

# Ezra

## Chapter 6

### *The Decree of Darius*

King Darius then issued an order, and they searched in the archives stored in the treasury at Babylon. <sup>2</sup> A scroll was found in the citadel of Ecbatana in the province of Media, and this was written on it: Memorandum: <sup>3</sup> In the first year of King Cyrus, the king issued a decree concerning the temple of God in Jerusalem: Let the temple be rebuilt as a place to present sacrifices, and let its foundations be laid. It is to be ninety feet <sup>a</sup> high and ninety feet wide, <sup>4</sup> with three courses of large stones and one of timbers. The costs are to be paid by the royal treasury. <sup>5</sup> Also, the gold and silver articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took from the temple in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, are to be returned to their places in the temple in Jerusalem; they are to be deposited in the house of God. <sup>6</sup> Now then, Tattenai, governor of Trans-Euphrates, and Shethar-Bozenai and you, their fellow officials of that province, stay away from there. <sup>7</sup> Do not interfere with the work on this temple of God. Let the governor of the Jews and the Jewish elders rebuild this house of God on its site. <sup>8</sup> Moreover, I hereby decree what you are to do for these elders of the Jews in the construction of this house of God: The expenses of these men are to be fully paid out of the royal treasury, from the revenues of Trans-Euphrates, so that the work will not stop. <sup>9</sup> Whatever is needed—young bulls, rams, male lambs for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, and wheat, salt, wine and oil, as requested by the priests in Jerusalem—must be given them daily without fail, <sup>10</sup> so that they may offer sacrifices pleasing to the God of heaven and pray for the well-being of the king and his sons. <sup>11</sup> Furthermore, I decree that if anyone changes this edict, a beam is to be pulled from his house and he is to be lifted up and impaled on it. And for this crime his house is to be made a pile of rubble. <sup>12</sup> May God, who has caused his Name to dwell there, overthrow any king or people who lifts a hand to change this decree or to destroy this temple in Jerusalem. I Darius have decreed it. Let it be carried out with diligence.

**6:1** *archives ... in the treasury at Babylon.* Many documents have also been found in the so-called “treasury” area of Persepolis. (CSB)

Lit, “house of scrolls.” Such libraries or depositories of documents have been uncovered by archaeologists. The search for the decree was begun in Babylonia, from where the exiles had departed. (TLSB)

**6:2** *Ecbatana.* One of the four capitals (along with Babylon, Persepolis and Susa) of the Persian empire. Located in what is today the Iranian city of Hamadan, its remains have not yet been excavated. This is the only reference to the site in the

OT, though there are numerous references in the Apocryphal books (Judith 1:1–4; Tobit 3:7; 7–1; 14:12–14; 2 Maccabees 9:3). (CSB)

Capital of Media and summer residence of Persian kings, c 300 mi NE of Babylon. Cyrus is known to have spent some time there during the first year of his reign. (TLSB)

*Media.* The homeland of the Medes in northwestern Iran. The Medes were an Indo-European tribe related to the Persians. After the rise of Cyrus in 550 B.C., they became subordinate to the Persians. The name of the area was retained as late as the NT era (Ac 2:9). (CSB)

*scroll.* Documents were typically preserved in this form. (TLSB)

The way in which the scroll was found in the archives is another example of the providence of God. Apparently no record of the decree could be found in Babylon, but a detailed version of the decree turned up among records which had been transferred to Ecbatana, the summer residence of the king of Persia (modern day Iran). According to the OT the Persian government placed very strong emphasis on precedent, so the discovery of the previous decree virtually assured a favorable verdict for the Jews. Such a verdict was also in keeping with the character of Darius. At this time he was especially eager to promote peace in the empire after the recent civil war in which he had deposed Pseudo-Smerdis. (PBC)

*A record.* The oral proclamation of Cyrus's decree, as the exiles heard it from his heralds (1:2–4), differed in some details from this written document found in the archives (vv 3–5). (TLSB)

**6:3–5** Compare this Aramaic memorandum of the decree of Cyrus with the Hebrew version in 1:2–4. The Aramaic is written in a more sober administrative style without any reference to the Lord (Yahweh). A similar memorandum dealing with permission to rebuild the Jewish temple at Elephantine in Upper Egypt was found among fifth-century B.C. Aramaic papyri recovered at that site. (CSB)

