

## Notes on Ezra Chapter 4

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### IV. People of the Land Oppose the Work – Chap. 4

Verses 1-3

1. Who heard about the work on the temple? What did they offer to do?
2. Read 2 Kings 17:24-41. How had these people come into Samaria? Describe their worship.
3. How did Zerubbabel and Jeshua respond to their request? Explain why they responded this way, based on what we know about these people.
4. Application: What lessons should we learn? Today whom should we likewise refuse to allow to become part of God's work with us? See 2 John 9-11; Gal. 1:6-9; Matt. 15:1-14.

Whenever God's people do His work, there will always be adversaries. People will oppose the work and seek to prevent it or at least to so subvert it as to destroy its real intended effect. This is what happened with the Jews in their work of building the temple. Since we will experience similar problems, there are lessons we can learn from the tactics of God's enemies here and from the means used to deal with them.

#### A. Religious Compromise

The first tactic of the adversaries was to try to become part of the group working on the temple. They claimed to be servants of the true God since the time they had been brought to the land by Esarhaddon, king of Assyria. So they wanted to be part of the work.

The record does not clearly state what their intent was. Perhaps they would have perverted the temple for their own purposes. Or maybe they intended to cause strife to hinder the work. Or perhaps they would have truly joined in the work, provided they would be permitted to continue their own perverted worship in the temple. In any case, we will see that they did not really want to truly serve God according to His true pattern.

#### *Background of the people in the land*

2 Kings 17:24-41 records how these people came to the land, and it explains why Zerubbabel was right to reject their help. When the Assyrians had removed the Israelites from the land, they had also brought into the land people from other nations who were not Israelites either in lineage or in religion.

At first, these people did not worship the true God. They were eventually taught about God, and they did attempt to worship Him after a sort, but they also worshiped their false gods as they had in their homelands. We are expressly told that they continued in their false perverted form of worship, even as they professed to honor God. Hence, God rejected their worship. 2 Kings 17:32-34,41

#### *Rejection of compromise with perverted worship*

Now in Zerubbabel's day the people of the land came to help on the temple, but he rejected their help. He said the people of the land had no part in the matter, but the Jews would do the work by themselves. He pointed out that King Cyrus had authorized the work (1:1,2), so they were acting legitimately, both according to God's law and according to civil law.

To have accepted their help would have been to have religious fellowship with people in error. The worship offered by these people professed to honor God but was not according to God's authorized pattern. To have accepted their help on the basis of their claim that they worshiped God, would have been to declare them to be acceptable before God despite their error.

## Modern applications

Likewise today there are people who tell us they worship the true God - they don't openly profess to rebel against God - but they do not truly serve according to His prescribed authority. They may be members of some denomination, having never been truly converted, or they may serve God with unauthorized practices (Matthew 15:9,13; Galatians 1:8,9; 2 John 9-11; Colossians 3:17; Jeremiah 10:23; Proverbs 14:12; 3:5,6; Revelation 22:18,19; 1 Timothy 1:3; 2 Timothy 1:13).

We may be tempted to worship with them, or to use them in our worship services, or otherwise appear to fellowship them. Most denominations gladly welcome such people into their fellowship, and today many members of "churches of Christ" advocate fellowshipping such people. But we must refuse to fellowship such people today for the same reasons the Jews here refused to do so. If their worship and conduct is not according to God's word, then we sin if we fellowship them and we make it appear that their conduct is acceptable. (See 2 John 9-11; Ephesians 5:11; Proverbs 17:15; 2 Corinthians 6:17-7:1; 1 Timothy 5:22; Psalms 1:1,2; 1 Corinthians 15:33; Romans 1:32; Acts 7:58; 8:1; 22:20; etc.)

Note that, when we refuse, people will most likely accuse us of being in the wrong. As happened here, the people we refuse to accept may resent our action and become our adversaries. Or other people who hear about our stand may accuse us of being wrong. Some may accuse us of driving people away from the truth. In any case, when we take the stand taken by God's people here, we can be sure that some will accuse us of being in the wrong and will defend those who are perverting God's worship.

People today, who resent our refusal to fellowship religious error, should carefully consider passages such as this. And we should carefully consider it, when we are tempted to compromise with error and perversions of God's pattern.

Verses 4,5

5. How did the people respond to this rejection of their request? How do people today similarly respond, when we teach them their service to God is not acceptable?

## B. Harassment

Having been forbidden a role in the work, the people of the land became a hindrance, trying to discourage the work. They made trouble and even hired people to try to frustrate the work. We are told some more about the methods that were used in the book of Nehemiah. These efforts continued until the times of king Darius.

The chronology of this chapter is confusing, because the names of the kings does not seem to fit the order of events. Perhaps the author, having introduced the fact the people tried to hinder the work, gives some examples from the reigns of later kings that did not follow chronologically but just illustrate the point, then later returns to the chronology. (See Mott's notes.)

The Waldron's argue that Ahasuerus (in v6) and Aratxerxes (in v7) are not the later leaders we commonly think of by those names (see introductory notes). They claim both these terms refer to Cambyses, who succeeded Cyrus (remember that kingdoms often have more than one king by the same name). However, they offer no proof. Such an explanation would make the chronology fit better, but why the name changes? Could it be that various Persian rulers were called by these names, just like various Egyptian rulers were called "Pharoah," various Roman rulers called "Caesar," and various New Testament Jewish kings called "Herod"?

Verses 6-10

6. What did the people do next (vv 6-8)? Who wrote the letter?

## C. False Accusation and Legal Opposition

One method the people of the land attempted was to write a letter to the civil government and make false accusations against the Jews, hoping the authorities would stop the Jews' work.

