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Ezra 4

(2019)

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Although I believe my aim is pure and God's will perfect this document is still the product of a human man, as to such I neither claim perfect knowledge or perfect understanding.

Ezra 4

Topics

- Israel's adversaries say to Israel's heads, "let us build the temple."
- The heads of Israel refuse to let their adversaries build the temple.
- Israel's adversaries make the people of Judah afraid.
- Bishlam, Mithredath and Tabeel write a letter to Artaxerxes.
- Rehum and Shimshai write a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes.
- The copy of the letter Rehum and Shimshai sent to Artaxerxes the king.
- The king sends an answer: "to rehum, Shimshai and those in Samaria.
- The Jews are forced to stop the work on the House of God in Jerusalem.

INTRODUCTION

The book of Ezra begins where 2 Chronicles ended as prophesied by Isaiah (Isa. 44:28) the Persian King Cyrus had sent exiles led by Zerubbabel back to Jerusalem in 538 B.C. (Persia had defeated Babylon in 539 B.C.). Despite opposition from the non-Jewish inhabitants of Judea, and after encouragement by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah the temple was rebuilt (515 B.C.). Then in 458 B.C., Ezra led the second of three waves of returning exiles. By the time Ezra arrived, the people had again fallen into sin, Ezra preached God's word and the people repented (10:9-17). Ezra succeeded because God's hand was upon him (Ezra 7:6, 9, 28) (Ezra 8:18, 22, 31). This book (probably written by Ezra), shows that God uses pagan kings to accomplish His purposes and His faithfulness to His promises and His people.

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NOTE: for information concerning people, places and the meaning of words see Map Locations and People of the Bible, and Bible Dictionary on Website Menu.

The previous chapter: speaks of Jeshua, the priests, Zerubbabel and his kinsmen, building the altar of God, the children of Israel gathering as one to Jerusalem and keeping the Feast of Booths in the seventh month. Levites were appointed to supervise the work of the House of the LORD and the builders laid the foundation of the Temple. The chapter ended with the people singing and praising the LORD and many who had seen the first House of the LORD weeping when they saw the foundation.

EZRA 4:1-2

Israel's Adversaries say to Israel, "Let us Build the Temple."

- **Ezra 4:1-2:** Now 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 fathers' houses 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 Esarhaddon king of Assyria who brought us here."

The adversaries of Judah and Benjamin: partly refers to the remnant of the ten tribes left behind in the land of Samaria after the kings of Assyria and Babylon had removed them from the land and partly to various foreigners that had set themselves up in the deserted cities, towns and villages spoken of in the following verses.

- **2 Kings 17:24:** The king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the people of Israel. And they took possession of Samaria and lived in its cities.

The chapter goes on to say that the king of Assyria was told that the nations that he had placed in the cities of Samaria do not know the law of the God of the land, so the king sent one of the priests who they had carried away from Samaria to teach them how they should fear the LORD, but they continued to make gods of their own and put them in the shrines of the high places that the Samaritans had made and in the cities in which they lived. (2 Kings 17:28-29).

The chapter goes on to say:

- **2 Kings 17:32-33:** They also feared the LORD and appointed from among themselves all sorts of people as priests of the high places, who sacrificed for them in the shrines of the high places.³³ So they feared the LORD but also served their own gods, after the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away.

The Samaritans were at this time a mixed race, partly Israelite but mostly foreigners who had replaced to a large extent the ten tribes after they were carried into captivity by the king of Assyria.

- **2 Kings 17:6:** In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria, and he carried the Israelites away to Assyria and placed them in Halah, and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes.

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Ezra 4:3

Israel Refuses to Let their Adversaries Build the Temple.

- **Ezra 4:3:** But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of fathers' houses in Israel said to them, "You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the LORD, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us."