**6:3** *ninety feet high and ninety feet wide.* These dimensions, which contrast with those of Solomon's temple (see NIV text note on 1Ki 6:2), are probably not specifications of the temple as built but of the outer limits of a building the Persians were willing to subsidize. The second temple was not as grandiose as the first (3:12; Hag 2:3). (CSB)

*sixty cubits.* 90 ft. No figures are given for the length of the building. Dimensions of Solomon's temple were 60 cubits long, 20 cubits wide, and 30 cubits high (1Ki 6:2). (TLSB)

**6:4** *large stones ... timbers.* See 5:8. The same kind of construction is mentioned in 1Ki 6:36; 7:12. Such a design was possibly intended to cushion the building against earthquake shocks. (CSB)

Solomon's temple was similarly constructed (1Ki 7:12), perhaps to counter the effects of an earthquake. (TLSB)

*costs are to be paid by the royal treasury.* In 1973 archaeologists discovered at Xanthos in southwest Turkey a cult foundation charter from the late Persian period that provides some striking parallels with this decree of Cyrus. As in Ezra, amounts of sacrifices, names of priests and the responsibility for the upkeep of the cult are specified. The Persian king seems to have known details of the cult. (CSB)

**6:5** *You shall put them in the house of God.* Concludes the royal decree of Cyrus. (TLSB)

**6:6** *keep away.* King Darius ordered the governor to refrain from interfering with the temple rebuilding. (TLSB)

**6:7** *Jews.* Judeans. (TLSB)

**6:8** *a decree.* Darius issued specific orders, implementing the original directive by Cyrus. (TLSB)

*paid out of the royal treasury.* It was a consistent policy of Persian kings to help restore sanctuaries in their empire. For example, a memorandum concerning the rebuilding of the Jewish temple at Elephantine was written by the Persian governors of Judah and Samaria. Also from non-Biblical sources we learn that Cyrus repaired temples at Uruk (Erech) and Ur. Cambyses, successor to Cyrus, gave funds for the temple at Sais in Egypt. The temple of Amun in the Khargah Oasis was rebuilt by order of Darius. (CSB)

For building materials and possibly labor. (TLSB)

**6:9** That the Persian monarchs were interested in the details of foreign cults is shown clearly by the ordinances of Cambyses and Darius I, regulating the temples and priests in Egypt. On the authority of Darius II (423–404 B.C.) a letter was written to the Jews at Elephantine concerning the keeping of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. (CSB)

*whatever is needed.* Persian authorities would have known what the priests would typically require for sacrifices. Sponsorship of the sacrifices by a pagan ruler perhaps did not cause conflict because he attached no stipulations except that prayers be said on his behalf. (TLSB)

**6:10** *pray for the well-being of the king and his sons.* In the inscription on the Cyrus Cylinder (made of baked clay), the king asks: "May all the gods whom I have resettled in their sacred cities ask Bel and Nebo daily for a long life for me."

The Jews of Elephantine offered to pray for the Persian governor of Judah. The daily synagogue services included a prayer for the royal family (cf. 1Ti 2:1–2). (CSB)

Darius expected the priests in Judah to offer prayers and sacrifices for his own welfare and for that of the state. (TLSB)

**6:11** *if anyone changes this edict.* It was customary at the end of decrees and treaties to append a long list of curses against anyone who might disregard them. (CSB)

*a beam.* Used like a floor or roof joist. (TLSB)

*impaled.* According to Herodotus (3.159), Darius I impaled 3,000 Babylonians when he took the city of Babylon. See NIV text note on Est 2:23. (CSB)

Punishment at that time was swift and harsh. (PBC)

To pierce a person's body with the beam. This Persian practice was inherited from the Assyrians. (TLSB)

*dunghill.* Aram term is unclear; it is translated "laid in ruins" in Dn 2:5; 3:29. To include a curse on anyone tampering with an official document was routine in the ancient Near East. (TLSB)

**6:12** *May God ... overthrow any king or people.* At the end of his famous Behistun (Bisitun) inscription Darius I warned: "If you see this inscription or these sculptures, and destroy them and do not protect them as long as you have strength, may Ahuramazda strike you, and may you not have a family, and what you do ... may Ahuramazda utterly destroy." (CSB)

*caused his Name to dwell.* See note on Dt 12:5. (CSB)

Not only local governors, but even great world rulers are under the control of the Lord, the King of kings. Even though their power has been magnified by terrible weapons of mass destruction, the rulers of the world are still under the control of the King of kings. He directs the affairs of this world for the final good of his people. (PBC)

*I Darius make a decree.* The king's signature, perhaps added personally; typically, scribes wrote official correspondence on the king's behalf. (TLSB)

