

62. The Second Temple

When was the rebuilding of the Temple begun, and when was it completed?

The Temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 0586. The Persians conquered Babylon in 0539, and in his second year, 0538, Cyrus allowed the exiles to return to Jerusalem. Yahweh *worship* must have resumed promptly, but this required only an altar. What about the Temple? Haggai, who dates the return to the second year of *Darius* (0521),¹ has Yahweh complain:

Hag 1:1. In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, in the first day of the month, came the word of Yahweh by Haggai the prophet unto Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, saying, [2] Thus speaketh Yahweh of hosts, saying, This people say, It is not the time . . . for Yahweh's house to be built. [3] then came the word of Yahweh by Haggai the prophet, saying, [4] Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your ceiled houses, while this house lieth waste?

Whatever the details, there was clearly a delay in the rebuilding.

Jeremiah had argued that people should accept the Exile. For its duration, he envisioned a seventy-year period:

Jer 29:10. For thus saith Yahweh, After seventy years are accomplished for Babylon, I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place.

All this suggests a Temple rebuilding project begun, interrupted, resumed in 0521, and completed in 0516, after a total “fallow” interval of seventy years.

Why the interruption? There are persistent reports of opposition from nearby parts of the same Persian province. Nehemiah, engaged in rebuilding the Jerusalem Wall, surveys the damage in secret. But when the work begins:

Neh 6:1. Now it came to pass when it was reported to Sanballat and Tobiah and to Geshem the Arabian, and unto the rest of our enemies, that I had builded the wall, and that there was no breach left therein . . . [2] that Sanballat and Geshem sent unto me saying, Come, let us meet together in one of the villages of the plain of Ono. But they thought to do me mischief. [3] And I sent messengers unto them, saying, I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down . . . [4] And they sent unto me four times after this sort . . . [10] And I went unto the house of Shemaiah . . . and he said, Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us shut the doors of the temple; for they will come to slay thee; yea, in the night they will come to slay thee.

That opposition is reported in many ways, no two alike, but having the same general tendency. We will see more in §63 (The Samaritans), and again in §67 (Ezra; we have already had an advance look at Nehemiah).

As for the dating, the above is probably close enough for our purposes.

¹So also Zechariah, who gives a somewhat different account. There *was* an event, but it seems to have been altered or garbled by the texts in which it is now reported.