Even though this mixed race came offering help, Judah and Benjamin rightly counted them as adversaries for though they claimed to have been sacrificing to the LORD ever since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria (v2), they also worshipped many other gods. Whenever a determined attempt is made to restore or extend true faith it will stir up adversaries of feigned and false religion and opposition from worldly enemies. Those who take upon themselves the Lord's work must always be on guard as the returned exiles were not to embrace those who claim to believe in the Lord, but are half-hearted pretenders who will weaken the faith of others. The Samaritans began by offering friendship, help and alliance, but their offers were deceitful and dishonest, because it was based on an untruth, for the Samaritans did not solely worship Jehovah as the Jews did, but worshipped Him along with their own gods.

- **2 Kings 17:41:** So these nations feared the LORD and also served their carved images. Their children did likewise, and their children's children—as their fathers did, so they do to this day.

During their seventy years in captivity a deep loathing for idolatry was engrained on their Jewish mind for they never again turned to idols, which was a total contrast to their history prior to their exile. For them to reject the offer of help from the Samaritans was an act of faithfulness before the LORD.

It is very likely that the Samaritans proposal to unite in building the Temple was a political move to unite many religions together to form a national unity.

Zerubbabel: (v3) returned to Jerusalem as the head of the returning Jewish exiles, influenced by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, he rebuilt the temple and became governor of Judaea under the Persians.

Jeshua: (v3) meaning, a savior, or a deliverer. He is also called Joshua, and the first person chosen to be the high priest for the reconstruction of the Jewish altar and temple after the return of the Jews from the Babylonian Captivity (Zech. 6:9–14) (Ezra 3).

As King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us: (v3) the exact words of the edict gave the right of building exclusively to those who went up from Babylon to Judaea.

- **Ezra 1:3:** Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem.

Zerubbabel, Joshua and the rest of the chief of their fathers, told the prince, the high priest and the chief of the people, that they will have nothing to do with them in building the House of the LORD, since they were neither of the same nation or of the same religion. The Jewish exiles had been strongly united together as one man in faith toward the Lord their God with an utter disdain toward other gods and idols and for this reason they determined to build the House of the LORD, themselves according to the command of Cyrus.

EZRA 4:4-5

3

Israel's Adversaries make Judah Afraid to Build the Temple.

- **Ezra 4:4-5:** Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build⁵ and bribed counselors against them to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.

The people of the land: refer partly to the Samaritans, partly to the Israelites and partly to foreigners who had replaced to a large extent the ten tribes after they were carried into captivity by the king of Assyria. Since Cyrus was frequently absent and absorbed in his warlike expeditions, the government was left in the hands of his son Cambyses, a wicked prince extremely hostile to the Jews and their religion. Since the people of the land could not alter the decree which Cyrus had issued, they went to great effort to frustrate, stop and hinder the work to weaken the hands of the people of Judah in the following ways:

- Dissuaded and trouble them from building, by slanders and threatening's.
- Hindering and preventing materials and provisions from arriving from the Tyrians and Zidonians.
- Laying obstacles in their way and using bribes to entice their workmen away from the work.
- Discourage them and persuading them that they would never be able to finish what they had begun.
- Trouble, abuse and molest the workmen and making stealthy underhand dealings and surreptitious contracts.
- Limiting money out of the king's revenues to bear the expenses as the following verses show that Cyrus ordered:

- **Ezra 6:3-4:** In the first year of Cyrus the king, Cyrus the king issued a decree: Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the house be rebuilt, the place where sacrifices were offered, and let its foundations be retained. Its height shall be sixty cubits and its breadth sixty cubits,⁴ with three layers of great stones and one layer of timber. Let the cost be paid from the royal treasury.

The same troubles were persistently practiced during the reign of Cyrus successor, Smerdis, down to the time of Darius Hystaspes, which means that the difficulties and obstacles used to prevent the Temple being completed made the progress of the work very slow for these troubles lasted for a period of twenty years.

EZRA 4:6-7

Bishlam, Mithredath and Tabeel write a Letter to Artaxerxes.