**6:1–12** The emperor Darius approves the building of the temple, sponsors its sacrifices, and curses those who would interfere. The God of heaven has so radically changed the

circumstances that the government that opposed the project becomes its sponsor. Today, do not fail to offer prayers for your officials. Who knows what changes God may bring? Above all, offer thanks to Him for your salvation by Jesus' sacrifice. • Great God of heaven, bless our officials, and guide their service for the benefit of Your Church. Amen. (TLSB)

### *Completion and Dedication of the Temple*

**<sup>13</sup> Then, because of the decree King Darius had sent, Tattenai, governor of Trans-Euphrates, and Shethar-Bozenai and their associates carried it out with diligence. <sup>14</sup> So the elders of the Jews continued to build and prosper under the preaching of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah, a descendant of Iddo. They finished building the temple according to the command of the God of Israel and the decrees of Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes, kings of Persia. <sup>15</sup> The temple was completed on the third day of the month Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius. <sup>16</sup> Then the people of Israel—the priests, the Levites and the rest of the exiles—celebrated the dedication of the house of God with joy. <sup>17</sup> For the dedication of this house of God they offered a hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred male lambs and, as a sin offering for all Israel, twelve male goats, one for each of the tribes of Israel. <sup>18</sup> And they installed the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their groups for the service of God at Jerusalem, according to what is written in the Book of Moses.**

**6:13–14** Work on the temple had made little progress not only because of opposition but also because of the preoccupation of the returnees with their own homes (Hag 1:2–9). Because they had placed their own interests first, God sent them famine as a judgment (Hag 1:5–6, 10–11). Spurred by the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah, and under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua, a new effort was begun (Hag 1:12–15). (CSB)

**6:14** The temple building project went well and was finished. (TLSB)

*Jews. Judeans.* (TLSB)

*Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes.* Three Persian kings who took actions benefiting the temple. Some 50 years after the temple was completed (early in the reign of Darius), Artaxerxes contributed sorely needed funds for its maintenance when he sent Ezra to Jerusalem (4:7; 7:12–26). (TLSB)

*Artaxerxes.* The reference to him seems out of place, because he did not contribute to rebuilding the temple. He may have been inserted here since he contributed to the work of the temple at a later date under Ezra (7:21–24). (CSB)

**6:15** *temple was completed.* On Mar. 12, 516 B.C., almost 70 years after its destruction. The renewed work on the temple had begun on Sept. 21, 520 (Hag

1:15), and sustained effort had continued for almost three and a half years. According to Hag 2:3, the older members who could remember the splendor of Solomon's temple were disappointed when they saw the smaller size of Zerubbabel's temple (cf. Ezr 3:12). Yet in the long run the second temple, though not as grand as the first, enjoyed a much longer life. The general plan of the second temple was similar to that of Solomon's, but the Most Holy Place was left empty because the ark of the covenant had been lost through the Babylonian conquest. According to Josephus, on the Day of Atonement the high priest placed his censer on the slab of stone that marked the former location of the ark. The Holy Place was furnished with a table for the bread of the Presence, the incense altar, and one lampstand (in the Apocrypha cf. 1 Maccabees 1:21–22; 4:49–51) instead of Solomon's ten (1Ki 7:49). (CSB)

**6:16** *exiles ... dedication.* Cf. the dedication of Solomon's temple (1Ki 8). The leaders of those who returned from exile were responsible for the completion of the temple. "Dedication" translates the Aramaic word *hanukkah*. The Jewish holiday in December that celebrates the recapture of the temple from the Seleucids and its rededication (165 B.C.) is also known as Hanukkah. (CSB)

Ceremonies at the dedication of Solomon's temple were duplicated as much as possible (1Ki 8). (TLSB)

**6:17** *They offered.* One difference between the dedication of "this house" and Solomon's temple was the smaller number of animals sacrificed (cf 1Ki 8:5, 63). (TLSB)

*sin offering for all Israel.* The sin offering (Lv 4:22–26) of 12 male goats represented a declaration of the reconstituted solidarity of the chosen people, again consisting of the 12 tribes of Israel as it did at Solomon's time. After the fall of Samaria in 722 BC, some people from the northern tribes had joined the kingdom of Judah. There was also an effort to draw descendants of the northern tribes back to Judah after the Assyrian conquest. Cf 2Ch 30:1–12. (TLSB)

