

# Scripture Lesson Text

**EZRA 6:13** Then Tatnai, governor on this side the river, Shethar-boznai, and their companions, according to that which Darius the king had sent, so they did speedily.

**14** And the elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they builded, and finished *it*, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the commandment of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia.

**15** And this house was finished on the third day of the month Adar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king.

**16** And the children of Israel, the priests, and the Levites, and the rest of the children of the captivity, kept the dedication of this house of God with joy,

**17** And offered at the dedication of this house of God an hundred bullocks, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs; and for a sin offering for all Israel, twelve he goats, ac-

ording to the number of the tribes of Israel.

**18** And they set the priests in their divisions, and the Levites in their courses, for the service of God, which *is* at Jerusalem; as it is written in the book of Moses.

**19** And the children of the captivity kept the passover upon the fourteenth *day* of the first month.

**20** For the priests and the Levites were purified together, all of them *were* pure, and killed the passover for all the children of the captivity, and for their brethren the priests, and for themselves.

**21** And the children of Israel, which were come again out of captivity, and all such as had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the LORD God of Israel, did eat,

**22** And kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy: for the LORD had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria unto them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

## NOTES

# The Service of Godly Leaders

Lesson Text: Ezra 6:13-22

Related Scriptures: Exodus 12:1-28; I Chronicles 23:1-27; 28:11-19;  
Leviticus 8:6-13

TIME: 516 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

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**GOLDEN TEXT**—“And the elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they builded, and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel” (Ezra 6:14).

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## *Lesson Exposition*

### **THE TEMPLE FINISHED— Ezra 6:13-15**

**Cooperation by Persian officials (Ezra 6:13).** The foundation of the temple had been laid during the reign of Cyrus (536 B.C.), but apparently nothing more was done until the second year of the reign of Darius (520 B.C.). Ezra emphasized the external opposition as a cause for this delay (4:1-5). But from the book of Haggai we also learn that the Jews themselves had been lax in completing the work, placing their own interests first (1:2-11). As a result, God had brought a famine that drained their resources.

The building was then resumed (Ezra 5:2; Hag. 1:12-15). But the regional Persian officials soon intervened, asking by what authority the Jews were doing this and writing to Darius, requesting that he investigate the matter (Ezra 5:3-17). Darius did so and found the decree of Cyrus, with its specific instructions for rebuilding the temple (6:1-5).

Darius then made a decree of his own, commanding his regional officials to desist from hindering the project.

Ezra 6:13 records that “Tatnai, gov-

ernor on this side the river,” along with his assistant Shethar-boznai and other colleagues, carried out the king’s decree “speedily.”

**Other encouragements to build (Ezra 6:14-15).** The Jews themselves were now enthusiastic to finish the temple. The builders, “the elders of the Jews,” achieved success “through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo.” Haggai had earlier rebuked the people for stopping work to build their own houses. Now he encouraged Zerubbabel and Jeshua with visions of future glory that would come to this house (Hag. 2:1-9).

But the real key to the completion of their project was that it was “according to the commandment of the God of Israel” (Ezra 6:14). He was behind “the commandment of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes.”

There is a question as to why Artaxerxes’s name appears here with the other two, for he did not rule until after the temple had been completed. But it should be noted that the temple is not mentioned in this verse—only building in general. Artaxerxes did give Nehemiah permission to rebuild the walls

of Jerusalem (Neh. 2:1-8), and he also gave support for the ongoing temple services (Ezra 7:12-17).

The temple was finished twenty years after construction had started and almost seventy years after the first temple had been destroyed. But it would eventually outlast Solomon's temple. The first temple lasted just under 400 years; the second, including the improvements later made by Herod, stood for 585 years.

### **THE TEMPLE DEDICATED— Ezra 6:16-18**

**The joyous celebration (Ezra 6:16-17).** Now that the temple was complete, "the children of Israel, the priests, and the Levites, and the rest of the children of the captivity" dedicated it. "The children of Israel" is the name given to all twelve tribes. Even though most of those present were from Judah and Benjamin, the restoration of worship was on behalf of all the tribes. There was no longer any recognition of the division that so long existed.

The groups that constituted the children of Israel were the priests, the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles. The priests and Levites served the Lord full-time in the activities of worship, while the rest were lay worshippers. Only these groups had been authorized to reconstruct the temple (cf. Ezra 1:3), and they alone dedicated it. It did not include any of the surrounding peoples, who earlier had greatly compromised their religion (Ezra 4:1-3; cf. II Kgs. 17:26-34).

The dedication of this temple was kept with great joy. The elderly men who had wept at the laying of the foundation had now passed away, and the younger generation embraced the completion with pure joy. They saw this as the beginning of a new era in their national history, when the former worship that had characterized Israel could be restored in all its fullness.

The dedication featured the offering of "an hundred bullocks, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs," along with a sin offering of "twelve he goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel" (Ezra 6:17). Although the numbers of these sacrifices seem large to us, they were meager in comparison to the 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep offered by Solomon at the dedication of the first temple (I Kgs. 8:63). The smaller number of animals testifies to the modest resources these Jews had.

The sin offering for the whole nation was no doubt included because it had been sin that had caused the destruction of the first temple and the cessation of worship for seventy years. It expressed to God the Jews' intention to put that behind them and recommit themselves to godly worship. All twelve tribes were represented by the twelve goats, though most of them had no representation there. All twelve tribes comprised covenant people, and there was hope for their total regathering.