- **Ezra 4:6-7:** And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.⁷ In the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam and Mithredath and Tabeel and the rest of their associates wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia. The letter was written in Aramaic and translated.

In the beginning of Ahasuerus reign: it is difficult to know exactly who this Ahasuerus was, because the name Ahasuerus was a common and regal name of succeeding kings of Persia and it was common for Persian kings to have two names. This Artaxerxes has been thought by many commentators to be:

- The husband of Esther
- The famous Xerxes successor of Darius
- Gomates, the Magian priest who personated Smerdis, the dead son of Cyrus, and reigned only seven months
- Most think, Cambyses, the son and successor of Cyrus who reigned seven years, for the following three reasons:
 1. He was an enemy to the Egyptians and no friend to the Jewish people.
 2. He feared the Jews would side with the Egyptians against him.
 3. It is very improbable that the people of the land took every opportunity to appeal to him to hinder and stop the work from preceding on the House of the LORD.

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True godliness teaches us to honour and obey our sovereign, but where the command of God requires one thing and the law of the land another, we must obey God rather than man, and patiently submit to the consequences. All who love the Gospel should avoid all appearance of evil, lest they give reason for the adversaries of the church to speak against the Christian faith. The world is ever ready to believe any accusation against the people of God, and refuses to listen to them. The king allowed these frauds to impose their falsehoods and slander against the Jews, upon him.

Wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem: (v6) in the beginning of the reign of Ahasuerus king of Persia and the days of Bishlam, Mithredath and Tabeel the inhabitants of the land wrote a letter to Ahasuerus full of hatred, enmity, spite and malice, charging the Jews as being a disobedient and rebellious people.

Nine nations that had come out of Assyria, Persia, Media, Susiana, and other provinces of that vast empire; were all in accord with what was written in this letter and all joined in its petition against the Jews.

NOTE Ahasuerus is called in the following letter by his Persian name Artaxerxes, because he referred to himself by the name Artaxerxes as did others in the letters written either by him or to him.

The letter was written in Aramaic and translated: this could mean that it was:

1. Written in the Chaldee or Syrian language, and in the Syrian character (text), for sometimes the Chaldee or Syrian words are written in the Hebrew character, as Hebrew words are oft written in an English character.
2. Written in Syriac characters and translated into Syriac.
3. Written in Aramæan language, sometimes called in our version, Chaldee. The following verses show that this was made use of by the Persians in their communications with the Jews
 - **2 Kings 18:26:** Then Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, and Shebnah, and Joah, said to the Rabshakeh, “Please speak to your servants in Aramaic, for we understand it. Do not speak to us in the language of Judah within the hearing of the people who are on the wall.”
 - **Isaiah 36:11:** Then Eliakim, Shebna, and Joah said to the Rabshakeh, “Please speak to your servants in Aramaic, for we understand it. Do not speak to us in the language of Judah within the hearing of the people who are on the wall.”

The goal of their letter was to press upon the king the danger of allowing the Jews to complete the building of the walls of Jerusalem and prejudice the king's mind against them.

NOTE: it is supposed that Bishlam, Mithredath and Tabeel were three deputy governors appointed by the king of Persia over all the provinces subject to his empire west of the Euphrates.

EZRA 4:8-10

Rehum and Shimshai write a Letter to King Artaxerxes.

- **Ezra 4:8-16:** Rehum the commander (chancellor in KJV) and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king as follows:⁹ Rehum the commander, Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their associates, the judges, the governors, the officials, the Persians, the men of Erech, the Babylonians, the men of Susa, that is, the Elamites,¹⁰ and the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Osnappar (Asnappar in KJV) deported and settled in the cities of Samaria and in the rest of the province Beyond the River.

The previous verses tell us that Bishlam, Mithredath and Tabeel and the rest of their associates wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem (v7), now in these verses we read that Rehum the commander (chancellor in KJV) of the Persian king and Shimshai the scribe and royal secretary wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king.

