

Ezra 4:1-24

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## Encountering Opposition

### The setting

A century before Jerusalem was overrun by the Babylonians, the Assyrians had already taken into exile many of the "10 lost tribes" that made up the northern kingdom of Israel.

In the place of those they had taken, the Assyrians resettled other people from nations they had conquered. These mass deportations were meant to reduce the chances of rebellion and uprisings.

- **2 Kings 17:24** - "And the king of Assyria brought men from Babylon, and from Cuthah, and from Ava, and from Hamath, and from Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the children of Israel: and they possessed Samaria, and dwelt in the cities thereof."

But these transplants "feared not the Lord" so "the LORD sent lions among them, which slew some of them."

They realized they needed to know how to not offend the god of their new home, so they asked the Assyrian king to send them a priest of the Jews to "teach them the manner of the God of the land."

The king agreed, and the teaching had some initial good results, because it says they "feared the Lord." But the scripture adds that they also still worshipped the foreign gods they brought with them. They appointed priests from among "the lowest of them" who sacrificed to Yahweh for them on the idolatrous high places.

- **2 Kings 17:34** - "Unto this day they do after the former manners: they fear not the LORD, neither do they after their statutes, or after their ordinances, or after the law and commandment which the LORD commanded the children of Jacob, whom he named Israel;"

Over time, the new transplants intermarried with the poor Israelites who remained and had not been taken into exile.

Some of the 10 tribes that made up the northern kingdom of Israel had fled from the Assyrian invasion to Judah as refugees. Until the destruction of Jerusalem, a "remnant of Israel" still loyal to Yahweh would send funds to help repair the Temple and bring offerings there.

So Judah included a small group of representatives of each of the "10 Lost Tribes."

Like the Assyrians, the Babylonians took only a small percentage of the people of Judah

into exile after Jerusalem's destruction - mostly the upper class who might lead a resistance or rebellion against Babylon.

- **Jeremiah 39:9-10** - "Then Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carried away captive into Babylon the remnant of the people that remained in the city, and those that fell away, that fell to him, with the rest of the people that remained. But Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard left of the poor of the people, which had nothing, in the land of Judah, and gave them vineyards and fields at the same time."

- **Jeremiah 50:17** - "Israel is a hunted sheep driven away by lions. First the king of Assyria devoured him, and now at last Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon has gnawed his bones."

Those poor people left behind intermarried with the already spiritually compromised Samaritans, resulting in a similar degrading of the religious practice and faith in Judah.

By the time of Zerubbabel's mission to rebuild the Temple - about 170 years and several generations on from the assyrian deportation - many of this mixed multitude had moved beyond Samaria to Judah and settled in areas around Jerusalem.

These people became what Jews in Jesus' day called the Samaritans. They obeyed a bastardized form of Judaism mixed with idolatry, not unlike the religious practices of the previous inhabitants of Israel they replaced. Later they claimed Mt. Gerizim as their holy mountain and built their own rival temple there. (A small group of Samaritans remain in Israel today, who claim descent from the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh).

These were the "adversaries" mentioned in this chapter.

### **'Adversaries of Judah and Benjamin'**

**Ezra 4:1** - "Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the children of the captivity builded the temple unto the LORD God of Israel;"

Josephus (Antiqu. l. 11. c. 4. sect. 3.) says they heard the sound of the trumpets from the dedication ceremony at the end of Ezra 3, and came to find out the meaning of it.

**Ezra 4:2** - "Then they came to Zerubbabel, and to the chief of the fathers, and said unto them, Let us build with you: for we seek your God, as ye do; and we do sacrifice unto him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assur, which brought us up hither."

This was only partly true. They worshipped other gods, too. In addition, God had forbidden sacrifice anywhere but in the Temple and only by priests of the line of Aaron.

All of these "people of the land" apparently still considered themselves Jews, although they diverged widely in their understanding of what that meant. They probably thought they had a stake in the rebuilding of the Temple.

**Ezra 4:3** - "But Zerubbabel, and Jeshua, and the rest of the chief of the fathers of Israel, said unto them, Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God; but we ourselves together will build unto the LORD God of Israel, as king Cyrus the king of Persia hath commanded us."