The letter was sent to the king of Persia and was written in the Aramaic language, since this presumably was the proper form of such an official appeal.

We are told here the names of various individuals who were behind the letter. Specifically, the men who wrote the letter were Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe. They were accompanied by various representatives of the nationalities of people who had been moved into the land. These groups are named in v9 (cf. 2 Kings 17:24; Ezra 5:6; 6:6).

V9 says that Osnapper had captured these people and settled them in the land. Presumably this is just another name for the Assyrian king Esarhaddon (v2).

Verses 11-16

7. List some accusations they made against the Jews (vv 11-16). What proof did they offer? (Think: Did their evidence prove their accusations? What evidence was overlooked?)
8. List other Bible examples you can think of in which God's people were falsely accused or harassed to hinder their work for God.
9. Application: List some accusations people sometimes make against God's people today to discourage and discredit us.

### *The people's letter to the king*

The people wrote a letter to King Artaxerxes informing him that the Jews were building the city of Jerusalem, repairing the walls, etc., and that if they were allowed to succeed, they would end up rebelling against the rule of Persia. They point out that history showed the Jews had rebelled repeatedly (cf. 2 Chron. 26:13). So they claimed they would surely rebel again if they rebuilt the city.

They claim further that the people would not pay taxes, and the king would end up having no power in the whole region. They said this, they claimed, because they were so loyal to the king that they didn't want him to be dishonored!

Of course, they said nothing about the fact they just did not want to see the Jews succeed. And the fact there was no evidence these people intended to do any such thing was apparently irrelevant to them. They hoped the king would overlook their lack of evidence and would just look up the past history of the Jews. They hoped this would be sufficient to convince him to punish the current generation!

Furthermore, they conveniently failed to mention that the Jews had been specifically authorized to do this work by King Cyrus (1:1,2). The decrees of Persian kings could not be changed, even by the king who made the decree, let alone by other kings (as shown in Daniel and in Esther). So they did not want the king to research and find Cyrus' decree. They just wanted him to find the Jews' past history of rebellion!

### *Other similar examples and modern applications*

The same trick has been used against God's people repeatedly. People who oppose God's work misrepresent the motives, teaching, and work of God's people by telling lies and half-truths. They hope to discredit the work and turn people against it – especially civil authorities – hoping people will pressure God's people to stop.

This method was used in the first century when Jesus' enemies claimed He intended to literally tear down the temple and rebuild it in three days, that He taught people not to pay taxes to Caesar, that He would be a king in competition with Caesar, that He committed blasphemy, that he cast out demons by the power of Beelzebub, etc. All these were half-truths or outright lies intended to turn people against Him.

So today one favorite trick of people who oppose the gospel is to use lies and half-truths to misrepresent the real beliefs and intentions of God's people. We are said to believe in "water salvation," that we can earn our salvation, are legalists, lack love, follow Alexander Campbell, are "anti's," don't believe in cooperation, don't believe in helping orphans, etc. As with the Jews in

the story in Ezra, these are all either completely untrue or else half-truths that miss the real point of our beliefs. But by prejudicially describing our views, people hope to prejudice others against us.

In the case of the Jews, we will see that these deceitful methods were temporarily successful. We must make sure they do not succeed in our day.

Verses 17-22

10. What did the king command in response to the letter?

King Artaxerxes responded that he had searched the archives and found that the Jews had indeed been a rebellious people. He found that the kings of the Jews had at times been mighty rulers who ruled over all the provinces in the area and demanded tribute from them. This would have been true, for example, in the times of David and especially Solomon (1 Kings 4:21; 1 Chronicles 18:3). Perhaps his point was that, if the Jews would do this in time past, they might indeed rebel in his day, as their enemies accused. Instead of paying tribute to him, they might seek to rule the people around them and seek tribute for themselves.

So he agreed with the Jews' enemies and determined to forbid the Jews to proceed with their building. He told the people of the land to see to it that the Jews stopped. He concluded that he saw no reason to allow activities in his realm that would harm his authority as king.

Verses 23,24

11. How did the Jews' enemies respond to the letter? What happened as a result?

12. Application: Did the Jews do right when they quit? What should they have done? What can we learn?

Of course, the king had decided exactly what the Jews' enemies wanted. Not only did the Jews not have his permission to continue with the work, but the enemies had his authority to put a stop to the work. They were naturally quite zealous to do so, even by force of arms if necessary.

So the Jews did stop working until the second year of the reign of Darius. (Note the apparent historical conflict here. This places Artaxerxes as reigning before Darius. This demonstrates that there must be some confusion of names here – there must have been more than one ruler with these names or rulers who had more than one name, etc.)

Apparently the Jews made no effort to contact the king and explain that their work had been authorized by decree of king Cyrus. Since the laws of Medes and Persians could not be changed (Daniel 6), it would appear that this could have been corrected.

So the Jews must have given up too easily. In any case, it is clear they quit when God did not want them to. We must take care lest we be discouraged in our stand for truth by the apparent power, influence, and successes of those who oppose our work for God.

We do not need human authority for our work for God. We ought to obey God, rather than man (Acts 5:29). Even if civil authorities did decree that we should not serve God, we should do His work anyway. But in many cases, civil rulers can be influenced to approve or accept our work for God, if we will at least try. In this case, the Jews apparently just gave up without trying. We will see that God was displeased with them, and He will likewise be displeased with us if we let people of the land influence us to neglect the work He commands us to do.

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