

EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 4

by Dr. Ralph Davis

No Surprises or Let the Troubles Begin (Ezra 4)

“Do not be surprised, brothers, if the world hates you” (1 John 3:13)

We are still with the returnees from exile circa 538 B.C. as they proceed to work on the rebuilding of the temple.¹ The thrust of Ezra 4 is fairly direct.

I. The World Subtly Hates You – Ezra 4:1-3

Here we see hatred and enmity under the guise of friendship. Here are people, seemingly from the area of Samaria, who offer their assistance to Zerubbabel and company in the temple rebuilding project (Ezra 4:2). But, according to verse 1, the writer clearly labels them “*enemies of Judah and Benjamin,*” and Zerubbabel, Jeshua and the leaders of Israel have the discernment (Ezra 4:3) to see them for what they really are.

Yet, the approach they use is so affable and ecumenical: “Let us help you build because, like you, we seek your God” (Ezra 4:2). They refer to the Assyrian king Esarhaddon, which should raise our suspicions, as it did Israel’s. Note the place of this king in Assyrian chronology:

Shalmaneser V	727-722
Sargon II	721-705
Sennacherib	704-681
Esarhaddon	681-669

These folks in Ezra 4:2 were, to a large degree, pagan imports who had already settled into an established syncretism (see and read 2 Kings 17:24-41, esp. vv. 33,41). The finds of 4th century papyri at Wadi Daliyeh (located a ways above Jericho) seem to support this. A great number of skeletons were also found here, the remains of families of Samaria who vamoosed before Alexander the Great in 331 B.C. “A good proportion of their personal names included the names of such deities as QOS (Edomite), SHR (Aramaic), Chemosh (Moabite), Ba’al (Canaanite), and Nebo (Babylonian).”²

The point? *Separation is urgent* (Ezra 4:3). There are times when narrowness and intolerance is the way to faithfulness.

¹ For an overview and chronological perspective of events in Ezra-Nehemiah, see John H. Walton, *Chronological and Background Charts of the Old Testament* [1994 ed.], pp. 35-36.

² Yamauchi, *EBC*, 4:626.

II. The World Obviously Hates You – Ezra 4:4-5

There is nothing subtle about the opposition in these verses. One could imagine some Israelites wondering if it wouldn't have been better to have accepted the syncretists' offer, for now the latter turn with a withering campaign of hostility against the people of Judah. The Hebrew text stresses the ongoing, wearing effect of this opposition in that it uses three participles in Ezra 4:4-5a (indicating continuing action): they kept on making their hands drop; kept frightening them; kept hiring counselors against them. The intimidation must have occurred on site (Ezra 4:4), with the hired professionals working the halls of power back in Persia (Ezra 4:5). Apparently all this proved effective; they wanted to stop Judah from building (Ezra 4:4), and they did (Ezra 4:24).

The point here is that *intimidation is powerful*. The prophet Haggai had to address this stop-work situation in 520 B.C.

III. The World Persistently Hates You – Ezra 4:6-23

To follow matters chronologically, see the list of Persian kings and dates in the Introduction to this series. What we have in this section is an ongoing description of conflict, intimidation, and enmity.

Before discussing all of Ezra 4:6-23 and its function, let me make some remarks on scattered details:

Verse 6 contains an accusation against Judah in the reign of Ahasuerus (or Xerxes). Yamauchi points out that when Darius died at the end of 486 B.C., Egypt rebelled; Xerxes had to march west to suppress the revolt. The Persians gained control by the end of 483 B.C.³ If the accusation in verse 6 had to do with an innuendo alleging revolt by Judah during this time, one can imagine what a volatile concern that would be for the Persians with Egypt already on their hands.

Verse 7 apparently deals with a second accusation (later than that of verse 6), this one leveled during the reign of Artaxerxes. Then verse 8 indicates a third accusation, also under Artaxerxes, of which we have a copy preserved in Ezra 4:11-16, with its flattery, fawning, innuendo, and apparent concern for Persian interests in taxes (Ezra 4:13) and security (Ezra 4:16).

Estimates indicate that somewhere between 20 and 35 million dollars worth of taxes were collected annually by the Persian king. Palestine, a part of the fifth satrapy, was assessed only 350 silver talents, worth about \$680,000 in 1952 terms. The Persians took a good amount of the gold

³ Yamauchi, *EBC*, 4:628.

and silver coins and melted them down, storing them as bullion. Little of the taxes were returned to assist the provinces.⁴

All sorts of accusations seem to be flying off to the Persian court in Ezra 4. That is very true-to-life. Near Eastern kings — Persians were no exceptions — used elaborate systems of informers and spies.

Now we come back to the *function* of Ezra 4:6-23. These verses seem to interrupt the flow of events. Verses 1-5 report opposition in the time of Cyrus and into the beginning of the reign of Darius (522 B.C.). Then in verses 6-23 we read an ongoing description of opposition to Judah down through the years. But in verse 24 we are wrenched back to the early reign of Darius. If we read in chronological order, we would read verses 1-5, then verse 24, then verses 6-23.

What has happened? Well, it is as though the writer, who is relating the earlier days after the return from exile, began telling us about the opposition Judah experienced right from the first, and then decided that he would simply go on and pile up all the opposition that Judah had experienced through the years. So, he simply kept checking off this accusation, that opposition, down through Artaxerxes' reign. But at verse 24, it is as if he says, "Now we need to go back to the time-period that my record here in Ezra 4 really concerns; let's get back to about 520 B.C., early in Darius' reign, when the work on the temple stopped because Judah seemed under so much duress."

This non-sequential order, however, is not deceptive, for the writer gives clear indicators (giving us the names of the respective kings) so that we can keep the chronology straight, and the specific objects of construction also help us detect the different situations. Note especially verses 12-13, where the people of Judah draw fire for rebuilding the city and its walls, not the temple as in verses 1-5 and 24. [This opposition in verses 8-23 under Artaxerxes was effective in bringing the project to a stop. It may have been that because of their lack of security the people of Judah wanted to rebuild the city and walls, but were doing it without official authorization, and so their enemies reported and exposed them].

In any event, in Ezra 4:24 we are back at the temple and back in the early reign of Darius (ca. 520 B.C.). You must remember that Ezra 4:6-23 constitutes a sort of big bracket piece, breaking up the chronology of chapter 4. The writer does this for topical reasons. The writer wants to overwhelm his readers with a sense of the unceasing opposition that Judah has faced through these years, as if he says, "You might just as well see the whole massive glob of it." His method of writing is intended to reinforce his point: *opposition is relentless*.

⁴ Yamauchi, *EBC*, 4:631-32.

IV. Conclusion

Ezra 4, then, is a dose of realism.⁵ It sobers up the too eager disciple who has never realized that the life of foxes and birds may hold luxuries that following the Son of Man never sees (Luke 9:58).

⁵ See Kidner, 48.