*hundred ... two hundred ... four hundred.* The number of animals sacrificed was small in comparison with similar services in the reigns of Solomon (1Ki 8:5, 63), Hezekiah (2Ch 30:24) and Josiah (2Ch 35:7), when thousands rather than hundreds were offered. (CSB)

**6:18** Concludes this portion of Ezr written in Aram, which began at 4:8. (TLSB)

*divisions.* The priests were separated into 24 divisions (1Ch 24:1–19), each of which served at the temple for a week at a time (cf. Lk 1:5, 8). In 1962 fragments of a synagogue inscription listing the 24 divisions were found at Caesarea. (CSB)

Priests and Levites were organized in working units as stipulated by David, reflecting the Law of Moses. (TLSB)

*written in the Book of Moses.* Perhaps referring to such passages as Ex 29; Lev 8; Nu 3; 8:5–26; 18. (CSB)

Restored community observed the Mosaic regulations governing the eligibility and responsibilities of those who served in the temple (Ex 29; Lv 8; Nu 3). (TLSB)

**6:13–18** God’s people rejoice in the atonement for all Israel celebrated at the dedication of the Jerusalem temple. This week, praise God for the blessings of forgiveness you hear and receive in your congregation. There is no greater cause of joy than the pardon of our heavenly King. • “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD!’ ” (Ps 122:1). Amen. (TLSB)

### *The Passover*

**<sup>19</sup> On the fourteenth day of the first month, the exiles celebrated the Passover. <sup>20</sup> The priests and Levites had purified themselves and were all ceremonially clean. The Levites slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the exiles, for their brothers the priests and for themselves. <sup>21</sup> So the Israelites who had returned from the exile ate it, together with all who had separated themselves from the unclean practices of their Gentile neighbors in order to seek the LORD, the God of Israel. <sup>22</sup> For seven days they celebrated with joy the Feast of Unleavened Bread, because the LORD had filled them with joy by changing the attitude of the king of Assyria, so that he assisted them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel.**

**6:19** *fourteenth day ... first month ... Passover.* The date would have been about Apr. 21, 516 B.C. (CSB)

Day on which Passover was instituted in Egypt. (TLSB)

*Passover.* The first observance of Passover in Egypt marked the birth of Israel as a nation. This celebration after the exile proclaimed its rebirth and fulfilled Ezk 45:21–25. (TLSB)

**6:20** *purified themselves ... ceremonially clean.* See note on Lev 4:12. Priests and Levites had to be ceremonially clean to fulfill their ritual functions. (CSB)

Priests and Levites who were contaminated by a physical, ritual, or moral impurity could not minister in the temple. Mosaic Law set down rules concerning purification (e.g., Lv 21–22). (TLSB)

*slaughtered the Passover lamb.* Priests and Levites killed the lambs that were then roasted and eaten by the people in private dwellings (v 21; Mt 26:17–19). (TLSB)

*fellow priests.* Lit, “their brethren the priests.” (TLSB)



**6:21** *with all who had separated themselves.* The returning exiles were willing to accept those who separated themselves from the paganism of the foreigners who had been introduced into the area by the Assyrians. (CSB)

People of the land who had removed themselves from the false worship of their neighbors. They may have been either converts to faith in Yahweh or Israelites whose faith had been corrupted but who were now returning to the Lord. (TLSB)

**6:22** *Feast of Unleavened Bread.* The seven days that followed Passover when only unleavened bread could be eaten (Dt 16:1–8). (TLSB)

*turned.* Or, “changed.” Not to be confused with the Hbr expression for repentance. (TLSB)

*king of Assyria.* A surprising title for Darius, the Persian king. But even after the fall of Nineveh in 612 B.C., the term “Assyria” continued to be used for former territories the Assyrians had occupied (even Syria is an abbreviation of Assyria). Persian kings adopted a variety of titles, including “king of Babylon” (cf. 5:13; Ne 13:6). (CSB)

Persian rulers such as Darius are so described because they replaced the kings of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires (5:13). (TLSB)

*aided them.* People recognized the miraculous change God had wrought in government. (TLSB)

**6:19–22** The Judeans rejoice in the cleansing and blessings associated with the celebration of the first Passover at the new temple, including the conversion of some people of the land. What joy stirs God’s people to see hearts turned to the Lord. How great is our calling to proclaim God’s mercy and cleansing! For the Lord has set us apart, washing away our sins in the consecration of Holy Baptism. • Holy Lord, as You have set apart my life for Your kingdom, set my heart now to share Your Gospel with others. Amen. (TLSB)