It was the office of these two to put into writing suitable for the king that clearly stated what Bishlam, Mithredath and Tabeel and the rest of their associates had expressed in their letter.

The great and noble Osnapper (Asnappar in KJV): (10) some take Osnapper to be:

- The official employed by Esarhaddon king of Assyria (v2) to settle the colonists in their new country.
- Another name for Sennacherib or Shalmaneser.

- A person of eminence, or Assyrian monarch, who was appointed to oversee the nations over the river Euphrates and set them in the cities of Samaria.
 - It more reasonable to think he was some great commander, or other official person of eminence, who was appointed captain of this colony, and intrusted with the office of conducting them over the river Euphrates, and seeing them settled in these countries.
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EZRA 4:11-16

The Copy of the Letter Rehum and Shimshai sent to Artaxerxes.

- **Ezra 4:11-16:** (This is a copy of the letter that they sent.) “To Artaxerxes the king: Your servants, the men of the province Beyond the River, send greeting. And now ¹² be it 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. ¹³ Now be it 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 impaired. ¹⁴ Now because we eat the salt of the palace and it is not fitting for us to witness the king’s dishonor, therefore we send and inform the king, ¹⁵ in order that search may be made in the book of the records of your fathers. You will find in the book of the records and learn that this city is a rebellious city, hurtful to kings and provinces, and that sedition was stirred up in it from of old. That was why 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.” (on this side the river in KJV).

Your servants, the men of the province beyond the river: (on this side the river in KJV) refer to the nations previously mention in (v8-16). The expression, beyond the river is a phrase used of Palestine by Ezra, Nehemiah, and in the Book of Kings, as designating the region west of the Euphrates River.

You will find in the book of the records: (v15) according to different commentators this refers to either of the following two books:

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1. The book of the Chronicles read before the king, spoken of in the following verse:

- **Esther 2:23:** When the affair was investigated and found to be so, the men were both hanged on the gallows. And it was recorded in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king.
- **Esther 6:1:** On that night could not the king sleep, and he commanded to bring the book of records of the chronicles; and they were read before the king.
- **Esther 10:2:** And all the acts of his power and might, and the full account of the high honor of Mordecai, to which the king advanced him, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia?

2. The Assyrian and Babylonish records, which together with both of these Empires were now in the hands of the Persian king to be searched or read as the king’s pleasure was, or as the affairs of the empire required.

You will have no possession: (v16) implies that the Jews would:

- Refuse to submit to the king’s authority, and refuse to pay him taxes imposed on each province by local authorities, for provisions, armies, the monarchy etc., and refuse to pay highway tolls which will greatly reduce the revenue of the king.
- Seize all the dominions on their side of the river Euphrates and claim them as their own.

They are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city: (v16) the letter deliberately uses language designed to turn the mind of the king against the Jews, and in such a way that it demands an immediate response.

We eat the salt of the palace: (v14) literally, “we are salted with the salt of the palace.” This is an Oriental expression meaning we receive maintenance and protection from the palace,” and therefore it would not be right or fitting for us to witness the king’s dishonour

EZRA 4:17-22

The King Sends an Answer: “To Rehum, Shimshai.

- **Ezra 4:17-22:** The king sent an answer: “To Rehum the commander (chancellor in KJV), 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 now¹⁸ the letter that you sent to us has been plainly read before me.¹⁹ And I made a decree, and search has been made, and it has been found that this city from of old has risen against kings, and that rebellion and sedition have been made in it.²⁰ And mighty kings have been over Jerusalem, who ruled over the whole province Beyond the River, to whom tribute, custom, and toll were paid.²¹ Therefore make a decree that these men be made to cease, and that this city be not rebuilt, until a decree is made by me.²² And take care not to be slack in this matter. Why should damage grow to the hurt of the king?”

