

Ezra

Chapter 6

The Decree of Darius

Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in Babylonia, in the house of the archives where the documents were stored. 2 And in Ecbatana, the citadel that is in the province of Media, a scroll was found on which this was written: “A record. 3 In the first year of Cyrus the king, Cyrus the king issued a decree: Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the house be rebuilt, the place where sacrifices were offered, and let its foundations be retained. Its height shall be sixty cubits and its breadth sixty cubits, 4 with three layers of great stones and one layer of timber. Let the cost be paid from the royal treasury. 5 And also let the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple that is in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be restored and brought back to the temple that is in Jerusalem, each to its place. You shall put them in the house of God.” 6 “Now therefore, Tattenai, governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and your associates the governors who are in the province Beyond the River, keep away. 7 Let 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. 8 Moreover, 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 men in full and without delay from the royal revenue, the tribute of the province from Beyond the River. 9 And whatever is needed—bulls, rams, or sheep for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, or oil, as the priests at Jerusalem require—let that be given to them day by day without fail, 10 that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the life of the king and his sons. 11 Also I make a decree that if anyone alters this edict, a beam shall be pulled out of his house, and he shall be impaled on it, and his house shall be made a dunghill. 12 May the God who has caused his name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who shall put out a hand to alter this, or to destroy this house of God that is in Jerusalem. I Darius make a decree; let it be done with all diligence.”

6:1 *archives where the documents were stored.* 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, 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 *great stones ... timber.* 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 be paid from 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...from the royal revenue. 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 life 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 ers 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. (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. 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)

The Temple Finished and Dedicated

13 Then, according to the word sent by Darius the king, Tattenai, the governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their associates did with all diligence what Darius the king had ordered. 14 And the elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. They finished their building by decree of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia; 15 and this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king. 16 And the 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. 17 They offered at the dedication of this house of God 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel 12 male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel. 18 And they set the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their divisions, for the service of God at Jerusalem, as it 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 *house was finished.* 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)

Passover Celebrated

19 On the fourteenth day of the first month, the returned exiles kept the Passover. 20 For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together; all of them were clean. So they slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the returned exiles, for their fellow priests, and for themselves. 21 It was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile, and also by every one who had joined them and separated himself from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to worship the LORD, the God of Israel. 22 And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the LORD had made them joyful and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work of 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 ... were clean.* /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 *separated himself.* 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)