

# ***FPFWC Christian Development***



## **Liberating Passover**

March 2022

Spring Quarter

**March 12, 2022**

## **Lesson #2 – Free to Worship**

SCRIPTURE TEXT – Ezra 6:1-12

### **ICE BREAKER** –

1. What causes Christians to drift away from the Lord as some of the Israelites did?
2. What could you do this week to encourage a friend who has drifted away from God?

***Key Verse: The God that hath caused his name to dwell there destroy all kings and people, that shall put to their hand to alter and to destroy this house of God which is at Jerusalem.—Ezra 6:12a***

### **LESSON BACKGROUND**

This lesson contains the text of a decree of Persian King Darius I (reigned 522–486 BC). He came to power after several years of internal strife. Darius strengthened the Persian government, established a new method of taxation, and further organized the empire. The decree continued a policy established by Cyrus (reigned 539–530 BC). His policy allowed for the return of Jewish exiles to Jerusalem and the reconstruction of the Jewish temple (Ezra 1:2–5, last week's lesson).

Under the leadership of Zerubbabel, the exiles returned to Jerusalem and Judah (Ezra 2:1–2; see Zechariah 4:9). Two years after the exiles returned, reconstruction began on the temple in Jerusalem, in 535 BC (Ezra 3:8–9). However, the reconstruction was delayed several times by local opposition and regional authorities (4:1–5, 24).

Today's Scripture text comes as a response to questioning from Persian officials Tatnai and Shetharboznai. After seeing the efforts at reconstruction, they questioned Zerubbabel and the local leaders concerning whose authority granted them rebuilding rights (Ezra 5:3, 9). The builders noted that their authority came from God and Cyrus. A letter was sent to Darius to inquire on the nature and authority of Cyrus's decree (5:5–17). Today's lesson concerns Cyrus's decree and Darius's response to the Persian officials.

While Darius was concerned with following Cyrus's decree, he also had a pragmatic reason to support the temple's reconstruction. By allowing agreeable Israelites to return to their homeland, Darius would have loyal subjects located in a geographically expedient place near Egypt, a region known for its rebellions and insurrections. Additionally, Darius would be able to institute a new tax system among the repatriated Jews in the regions of Judah, thus increasing his coffers.

Ezra 4:8–6:18 is written in the Aramaic language (unlike the Hebrew of Ezra 1; compare 4:7). Aramaic was used for business and government dealings of the

Persian Empire. As our lesson text records official government documentation, the use of Aramaic is understandable.

## **LESSON COMMENTARY**

**6:1–7.** The search for Cyrus' proclamation began in **Babylon** since the Jews left from there to go to Judah. It ended in **Ecbatana** (located 200 miles southwest of the Caspian Sea), the capital of **Media**, the summer residence for the Persian kings, with the discovery of a **scroll** containing a relevant **memorandum**. This was probably not the original decree, which a scribe would have written on a clay tablet, but rather a record of the decree with further administrative details (cf. 1:2–4; Xanthos Charter, c. 358 BC; Yamauchi, "Ezra and Nehemiah," 411–2). It stipulated the size of the rebuilt temple, though if followed would have resulted in one larger than the original (1Kg 6:2). The financing would come **from the royal treasury**, and the **gold and silver utensils** previously taken would regain their proper location within the **temple** (Dn 5:2–4). Darius I then ordered his provincial officials to **keep away from there**, i.e., not to interfere any further with the rebuilding of the temple, and to let Zerubbabel and **the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site**. They were to rebuild the temple in its original location; an inscription of Nabonidus indicates that he rebuilt the temple of Sippar, a city of Babylonia on the Euphrates, over the foundations of the earlier temple of Sargon II, king of Assyria and Babylonia from 721 to 705 BC (COS, 2.123A).

### **2. Decree of Darius (6:8–12)**

**6:8–12.** The Persian kings were interested in the restoration of indigenous religious sanctuaries throughout their empire, and Darius's proclamation fit within that context (cf. *ANET*, 491–92). This was an adroit political maneuver, because it secured the loyalty of their subjects, while offering putative support for foreign cults—notice also that he required the Jews to **pray for the life of the king and his sons**. The end of the Cyrus Cylinder included this strategic request for all those repatriated to their sacred cities. Herodotus attested to this imperialistic intrusion into accepted ritual life. As the sacrifice was being offered, the one involved, "prays that it may be well with the king and all the Persians" (1.132). The financial and ritual resources necessary for the completion of the temple were to come from Tattenai's provincial coffers. This would result in the offering of **acceptable sacrifices to the God of heaven**. The decree included a sentence of death on anyone **who violates this edict**. Darius I impaled some of his enemies (cf. Herodotus 3.159; the Behistun Inscription), so this was no idle threat. Coupled with Darius' curse on anyone who tried to **destroy this house of God in Jerusalem**, this dire warning served as an effective means of social control throughout the Persian Empire.

**LESSON NUGGET** – "Let the work of this house of God alone" literally means, "Keep your distance!". The king described the terrible judgments that would come to anybody who didn't obey his edict (vv.11-12). So, what started out as

an investigation ended up as a royal decree that protected the Jews and provided for them.

**Sources: *Moody Bible Commentary, Standard Lesson Commentary, Life Application Bible and The Essential Everyday Bible Commentary***