



Ezra - Chapter Four

II Ezra 3:1-6:22 - The Returned Exiles Rebuild the Temple on Its Original Site (continues)

Summary of Chapter Four

The rebuilding project encounters opposition from other groups in the region, and the work ceases. These people were essentially Samaritans who worshipped the Lord but also worshipped other gods and their offer of help was rejected leading them to oppose the mission.

II.b Ezra 4:1-24 - Conspiracy against the Project

Refer to the chapter summary above.

II.b.i Ezra 4:1-5 - Resistance to Rebuilding the Temple

Following the exile of the northern tribes King Shalmaneser V of Assyria resettled the land with foreign nationals. When the Lord sent lions against these immigrants the king ordered that an Israelite priest be sent to the land to teach them about the Lord. The outcome was: *<<So these nations worshipped the Lord, but also served their carved images; to this day their children and their children's children continue to do as their ancestors did>>* (1 Kings 17:41). When the descendants of these people offered to help rebuild the temple the Jewish leaders declined their help because their worship of the Lord was not pure. Therefore, these people opposed the rebuilding of the temple and the city.

¹ When the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the Lord, the God of Israel, ² they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of families and said to them, 'Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do, and we have

been sacrificing to him ever since the days of King Esar-haddon of Assyria who brought us here.'

Ezra 4:1-2

The adversaries of Judah and Benjamin. The returned exiles found themselves in a Persian province, called Beyond the River (v.11); i.e. beyond the Euphrates from the perspective of the Persian power centres. Its administrative centre was in Samaria, the capital of the former northern kingdom of Israel. Its population was composed largely of the descendants of peoples settled there first by King Shalmaneser V and then by King Esar-haddon of Assyria, in circa 671-670 BC; refer to 2 Kings 17:24-33 and Isaiah 7:8. This second resettlement was long after Assyria had conquered the northern kingdom in 722 BC, bringing in exiles from other lands. Apparently Samaria was a hotbed of unrest for decades.

Judæa was not completely empty of inhabitants in the two generations of captivity. There was a remnant descended from the lowest and poorest of the land that was left behind in the exile, combined with the few who had drifted into the largely desolate area from the north. These people were not happy that Judah and Benjamin had come back to Judæa and thus they were their adversaries. These were the early Samaritans, those who were brought into the lands of the former northern kingdom of Israel after its fall to the Assyrians, who intermarried with those left behind from the exile. In the two generations of Babylonian exile after the fall of the southern kingdom of Judah, they had also expanded somewhat into the lands of Judah. The Samaritans continued as a people into NT times. Because the Samaritans had some historical connection to the people of Israel, their faith was a combination of law and ritual from the Law of Moses and various superstitions. Most Jews in Jesus' time despised the Samaritans, even more than Gentiles because they were, religiously speaking, 'half-breeds' who had an eclectic, mongrel faith. This context is essential in understanding the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37.

Heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the Lord. The noise from the dedication ceremony at the end of Ezra Chapter 3 may have gotten the attention of these scattered peoples, signalling them that the returning Jews were serious about re-establishing a permanent presence in Judæa.

Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do. Indeed, these peoples' ancestors had been taught the religion of Yahweh by a priest sent for that purpose (2 Kings 17:24-28), although the same account tells that they worshipped other gods as well (2 Kings 17:29-41), and they are identified as adversaries. They wanted to become partners in the building work, yet they were still adversaries. They wanted to partner in the work either to ruin it or to influence it to their benefit, for proposal to unite in building the temple was a political move; for, in old-world ideas, co-operation in temple building was incorporation into national

unity. The calculation, no doubt, was that if the returning exiles could be united with the much more numerous Samaritans, they would soon be absorbed into their national identity.

They did this on the claim that we worship your God as you do. They probably said this with all sincerity; they genuinely believed that they sought the same God in the same way. Yet they also added: we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of King Esar-haddon of Assyria. This means they sacrificed without either a temple or a priesthood, which was obviously against the commandment of God. This completely contradicted their claim: we worship your God as you do.

To the Samaritans, Yahweh was one of many powerful gods. Their idolatry represented a grave danger, because Israel was exiled for their idolatry. This was a dangerous partnership for the returned exiles.

³ But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of families in Israel said to them, ‘You shall have no part with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus of Persia has commanded us.’

