

Ezra 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 16 July 2021

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Ezra chapter 4. Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the Lord, the God of Israel, 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 Esau Haddon, king of Assyria, who brought us here. 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.

Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build and bribed counsellors against them to frustrate their purpose all the days of Cyrus, king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius, king of Persia. And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. In the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam, Amithradath, and Tabeel, and the rest of their associates, wrote to Artaxerxes, king of Persia. The letter was written in Aramaic and translated, Reham 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, and the rest of the nations, whom the great and noble Asnappa deported and settled in the cities of Samaria, and in the rest of the province of beyond the river. 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 greetings. And now 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. 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. 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, 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. 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. The king sent an answer to Rehum the commander, 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 the letter that you sent to us has been plainly read before me, 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.

And mighty kings have been over Jerusalem, who ruled over the whole province beyond the river, to whom tribute, custom, and toll were paid. 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. And take care not to be slack in this matter. Why should damage grow to the hurt of the king? 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. 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.

The rebuilding of the temple represented a threat to other groups in the region. The returnees contained many priests and Levites and descendants of the old Judahite elite and ruling classes, the sort of people who would be able to unite a more general population of Jews together, unsettling the existing balance of power.

[3 : 53] Unsurprisingly, there were plenty of surrounding people who were interested in undermining, compromising, manipulating, or otherwise controlling the temple project. Ezra chapter 4 introduces these parties as the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin. Their initial approach might have seemed encouraging to the naive. They presented themselves as worshippers of the Lord who wanted to be involved in the rebuilding project. Their underlying hostility towards the project became more apparent as their initial offers were rebuffed. The primary source of opposition came from Samaritans, who had descended from a mixture of pagan peoples resettled by the Assyrians and the remnant of the ten Israelite tribes who had formerly occupied that land. After the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel to the Assyrians around 722 BC, the Assyrians resettled various pagan groups in the former territory of Israel, each of them continuing to worship the gods of their place of origin, a situation which is described in more detail in 2 Kings chapter 17. Later waves of resettled populations were brought in under

Esorhaddon and Ashurbanipal, as verses 2 and 10 of this chapter mention. After many of the new people settling in the land were killed by lions, the king of Assyria commanded that an Israelite priest be sent to instruct the people in the law of the God of the land of Israel.

However, the situation that resulted was one of syncretistic worship, with the Samaritans worshipping both the Lord and their various pagan deities. 2 Kings chapter 17 verses 33 to 41 describes the situation that resulted.

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. To this day they do according to the former manner.

They do not fear the Lord, and they do not follow the statutes or the rules or the law or the commandment that the Lord commanded the children of Jacob, whom he named Israel. The Lord made a covenant with them and commanded them, You shall not fear other gods, or bow yourselves to them, or serve them, or sacrifice to them. But you shall fear the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt with great power and with an outstretched arm. You shall bow yourselves to him, and to him you shall sacrifice. And the statutes and the rules and the law and the commandment that he wrote for you, you shall always be careful to do. You shall not fear other gods, and you shall not forget the covenant that I have made with you. You shall not fear other gods, but you shall fear the Lord your God, and he will deliver you out of the hand of all your enemies. However, they would not listen, but they did according to their former manner. 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. Much more about the Samaritans and their worship had changed by the time of Christ, when they were monotheists who worshipped on Mount Gerizim, where prior to its destruction they had worshipped the Lord in their own temple, a rival to that in Jerusalem. However, at this point in their history, at the time of the return, while the Samaritans could claim that they worshipped the

[7 : 00] Lord, they definitely did not do so exclusively. Compromising with such a group at this stage would have set an incredibly dangerous course for the returnees. Zerubbabel and Jeshua are suspicious of the Samaritans, and dodged the deeper issues by refusing their help on the basis of the fact that the returnees alone had been authorised to undertake the task of rebuilding. If they permitted the Samaritans to join in the task, they might jeopardise their authorisation by King Cyrus of Persia.

Nevertheless, the Samaritans succeeded in thwarting the rebuilding of the temple by harassing the returnees, intimidating them, bribing Persian officials to frustrate their efforts and other such things. This process lasted for the entirety of the reign of Cyrus, his successor Cambyses, and continued into the beginning of the reign of Darius. While the rebuilding of the temple was completed in the reign of Darius, opposition continued into the reign of Xerxes, or Ahasuerus.

Following the longer chronology, this verse links the earlier persecution and resistance and harassment in the reigns of Cyrus, Cambyses and Darius I, with the later harassment that they experienced in the reign of Artaxerxes. Verse 8 of this chapter to chapter 6 verse 18 is an Aramaic document.

Andrew Steinman argues that we should understand this as a collection of different correspondents joined by narrative sections, compiled by the people mentioned in verse 7.

Bishlam, Mithradath and Tabeel are officials who gathered together correspondents from the most recent all the way back to the time when the temple was built. Steinman suggests that it was likely compiled by Persian officials under the supervision of Nehemiah. The first letter is sent by key officials in the Trans-Euphrates region, the province of beyond the river. The authors of the letter are described in a way that seems to be calculated to gain the sympathies of its recipient. Although they are situated beyond the river, they were largely sent there by the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal. They themselves are Persians, Babylonians, Medians and other people who would come from the other side of the river. As such, they have a natural kinship with the Persian king to whom they are writing.

[9 : 07] Within their correspondence, they present the city of Jerusalem as a constitutionally and historically rebellious city, a city that had a long history of causing trouble in the region, rebelling against those to whom it had to pay tribute, breaking covenants and betraying loyalties.

They, of course, are writing purely as those concerned with the king's honour. As persons disinterested in the matter, save for the fact that they are loyal subjects of the king, they write to him as if they were concerned with nothing other than his own sovereignty. They encourage him to search the historical records, not just the records of the kings of the Medes and the Persians, but also the records going back to the time of Babylon. If Artaxerxes permits the city of Jerusalem to be rebuilt, he will only be inviting trouble. Artaxerxes responds favourably to them. He commands the cessation of the rebuilding efforts in the city. While people may be settled there, it should not be re-fortified and re-established as a city. Jerusalem has too much of a history of troublemaking, and Artaxerxes' sense from the historical chronicles seems to support the writers of the letter. The claims being made concerning Jerusalem are ridiculously overblown. While Jerusalem proved to be unfaithful at many points in its past, little good reason was given that this would be the case in the future.

Jerusalem's situation had much changed. Of course, the writers of the letter were not primarily concerned with the rule of Artaxerxes, but with their own power in the province. The re-establishment of the city of Jerusalem would pose a threat to them far more than it would pose any threat to Artaxerxes. Verses 6 to 23 of this chapter are digressory, taking us beyond the time of the rebuilding of the temple to a time when the larger city was being re-established. Verse 24 moves us back, connecting us with the earlier narrative.

A question to consider, of what earlier episodes in Israel's history might we be reminded by the opposition that they face in this chapter?