They had specific instructions from Cyrus the Great and had no leeway to include others even if they wanted to, which they didn't. Their commission only concerned themselves, and not others.

Also, if these others participated in the work, they would have some claim on the Temple, which they might later pollute somehow with their idolatry.

It's not clear whether or not this was a sincere offer by the surrounding people or if they wanted to sabotage the rebuilding effort from the first.

King Solomon had used Gentile artisans sent by Hiram king of Tyre to work on his Temple project, so the idea was not forbidden on its face. Zerubbabel must have suspected a danger in including them. That suspicion was proved right.

**Ezra 4:4-5** - "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, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia."

"weakened the hands" means they caused them to become discouraged.

Their resistance to the project lasted nearly 20 years, all through the reigns of Cyrus (who reigned from 539-530 B.C.), his son Cambyses II (530 to 522 B.C.) and to the second year of Darius the Great. Unlike the tolerant Cyrus, Cambyses was intolerant of other religions. After he defeated Egypt, he killed their sacred bull of Apis, and also began to exhibit symptoms of madness. Because Judah had allied with Egypt in the past, the accusations against Zerubbabel may have seemed plausible to Cambyses, fearing a new alliance that might lead to an uprising.

### 'Unequally Yoked'

Zerubbabel's decision points us to Paul's warning:

- **2 Corinthians 6:14-17** - "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you,"

Paul was probably commenting and expanding on a rule in the Torah:

- **Deuteronomy 22:10** - "Thou shalt not plow with an ox and an ass together."

One traditional explanation has been that it would put an undue stress on the stronger animal, the ox.

Paul ties his warning to the Temple - "what agreement hath the temple of God with idols?"

But by "the Temple" he means the spiritual Temple - Jesus' body, and secondarily, our own body where God dwells.

More important is the source of the "Come out of her!" quote.

- **Isaiah 52:11-12** - "Depart ye, depart ye, go ye out from thence, touch no unclean thing; go ye out of the midst of her; be ye clean, that bear the vessels of the LORD. For ye shall not go out with haste, nor go by flight: for the LORD will go before you; and the God of Israel will be your rereward."

i.e. separate yourselves from Babylon, the world system. But also avoid uncleanness even after you leave.

What does this have to do with Zerubbabel and his adversaries the people of the land?

That verse in Isaiah 52 applied directly to Zerubbabel and his compatriots.

Their departure from exile was not in fear, confusion or flight but was carefully coordinated peacefully by God through Cyrus, and conducted without haste.

Being aware of Isaiah's prophecy, they had every reason to be scrupulous about "touching the unclean thing." They were literally "bearing the vessels of the Lord" back from Babylon for use in the rebuilt Temple.

Zerubbabel judged that cooperating with the people of the land" would taint their project with uncleanness because of the mixture of idolatry with worship of Yahweh.

## **A Listing of Roadblocks**

**Ezra 4:6-7** - "And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, wrote they unto him an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. And in the days of Artaxerxes wrote Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, and the rest of their companions, unto Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the writing of the letter was written in the Syrian tongue, and interpreted in the Syrian tongue."

Ahasuerus was the Jews' name for Xerxes, whose reign was many years later, so this is wrong. Probably referring to Cambyses and possibly a usurper who reigned for about half a year. And actually, early Jewish historians like Josephus applied the names Ahasuerus, Artaxerxes, and Darius somewhat fluidly to the same figures, using it as a title like Pharaoh or Caesar.

[Some scholars believe Artaxerxes was really meant here, which would make the timeline cover about a hundred years, which seems unlikely.]

The chapter includes a copy of the letter of protest sent to the king and signed by governors of all the surrounding transplanted people from the different lands.

The copy of the original letter included in this chapter was brought from Babylon by Ezra, who at this point has not yet arrived on the scene, although the book carries his name.

Starting at Ezra 4:8 and continuing all the way until Ezra 6:18, everything is written in Aramaic (instead of Hebrew); Ezra 7:12-26 is also in Aramaic.