After the king had read the letter Rehum and Shimshai had sent him (v11-16), and a search had been made in the book of the records (v15) and it has been found that Jerusalem had risen against kings he sends them his answer, saying, immediately take action to immediately stop the Jews from continuing with the work on the walls and city of Jerusalem until he makes an official decree.

He may have suspected that in this case, all its circumstances, were not truly stated, and that from here on he might have considered it better to back away from the orders he had previously given and instead make his decision based upon his own knowledge, especially since he would have seen that his father Cyrus had shown favour to the Jews, and had given them liberty to rebuild the temple and encouraged them to do it; which he most likely understood was their only intention, other than build their own houses to dwell in, and nothing else.

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This city from of old has risen against kings: (v19), after the king had looked in the book of the records (v15) he found that they contained accounts of insurrections and rebellions, some of which may have been by Menahem, Hezekiah, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin and Zedekiah spoken of in the following verses.

- **2 Kings 15:16:** At that time Menahem (king of Israel) sacked Tiphsah (in modern Syria or Turkey) and all who were in it and its territory from Tirzah on, because they did not open it to him. Therefore he sacked it, and he ripped open all the women in it who were pregnant.
- **2 Kings 18:7:** And the LORD was with him (Hezekiah the king of Judah); wherever he went out, he prospered. He rebelled against the king of Assyria and would not serve him.
- **2 Kings 24:1:** In his days, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up, and Jehoiakim (king of Judah) became his servant for three years. Then he turned and rebelled against him.
- **2 Kings 24:20:** For because of the anger of the LORD it came to the point in Jerusalem and Judah that he cast them out from his presence. And Zedekiah (king of Judah) rebelled against the king of Babylon.

It does not appear that there had ever been any rebellion against Persia.

EZRA 4:23-24

The Jews are Forced to Stop the Work on the House of God.

- **Ezra 4:23-24:** Then, when the copy of King Artaxerxes' letter was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their associates, they went in haste to the Jews at Jerusalem and by force and power made them cease.²⁴ Then the work on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped, and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

In obedience to the king's command they went in haste to Jerusalem, no doubt with an eagerness of spirit to put a stop to the building works of the Jews who they loathed. The king's order was only to prevent the Jews from continuing their building work on the city, its walls and the temple. They may have done this in any of the following two ways:

1. By the authority they had by the king's letter, for the Jews could not proceed in their work against their king's prohibition.
2. By the forces they brought with them to compel them to stop, should they refuse to obey.

We are not told, whether they had proceeded further than laying the foundations though it is very likely by this time that the walls of the Temple would be at some height; however, upon this command of the king it was discontinued. These events gave rise to the strong religious aversion between the Jews and the Samaritans, which was afterwards greatly aggravated by the Samaritans' erection of a rival temple on Mount Gerizim. The work ceased on the house of God, because they could not proceed in the work against their king's prohibition, so it ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia (this is Darius the son of Hystaspis, who succeeded Cambyses the son of Cyrus). However, the work did not completely cease during these two years for the following verses show that the prophets Haggai and Zechariah exhorted them to continue.

- **Ezra 5:1-2:** Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them.² Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and the prophets of God were with them, supporting them.

So that the work, in a great measure, stood still until the second year of the reign of Darius, but even then, the building work was slow for nearly two years, the brazen altar of burnt offering remained which was still the center of a certain amount of worship.

NOTE: this same Zerubbabel who lead the exiles back to Jerusalem (v2-3) and laid the foundations of the Temple also finished the work.

- **Zechariah 4:9:** "The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house; his hands shall also complete it. Then you will know the LORD of hosts has sent me to you."

And some of the people who saw the finishing of this second house of the LORD, had also seen the glory of the first house.

- **Haggai 2:3:** 'Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes?'

As the founder of Bible House of Grace, I would like to thank the many Christian scholars, commentators and theologians who have gone before me, and the many today, who have freely made available their works to enhance the knowledge of the Bible to all people worldwide. It is only with the help of these faithful writers that much of Bible House of Grace exists as it does today.