

Week of October 17 - 23

Ezra 3 Worship and Rebuilding Begin in Jerusalem

The first concern of the Israelite community who had returned was the worship of the Lord. It was important to them that they place themselves under the refuge of the Lord because they were fearful of an attack by the surrounding nations. Sacrifices had not been offered for fifty years since Jerusalem's fall (586 B.C.). The seventh month (Tishri, also September on our calendar) was the holiest month of the Jewish calendar when the Feasts of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles were celebrated. Zerubbabel and Jeshua, the high priest, supervised the reconstruction of the altar and the offering of sacrifices. The Feast of Tabernacles was the first holy day celebrated.

In the second year of the return (536 B.C.), cedar logs were imported from Lebanon. The people began to rebuild the temple and lay its foundation under the supervision of priests and Levites appointed by Zerubbabel and Jeshua. The Levites led in praise through singing and musical instruments. The response was a mixture of joy by the younger Israelites who had not seen Solomon's Temple and weeping by the older because they had remembered its glory. Haggai declared that the glory of this temple would exceed that of the former temple.

Compared with Solomon's Temple, this second temple was much less impressive. The second temple refers to both the restored temple and Herod's renovations. The second temple changed occasionally, but major changes took place because of Herod's renovation and expansion of the Temple, which was dilapidated after 334 years. These improvements were still in progress during Jesus' walk on the earth. The second temple stood from 515 B.C. until the Romans destroyed it in A.D. 70.

Note the praise of the people: Praise involves God's people singing and playing, and testifying to the greatness and goodness of the Lord!

Ezra 4 Opposition to the Lord's Work by Enemies

Some enemies of Judah and Benjamin who had been exiled to Israel by the Assyrians offered to assist with the rebuilding of the temple because they claimed to worship the God of the Jews. Zerubbabel rejected their offer, probably because their religion was a mixed cult of paganism and because Cyrus had commanded the Jews to rebuild it. These Samaritans tried to obstruct the work by harassing the builders and hiring counselors to frustrate their purpose. The work stopped for sixteen years (536-520 B.C.) until the reign of Darius.

A letter from the time of Xerxes is mentioned, but a later second letter from the period of Artaxerxes is quoted at length in this chapter. The authors of the letter identified themselves as descendants of those deported by Ashurbanipal. They warned that the Jews would stop paying taxes when their walls were complete and the decline of revenue would hurt the king's reputation. If the Jews continued to rebuild the city that had a reputation for rebellion, their actions might encourage other peoples in other parts of the empire to revolt. They reminded the king of Jerusalem's history of insurrection and charged the Jews with sedition. Artaxerxes ordered the work stopped until he could determine a permanent solution to the problem.

The people waited. But many years had elapsed before the order to stop work came. It seems that it may have been a lack of faith that was the true hindrance. There were enemies in the land

who frightened them, and the Jews did not dare continue their work. It was not until two kings later that the order to stop work was obtained, but the Jews had already stopped building, fearing their enemies. They seemed to have forgotten God.

Ezra 5 Rebuilding Commences under God's Authority

The prophets Haggai and Zechariah urged and helped the community to renew their efforts to rebuild the Temple and its walls. Haggai criticized the people for living in fine homes while the temple lay in ruins. Zechariah revealed the great future that awaited the temple in the days of the Messiah. But no sooner had their work begun that Tattenai, governor of the areas west of the Euphrates, questioned their authority to build. He was told their authority came from God, and it was He who watched over them.

Consequently, Tattenai sent a letter to Darius, the new king, outlining the history of Jerusalem and the exiles, requesting a search in the royal library of Babylon for Cyrus's authorization for rebuilding, which the Jews claimed to have.

Ezra 6 Darius and the Finished Work

King Darius searched Babylon and then Ecbatana (Media) and found the decree of Cyrus. Darius ordered the governor not to stop the construction of the temple and walls but to pay for their expenses out of the taxes collected in the governor's territory and to hang anyone who opposed their work. Those who had threatened the work of building the temple ended up supporting its completion.

The speedy response of Tattenai enabled the completion of the temple four years later in 515 B.C. By divine plan, Jewish elders, Hebrew prophets, and pagan kings all contributed to complete the task. The dedication service was celebrated with joy and sacrifices. The Levites and priests were organized into their various groups, as instructed in the laws of Moses.

At last, the Temple was finished and dedicated to God with sacrificial offerings and songs of thanksgiving. On completion of the Temple the Feast of Passover was celebrated in the temple for the first time since the fall of Jerusalem. The exiles worshiped the Lord and rejoiced that the Lord had changed the heart of the Assyrian king. The second temple lasted until it was destroyed in A.D. 70 by the Romans.

Haggai General Observations

The Prophet Haggai is the tenth of the minor Prophets, probably born in Babylon during the captivity. His prophecy is short and to the point. According to Ezra, Haggai and Zechariah prophesied during the same period. His prophecy was to comfort the builders of the temple with an assurance from the Lord that it would become more glorious than all the splendor of Solomon's temple.

Haggai 1 The Prophet's Call to Rebuild the Temple

The prophecy was issued because of the people's reluctance to start building the temple. They said that the time was not right. In response, the Lord asked if it was time, then, for them to live in luxurious homes while His house remained in ruins.

The Israelites found their crops were failing and their income disappearing. The futility of labor was one of the curses for breaking the covenant. Despite the fulfillment of God's judgment and

the chance of a new beginning, the promised outpouring of blessings had not occurred. Life was still unsuccessful and empty economically and in every other way.

The Lord did this because the temple remained in ruins with no effort made to rebuild it. Until the people turned their attention to this priority, there would be no prosperity.

In response to Haggai's message, they obeyed the Lord because they recognized that He had sent Haggai. They feared the Lord, worshiping Him. So, Haggai announced a new word from God: "I am with you," and all the people began to work on the temple.