### **Jerusalem: The 'Rebellious and Bad City'**

**Ezra 4:12** - "Be it known unto the king, that the Jews which came up from thee to us are come unto Jerusalem, building the rebellious and the bad city, and have set up the walls thereof, and joined the foundations."

**Ezra 4:13** - "Be it known now unto the king, that, if this city be builded, and the walls set up again, then will they not pay toll, tribute, and custom, and so thou shalt endamage the revenue of the kings."

**Ezra 4:14-15** - "Now because we have maintenance from the king's palace, and it was not meet for us to see the king's dishonor, therefore have we sent and certified the king; That search may be made in the book of the records of thy fathers: so shalt thou find in the book of the records, and know that this city is a rebellious city, and hurtful unto kings and provinces, and that they have moved sedition within the same of old time: for which cause was this city destroyed."

The Persian king responded:

**Ezra 4:18-21** - "The letter which ye sent unto us hath been plainly read before me. And I commanded, and search hath been made, and it is found that this city of old time hath made insurrection against kings, and that rebellion and sedition have been made therein. There have been mighty kings also over Jerusalem, which have ruled over all countries beyond the river; and toll, tribute, and custom, was paid unto them. Give ye now commandment to cause these men to cease, and that this city be not builded, until another commandment shall be given from me."

The "people of the land" quickly delivered this correspondence to Zerubbabel and his

company, backed by force of arms and this new decree.

**Ezra 4:24** - "Then ceased the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem. So it ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia."

So, the mission to rebuild, which began with a decree of the Persian king, is halted by a different decree of a different king.

The letter lied about Zerubbabel's project. He was commissioned only to rebuild the Temple, not the city or its walls. They had probably so far only built houses and laid the Temple's foundation.

But from Cambyses' point of view, Jerusalem's history of rebellion against Assyrian and Babylonian rule was enough to spark his paranoia. With rebuilt walls, the Jews might resort to foreign alliances and attempt to break away from paying taxes and tribute to Persia. Perhaps even annex the whole territory. Cambyses apparently ignored the records of his father Cyrus' encouragement of the Jews' rebuilding efforts.

Although the work was delayed, we'll see that the project was not defeated.

## Summary

There are two lessons we can take from this chapter.

### 1. 'Touch Not the Unclean Thing'

Holiness for believers today doesn't mean physically going anywhere. It means we have been set apart. Like the kingdom of God, it's an internal recognition. We leave Babylon by not giving credence to its value systems. We're in the world, but not of the world.

Jesus broke the rules about clean and unclean, and reversed the process. Jesus ate with sinners, and touched to heal the unclean woman who had an issue of blood. He walked through Samaria - usually avoided by Jews as unclean - and spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well - a descendant of the "people of the land" who troubled Zerubbabel.

The parable of the good Samaritan - another descendent of the "people of the land" - showed the supposedly "clean" priest and Levite passing by on the other side trying to avoid touching the "unclean" thing (possibly a dead body), while the Samaritan helped the wounded man.

Uncleanness doesn't come upon us from the outside, Jesus said, it was what comes out of a person from inside.

Touching the unclean thing is giving credence to Self. It's like touching a dead body - your own dead body. The danger doesn't come from anything "out there."

## 2. Encountering Discouragement and Opposition

When we embark on some mission or work of God, Satan, the accuser of the brethren, sometimes will start his attack with something that's true: "You're a sinner, a failure" - in the same way the opponents of Zerubbabel bring up Jerusalem's history of rebellion, and constantly tried to discourage them.

We can't offer excuses or defend ourselves. We must only respond with "the decree of the King." We're forgiven, we've died to self at the cross, we've been born from above, and now live a new and different existence in the Spirit - in His resurrection life. Our only "rightness" is the righteousness of Christ.

One of Jesus' parables has a wise suggestion:

- **Matthew 5:25** - "Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison."

When we argue with Satan we just dig a deeper hole for ourselves.

To resist the devil is to surrender to God and let God do the work, because we don't belong to ourselves, we belong to Him.