**The assignments for priests and Levites (Ezra 6:18).** Now that the temple was restored, "they set the priests in their divisions, and the Levites in their courses" to conduct the prescribed observances. David had inaugurated this system of divisions and courses after the ark was brought to Jerusalem (I Chr. 23—24), and this organization continued after the temple was built. Now it was revived.

But the emphasis in our text is not on adherence to David's instructions but to those "written in the book of Moses" (Ezra 6:18). It was Moses who gave the original prescription for priestly and Levitical duties (Ex. 29; Lev. 8; Num. 3; 8:5-26). Obedience to the mandates of Moses' Law was considered crucial to the leaders of these postexilic Jews, for they knew what had happened to their fathers, who had taken it lightly.

## THE PASSOVER OBSERVED—

### Ezra 6:19-22

**Preparation by the priests and Levites (Ezra 6:19-20).** Just as the rebuilding of the altar was soon followed by the Feast of Tabernacles (3:3-4), so the dedication of the new temple was followed, after about three weeks, by the Passover. This occurred at its scheduled time, the fourteenth day of the first month (Nisan). The Passover, their most important festival, commemorated Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt.

We do not know how regularly the Jews had observed this feast over the centuries. The Passovers recorded were those associated with decisive events, including other rededications of the temple (cf. II Chr. 30:1-27; 35:1-19). One thing seems certain: the Passover had not been observed during the Captivity. So this may have been the first one the Jews had commemorated in many years, and it was fitting that it should follow so closely the restoration of temple worship.

The reason the Passover could be observed at the proper time was that "the priests and the Levites were purified together, all of them were pure" (Ezra 6:20). To carry out their functions, priests and Levites had to undergo purification from ceremonial uncleanness (cf. Ex. 29:4; Num. 8:5-8). Such uncleanness could have been caused by contact with a corpse, certain diseases, or running sores. A Passover in Hezekiah's day had to be postponed a month because priests had not been purified (II Chr. 30:1-3).

The Levites killed the Passover lambs for all the returned exiles, and the priests sprinkled the blood.

**Celebration by the people (Ezra 6:21-22).** The priests and Levites were joined by "the children of Israel, which were come again out of captivity," in eating the Passover meal. What a joy

it must have been for these people to worship their God in their own land! They were further joined by "all such as had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the Lord God of Israel." Although these may have been Gentile proselytes to the Jewish faith, it is more likely that they were Jews already living in the land among pagan neighbors. The Passover thus had the effect of reuniting Israelites of various tribes.

The Jews kept both the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread during the seven days that followed. They did so with the joy that comes with following God.

—Robert E. Wenger.

## QUESTIONS

1. What two obstacles stopped the returned exiles from finishing the temple right away?
2. What encouragements did the Jews have to finish the building?
3. Why was Artaxerxes included among the kings who gave support to the Jews in their building?
4. Which temple stood longer—Solomon's or the second one?
5. Who had been authorized to build the temple? Who were excluded?
6. How did the offerings at this dedication compare with Solomon's?
7. How do we know this temple was intended for all twelve tribes?
8. Why were these Jews careful to do all that was in Moses' Law?
9. What roles did the priests and Levites play in the Passover?
10. Besides the exiles, who joined in the observance of the Passover?

—Robert E. Wenger.

## PRACTICAL POINTS

1. Our great God uses both believers and unbelievers to do His will (Ezra 6:13-15).
2. Joy is the proper response of God's people when they recognize His blessings (vs. 16).
3. Sacrifices and offerings are always a part of true worship (Ezra 6:17; cf. Rom. 12:1-2).
4. Any work of God should be carefully organized and biblically founded (Ezra 6:18).
5. The true worshipper is concerned about spiritual purity (vss. 19-20).
6. All are always welcome to celebrate the faithfulness of God (vss. 21-22).

—Don Kakavecos.

## RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

1. How is it that God can use unbelievers to accomplish His purposes and plans (Ezra 6:13-14, 22; cf. Ps. 33:10; Prov. 16:1, 9; Isa. 14:26-27; Dan. 4:34-35)?
2. Why is the ministry of the Word by spiritual leaders important for properly completing the work of God (cf. Josh. 1:8; II Tim. 3:16-17)?
3. Is anything that our world terms "celebration" acceptable in the worship of our Lord? What should always be the determining factors in how we worship (cf. Mark 7:6-8; John 4:23-24; I Cor. 10:31)?
4. If joy is the proper response to God's blessings, why do you think it is often missing from His people's worship?

—Don Kakavecos.

## Golden Text Illuminated

**"And the elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they builded, and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel" (Ezra 6:14).**

The completion of the second temple was a momentous occasion. Only God's sovereignty could have brought it about. But we also see how His people stepped up to fervently carry out His will.

About twenty years before the time of today's text, the first Israelites to return from the Captivity attempted to rebuild the temple. Hampered by some troublemaking Samaritans, they got no further than laying the foundation. So the fact that our text mentions that the elders "prospered" in their building and completed their project is no small thing. This temple project had been a long time coming.

Our golden text lists two notable prophets who initiated the rebuilding of the temple: Zechariah and Haggai. After Israel's years-long slump, these two men urged God's people to resume their task.

But it can also be seen here that God's people, specifically the elders of the Jews, responded to the Lord's command as well. And they responded enthusiastically, leading the Lord's people to worship Him once again.

In the building of the temple, we get a picture of the different roles the Israelite leaders played in following God's commands.

—Megan Hickman.