Ezra 4:3

Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of families in Israel present a united answer declining the offer of help (vv.1-2): we alone will build to the Lord. All the returned exiles were agreed upon this answer to the Samaritans. Their stated ground for declining the help is that the decree of Cyrus applied only to the returning exiles. No doubt they understood that the actual intent behind the request was to frustrate the project or to gain politically from being part of it.

Later opposition was rebutted in similar fashion: <<*But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they mocked and ridiculed us, saying, ‘What is this that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?’ Then I replied to them, ‘The God of heaven is the one who will give us success, and we his servants are going to start building; but you have no share or claim or historic right in Jerusalem’>> (Nehemiah 2:19-20).*

You shall have no part with us in building a house to our God. With one voice, they refused the help of the Samaritans. They did this knowing they had the permission, even the command, of King Cyrus, and knowing they lacked both human and financial resources. It was an important step of faith to refuse a partnership that might have seemed helpful. It can be imagined that there were a few pragmatists among them who said, “We need any help we can get. We can guard ourselves against ungodly influences they may bring.” In weak or early

circumstances of a building work there is often a serious temptation to take any help and to ignore the dangers of unwise and ungodly partnerships.

⁴ Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and made them afraid to build, ⁵ and they bribed officials to frustrate their plan throughout the reign of King Cyrus of Persia and until the reign of King Darius of Persia.

Ezra 4:4-5

Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and made them afraid to build. At first the returnees continued to build despite their fear: <<*They set up the altar on its foundation, because they were in dread of the neighbouring peoples, and they offered burnt-offerings upon it to the Lord, morning and evening*>> (Ezra 3:3). Now the fear was starting to overcome them.

The real attitude of these residents, now called the people of the land, emerges. They showed their determined opposition throughout the reign of King Cyrus of Persia (from the time the opposition began in 538 or 537 BC; Cyrus died in 530) even until the reign of King Darius, who reigned between 522-486 BC. Therefore, the opposition continued over a period of about 20 years, up to the completion of the temple in 516 BC. The discouragement apparently involved turning local officials against the project. Even though the project actually had the full authority of King Cyrus behind it, local enemies would exploit the distance from Jerusalem to the imperial centre to their own advantage.

This response to the refusal of partnership revealed their evil intent. If they could not attack the work through a subversive partnership, they would then attack the work through discouraging the workers, troubling the builders, and lobbying against them in the court of King Cyrus.

II.b.ii Ezra 4:6-24 - Rebuilding of Jerusalem Opposed

This section interrupts the historical narrative of Ezra 1:1-4:5 and mentions two later examples of hostility from the people of the land recorded in Ezra 4:6 and 4:7-23, showing that persistent and recurring hostility to the returning Jews occurred for a century or more after Cyrus' decree. The narrative resumes at v.24. The technique employed was familiar practice in ancient history writing. Its purpose here is to show that the problems faced by the new community were not isolated but were deeply rooted in its situation.

While the author is on the topic of the opposition by the people of the land, he jumps forward yet further to another hostile episode, when a formal letter of complaint was sent by leaders in the province to King Artaxerxes I, who reigned between 464-423 BC.

⁶ In the reign of Ahasuerus, in his accession year, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.

Ezra 4:6

This verse jumps forward to later events during the reign of Ahasuerus (486-464 BC), the Hebrew name of Xerxes I of Persia, who appears in the Book of Esther: <<*This happened in the days of Ahasuerus, the same Ahasuerus who ruled over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia*>> (Esther 1:1).

In his accession year. The adversaries wanted to make the new king aware of the situation as soon as they possibly could hoping he would overturn the decree of his predecessor Cyrus. This showed a true enterprising spirit among the adversaries of God's people. They were wrong, but they were energetic and enterprising in their wrong work.

They wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. The Samaritan adversaries against the people of Judah sought to stop the work in this way through influencing the king against the builders.

⁷ And in the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam and Mithredath and Tabeel and the rest of their associates wrote to King Artaxerxes of Persia; the letter was written in Aramaic and translated. ⁸ Rehum the royal deputy and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to King Artaxerxes as follows

Ezra 4:7-8

The letter form follows known practice in the Persian period: formal address, greetings, information, and request. The precise occasion of this action against the community is not known, but it presupposed that the people had made an attempt to rebuild the city walls sometime before the mission of Nehemiah, who arrived in 445 BC still in the reign of Artaxerxes and completed the rebuilding of the walls despite strenuous attempts to stop the work at that time too; refer to Nehemiah Chapters 4 and 6.

