

Rebuilding the Temple (Ezra 6-7)

The Book of Ezra begins with a decree from King Cyrus of Persia, allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple that had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC. This decree introduces us to one of the principal themes of Ezra and Nehemiah: the relationship between God's work and human work. We sense from the book of Ezra that God is in control, yet choosing to work through human beings, even Gentile kings, to accomplish his will.

Ezra describes several efforts to squelch the construction. These were successful for a while, stopping the temple project for about two decades. Finally, God encouraged the Jews through the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah to resume and complete the job. Moreover, Darius, king of Persia, underwrote the building effort financially in the hope that the Lord might bless him and his sons. The temple was finally completed, thanks to the fact that God had "turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them" (Ezra 6:22).

As this verse makes clear, the Jews actually did the work of rebuilding the temple. Yet their labors were successful because of help from two pagan kings, one who inaugurated the project and the other who paid for its completion. Behind these human efforts loomed the overarching work of God, who moved in the hearts of the kings and encouraged his people through the prophets. As we have seen, God is at work far beyond what meets the eye of his people.