

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

trust in men and in human handiwork, but in the power of the Spirit of God and of Christ, that Spirit who has never yet abandoned the community and who still works the greatest miracles in her midst at the present time. For what can be more wonderful than that, after all the wise and foolish attacks on the Christian faith in the course of so many centuries, and after all the wise and foolish defences of the same, there should be always 7,000 men or more who hold fast by the Gospel, so full of stumbling blocks and foolishness, and to its old creed. They need never feel alone so long as, instead of counting heads, they believe in a holy, universal Church.

THEOD. ZAHN.

A FRESH INTERPRETATION OF PSALM CXXVII.

(“Except the Lord build the house.”)

Then the people of the land weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building, and hired counsellors against them, to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, . . . and [the work of the house of God] ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia (Ezra iv. 4, 5, 24).

The Jewish exiles who availed themselves of the permission given in the decree of Cyrus to return and to rebuild the temple were doomed to disappointment for sixteen years. They returned to find themselves in the midst of a population of half-heathens (“the people of the land”) who first claimed a share in the proposed building; and next, when their claim was rejected, sought with all their power to prevent the temple from being built at all.

The erection of a temple was in any case a very great work for a band of returned exiles to attempt. Public

spirit, personal contributions, and personal work were needed to accomplish the task, and moreover each man had his own house to build and his own position to secure in a country which was new and strange to him, though it was the land of his fathers. The inherent difficulties of the case were great enough before they were enhanced by the active opposition of enemies. This opposition moreover was formidable in itself. It was local, and therefore constant; it was countenanced by Persian officials, and therefore wore a legal aspect. The jealous half-heathen settlers in Judah won over to their side Tatnai (Tattenai), "the governor beyond the river," *i.e.* (probably) the satrap of Syria. The decree of Cyrus was hindered in its accomplishment; the foundations of the temple were laid, but little more could be done. The enemy appealed to the Persian court, and the Jews found that they had laboured in vain to build, and watched in vain over their work. The frown of a satrap and the opposition of neighbours stopped further progress, so that sixteen years after Cyrus' decree the prophet Haggai protests in the Lord's name to the Lord's people: *Mine house lieth waste, while ye run every man to his own house* (Haggai i. 9).

The sound of a prophet's voice brought a change over the scene, a change most artlessly told by the Hebrew historian. *Now the prophets Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo prophesied unto the Jews . . . Then rose up Zerubbabel and Jeshua and began to build the house of God* (Ezra v. 1, 2).

Haggai aroused the Jews with few words full of faith and force, *Be strong and work, for I am with you, saith the Lord of hosts*. Zechariah, with home-made visions of *carpenters* (i. 20), of a *measuring-line* (ii. 1, 2), and of a *lampstand* (iv. 2), painted before his countrymen's eyes the ultimate success of their efforts to build. The nation recovered its lost spirit. *The elders of the Jews builded,*

and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra vi. 14).

The voice of the prophet found an echo in the voice of the psalmist. That Psalm cxxvii., rightly understood, gives the same message as the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah, the following translation will show:

1. Surely Jehovah will build the house,
Whose builders have laboured in vain;
Surely Jehovah will keep the city,
Whose watchman hath waked in vain.
2. (Vain labour hath it been to you,
Ye that rose up early,
That sat down late,
That did eat the bread of painful toil.)
Thus¹ will he give to his loved one sleep.

Israel's efforts have failed, says the Psalmist, but now Jehovah Himself, the true Builder and the true Watchman (Ps. cxxi. 4), will intervene, and Israel may sleep while Jehovah watches and works.

But what exactly did the Psalmist mean by saying that Jehovah Himself would build and watch, and that Israel might now look forward to rest? It was certainly not a time for mere quiescence; the temple was not destined to be finished by unseen supernatural hands; the greater part of the work remained to be done, and must be done by the Jews themselves. Yet the Psalmist prophesies with emphasis that Jehovah Himself will build the long-neglected temple.

The answer to the question lies in the new attitude of the Persian court. During the last years of Cyrus, and during the reigns of his successor Cambyses, and of the usurper Gomata (Smerdis) the Magian, the decree of Cyrus had slumbered only half accomplished. But now Darius the son of Hystaspes was on the throne,

¹ *i.e.* By "building" and by "keeping."

A still strong man in a blatant land,
Who could rule and dare not lie—¹

a second Cyrus indeed in the strength and originality of his character. Jehovah had stirred up the spirit of Cyrus to decree (Ezra i. 1); and Jehovah, so prophet and psalmist saw, had raised up this vigorous Darius² to carry out the decree.

The exiles might rest now from the fever of fear and the palsy of despair, and fall asleep after each day's labour with the thought that Jehovah was indeed working with them and watching over them.

Thus ends the first half of the psalm, consisting of vv. 1, 2. The second half, consisting of vv. 3, 4, 5, seems at first sight to have no connexion with what goes before. In fact, however, the change of thought introduced in v. 3 is less abrupt than it seems. The temple was of no value unless Israel could be securely replanted round it. The building could fulfil its end only if it became the centre of a living people. The returned exiles, however, formed an incomplete community unworthy to be called a people as yet.

There were few women and children among them; for the first to take the long journey to the half-deserted land of Palestine were doubtless, for the most part, young and vigorous men. These, like all new settlers, had to make the home before they could fill it. So at first the restored community of Israel might be described in general terms as *childless and dwindling*, a sad community with a wholly uncertain future. Of what use was it to build the temple

¹ "Thus saith Darayavush the king: Thou who mayest be king hereafter, keep thyself altogether from lies." (*Behistun Inscription of Darius.*)

² "The temples which Gomata had destroyed, I rebuilt . . .

The religious chants and worship I restored . . .

I established the state in its place . . .

As it was before, so I restored what had been taken away." (*Ibid.*)

and inhabit Jerusalem once more, if extinction was to be the end?

And so the Psalmist passes on to a further promise. Jehovah will build the temple, and Jehovah will watch over the city—yes, and He will do more than this. Those who are faithful to Him shall receive not only help for the present, but also pledges for the future. Zechariah (viii. 5) had prophesied, *The streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the streets thereof.* The Psalmist in vision sees the prophecy already accomplished and exclaims :

3. See the heritage which Jehovah giveth, even children!
[See] His reward, even the fruit of the womb!

The two remaining verses of the psalm contain the Psalmist's musings on the vision he has seen. He says that *the children of youth, i.e.* the children born while their father is still young, grow up to be their father's defence. Like arrows they go whither he sends them against the enemy. Nay, it is not always necessary for the man of many sons to resort to the doubtful arbitrament of war. Respected by his foe, he may treat with the enemy in the gate, and hold his own in peaceful conference.

4. Like arrows in the hand of a mighty man, so are the sons of youth.
5. Blessed is the man who hath filled his quiver with them;
They will not be ashamed;
Verily they will speak with their enemies in the gate!

In conclusion, I may be allowed to say that I have made the translation of the psalm as literal as possible.

W. E. BARNES.