The present letter was written in Aramaic, which had been the official imperial language under the Babylonians and was still used in diplomacy. The letter might have been translated into Persian for the benefit of the king, or into Hebrew, therefore implying that the author knew of a Hebrew copy. However, when the letter is introduced here, the language in the Book of Ezra changes from Hebrew to Aramaic, and continues in Aramaic until Ezra 6:18, returning to Hebrew from Ezra 6:19 to the end. Citing the letters in Aramaic gives authenticity to Ezra's account, which is confirmed also by Ezra 7:12-26; it is not entirely clear, however, why Ezra's own narrative in this section also uses Aramaic, e.g. Ezra 4:23-5:5 and 6:13-

18. Perhaps it was natural, given that the letters were in Aramaic. In any case, the reader comes away confident that the author was fluent enough in Aramaic to understand the royal letters.

⁹ (then Rehum the royal deputy, Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their associates, the judges, the envoys, the officials, the Persians, the people of Erech, the Babylonians, the people of Susa, that is, the Elamites, ¹⁰ and the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Osnappar deported and settled in the cities of Samaria and in the rest of the province Beyond the River wrote – and now ^{11a} this is a copy of the letter that they sent):

Ezra 4:9-11a

Rehum the royal deputy, Shimshai the scribe. The officials give their credentials as leaders and also stress that their rights in the land have imperial warrant because of the older Assyrian resettlements.

The people of Susa. Susa was the winter capital city in the Persian Empire as confirmed by various Scriptures, for example: <<*The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah. In the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital, one of my brothers, Hanani, came with certain men from Judah; and I asked them about the Jews that survived, those who had escaped the captivity, and about Jerusalem*>> (Nehemiah 1:1-2), <<*In those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, in the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all his officials and ministers*>> (Esther 1:2-3a), and: <<*In the vision I was looking and saw myself in Susa the capital, in the province of Elam, and I was by the river Ulai*>> (Daniel 8:2).

Susa was a principal city of the Elamite, Persian and Parthian empires, and was originally known to the Elamites as ‘Susan’ or ‘Susun’. The Greek name for the city was Sousa and the Hebrew, Shushan. The modern city of Shush, Iran, presently occupies the ancient site. Refer to the map at the end of this document.



The Assyrian king Osnappar is probably Ashurbanipal (668-627 BC); he continued the resettlement of Israel, which his predecessors began.

Beyond the River was the name of the Persian province, which apparently included Jerusalem, until the decree of Cyrus returned the land to the Jews.

^{11b} ‘To King Artaxerxes: Your servants, the people of the province Beyond the River, send greeting. And now ¹² may it be known to the king that the Jews who came up from you to us have gone to Jerusalem. They are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city; they are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations.

Ezra 4:11b-12

That rebellious and wicked city. Jerusalem had in fact often been more acquiescent to the empire than the biblical writers thought proper (note the highly critical view of the kings Ahaz and Manasseh in 2 Kings Chapters 16-21), although there had been some switching of loyalties during the last days of the kingdom; refer to 2 Kings 18:7, 24:1 and 24:20. The letter plays on the empire’s ready suspicions of rebellion.

They are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations. By the time of this letter, considerable repair work had already been done on the wall around Jerusalem.

¹³ Now may it be known to the king that, if this city is rebuilt and the walls finished, they will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and the royal revenue will be reduced. ¹⁴ Now because we share the salt of the palace and it is not fitting for us to witness the king’s dishonour, therefore we send and inform the king, ¹⁵ so that a search may be made in the annals of your ancestors. You will discover in the annals that this is a rebellious city, hurtful to kings and provinces, and that sedition was stirred up in it from long ago. On that account this city was laid waste. ¹⁶ We make known to the king that, if this city is rebuilt and its walls finished, you will then have no possession in the province Beyond the River.’

Ezra 4:13-16

They will not pay tribute, custom, or toll. This was a lie and a false accusation. They recalled the prior sins of Jerusalem, i.e. this is a rebellious city, and attributed them to these chastened, returned exiles.

The returnees did pay the tax that was due and it was a heavy burden on them:
<<And there were those who said, ‘We are having to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay the king’s tax. Now our flesh is the same as that of our kindred; our children are the same as their children; and yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have

been ravished; we are powerless, and our fields and vineyards now belong to others’>> (Nehemiah 5:4-5).

