken and were conducting the building. But this incongruity between the question and answer is merely caused by the fact that the discussion is reported only by a short extract restricted to the principal subjects. We learn that this is the case from the contents of the letter sent by the officials to the king. According to these,

the royal functionary inquired not merely concerning the author of the command to build, but asked also the names of those who were undertaking the work (comp. vv. 9 and 10); while the rulers of the Jews gave a circumstantial answer to both questions (vv. 11-15). (KD)

Names of Judean elders (vv 5, 9) may have been included with the letter Tattenai sent to Darius (vv 7–17). Adversaries prepare to penalize specific people, a new level of intimidation. (TLSB)

5:5 *the eye ... was on.* Similar to the words of the blessing “the LORD make His face to shine upon you” (Nu 6:25), meaning to look with favor. (TLSB)

Jews. Judeans. (TLSB)

not stopped. The Persian governor gave the Jews the benefit of the doubt by not stopping the work while the inquiry was proceeding. (CSB)

Tattenai did not interfere with the project on his own authority, and the prophets continued their support (v 2). (TLSB)

When the Jewish people claimed that their project had been authorized by the Persian government, Tatenai permitted the work to continue until he received verification of their claim from the capital. (PBC)

Darius. Persian king (4:24). (TLSB)

5:1–5 God’s prophets boldly call His people back to the work of the Jerusalem temple. Today, when your cause is right in the Lord’s eyes, do not hesitate to act and to call others to peaceable action. Act confidently, because the Lord will watch over you, bless you, and keep you through Christ. • Stir Your people to bold action, O Lord, in the cause of pure and faithful worship. Help us to stare down all who would oppose Your good purposes. Amen. (TLSB)

5:6–7 *sent to King Darius ... sent him.* Texts found in the royal city of Persepolis vividly confirm that such inquiries were sent directly to the king himself, revealing the close attention he paid to minute details. (CSB)

5:7–17 Tattenai reported the matter to Darius as objectively as possible, requesting confirmation of the claim that Cyrus had some 20 years earlier “made a decree that this house of God should be rebuilt” (v 13). (TLSB)

5:8 *we went.* It was the governor’s duty to find out what was happening in Jerusalem. (TLSB)

great God. Leaders of Judah had told Tattenai that they were “servants of the God of heaven and earth” (v 11), which may have influenced him to describe this God as “great.” (TLSB)

timbers. May refer to interior paneling (1Ki 6:15–18) or to logs alternating with the brick or stone layers in the walls (see note on 6:4). (CSB)

huge stones ... timber is laid in the walls. Cf 6:4; 1Ki 6:10. (TLSB)

5:11 *great king of Israel.* According to 1Ki 6:1 Solomon began building the temple in the fourth year of his reign (966 B.C.). The project lasted seven years (1Ki 6:38). (CSB)

How simple, plain, and ingenuous is this confession! They were the servants of the God of heaven. How came they then into bondage! Why, they provoked the God of heaven—repeatedly sinned against him, and then he gave them into the hands of their enemies. (ACC)

5:12 *Chaldean.*† The Chaldeans were the inhabitants of the southern regions of Mesopotamia who established the Neo-Babylonian empire (612–539 B.C.). In the late seventh century B.C. the Chaldeans, led by Nebuchadnezzar’s father Nabopolassar, overthrew the Assyrians. (CSB)

Region in south Babylonia. (TLSB)

carried away. Exiled in 587 BC (cf 1:7). (TLSB)

5:14 *Sheshbazzar ... governor.* See note on 1:8. (A Babylonian name meaning either “Sin, protect the father” or “Shamash/Shashu, protect the father.” Sin was the moon-god, and Shamash (Shashu is a variant) was the sun-god. In spite of his Babylonian name, Sheshbazzar was probably a Jewish official who served as a deputy governor of Judah under the satrap in Samaria (see 5:14). Some believe that Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel were the same person and give the following reasons: 1. Both were governors (5:14; Hag 1:1; 2:2). 2. Both are said to have laid the foundation of the temple (3:2–8; 5:16; Hag 1:14–15; Zec 4:6–10). 3. Jews in Babylon were often given “official” Babylonian names (cf. Da 1:7). 4. Josephus (*Antiquities*, 11.1.3) seems to identify Sheshbazzar with Zerubbabel.

Others point out, however, that the Apocrypha distinguishes between the two men (1 Esdras 6:18). Furthermore, it is likely that Sheshbazzar was an elderly man at the time of the return, while Zerubbabel was probably a younger contemporary. Sheshbazzar also may have been viewed as the official governor, while Zerubbabel served as the popular leader (3:8–11). Whereas the high priest Jeshua is associated with Zerubbabel, no priest is associated with Sheshbazzar. Although Sheshbazzar presided over the foundation of the temple in 536 B.C., so

little was accomplished that Zerubbabel had to preside over a second foundation some 16 years later (see Hag 1:14–15; Zec 4:6–10). (CSB)

Still others hold that Sheshbazzar is to be identified with Shenazzar (1Ch 3:18), the fourth son of King Jehoiachin. Zerubbabel would then have been Sheshbazzar's nephew (compare 3:2 with 1Ch 3:18). (CSB)

5:15 *put them in the temple.* Cyrus referred to the new temple in Jerusalem as though the building were already completed. (TLSB)

5:16 *Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations.* Cyrus had authorized Sheshbazzar to rebuild the temple (v 15), which he likely started, but work on the foundation was completed by Zerubbabel and Jeshua (3:8–10). There is no further mention of Sheshbazzar. (TLSB)

5:17 SEARCH BE MADE IN THE ROYAL ARCHIVES – Apparently King Cyrus's decree authorizing the Jew to rebuild the temple had been filed away and ignored. Cyrus has died eight years after issuing it, and a search had to be made to find the decree. (PBC)

Today, too, it is a great blessing to Christians if they have impartial, conscientious rulers who faithfully carry out their responsibilities and do not hinder God's people from carrying out their responsibilities. (PBC)

Tattenai wants Darius to verify existence of Cyrus's decree. (TLSB)

5:6–17 The Persian governor Tattenai discovers the truth about the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple to the "great God" of heaven. Thanks be to God for faithful government officials who seek and report the truth! Pray for them. Vote for them. Encourage good people to seek public office. The God of heaven rules among us through faithful leaders in both church and state. The great God of our salvation cares for every aspect of our lives. • O great God of heaven, work for the peace of Your servants on earth. Amen. (TLSB)