Now because we share the salt of the palace. This indicates that they were in receipt of financial support from the central government in Persia and were probably concerned they would lose their primary source of income in the Jewish nation became strong again.

It is not fitting for us to witness the king’s dishonour. They skilfully shaped their words to claim they were supporting and protecting the king rather than any self-interest that was probably their real driving force. Later, another opponent of the Jews in Susa tried a similar tack to get the king to destroy them: <<*Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, ‘There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king’s laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them’>> (Esther 3:8).* His attempts would fail just as they would in Jerusalem.

The threat of an independence movement in Jerusalem is exaggerated. The imperial records, the annals of your ancestors, would include those of Assyria and Babylon, empires to which the Persians regarded themselves legitimate successors.

Their attack by letter was a skilful combination of truth and lies. It was true that Jerusalem had a sinful past; yet with these returned exiles, it truly was the past and not the present. However, that truth was completely irrelevant because of the great lie - the lie that Jews and the builders of Jerusalem had a rebellious intent.

¹⁷ The king sent an answer: ‘To Rehum the royal deputy and Shimshai the scribe and the rest of their associates who live in Samaria and in the rest of the province Beyond the River, greeting. And now ¹⁸ the letter that you sent to us has been read in translation before me. ¹⁹ So I made a decree, and someone searched and discovered that this city has risen against kings from long ago, and that rebellion and sedition have been made in it. ²⁰ Jerusalem has had mighty kings who ruled over the whole province Beyond the River, to whom tribute, custom, and toll were paid. ²¹ Therefore issue an order that these people be made to cease, and that this city be not rebuilt, until I make a decree. ²² Moreover, take care not to be slack in this matter; why should damage grow to the hurt of the king?’

Ezra 4:17-22

So I made a decree, and someone searched and discovered that this city has risen against kings from long ago, and that rebellion and sedition have been made in it. Hezekiah is one example of a king who rebelled against the mighty Assyrians: <<*The Lord was with him; wherever he went, he prospered. He rebelled against the king of Assyria and would not serve him*>> (1 Kings 18:7), and Zedekiah rebelled against Babylon: <<*He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar, who had made him swear by God*>> (2 Chronicles 36:13). The king's response gave license to the enemies of the exiles to stop the work by force, an action that might underlie the news later heard by Nehemiah that the walls of Jerusalem lay in ruins: <<*They replied, 'The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire'*>> (Nehemiah 1:3). The Samaritan letter to stop the work was a combination of truth and lies, and here the Persian king focused on the truth in the letter - the sinful and tragic past of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem has had mighty kings is a possible reference to the relatively powerful united monarchy under David and Solomon. Artaxerxes I noted that in times past there were in fact powerful kings of Judah, who had the power to tax and impose tribute on their neighbours. In his mind, it meant that Judah had the potential to return to this powerful past.

Who ruled over the whole province Beyond the River. This describes well the extent to which the Promised Land reached under the reigns of David and particularly Solomon.

Therefore issue an order that these people be made to cease. The letter from the Samaritan adversaries was successful. King Artaxerxes of Persia, perhaps the most powerful man in the world at that time, commanded that the work be stopped.

This city be not rebuilt, until I make a decree. The judgement is only temporary. The king wants the matter investigating further before he makes a final decision on the issue.

²³ Then when the copy of King Artaxerxes' letter was read before Rehum and the scribe Shimshai and their associates, they hurried to the Jews in Jerusalem and by force and power made them cease.

Ezra 4:23

They hurried to the Jews in Jerusalem and by force and power made them cease. The adversaries made the most of the decree of Artaxerxes and used it to make the work stop immediately.

²⁴ At that time the work on the house of God in Jerusalem stopped and was discontinued until the second year of the reign of King Darius of Persia.

Ezra 4:24

The phrase ‘at that time’ then picks up the story from v.5, before the long interlude of vv.6-23, bringing the narrative back to the period principally in view, i.e. soon after the first return. The story now records the outcome of the mission to prevent the building of the temple. It is implied that the work had ceased soon after it began, i.e. within about two years after circa 537 BC. It resumed in the second year of the reign of King Darius of Persia, which is 520 BC. The period of inactivity therefore lasted around 15 years.

