

### The Jews Face Opposition From the Surrounding Foreigners

#### Ezra 4

**Ezra 4:1-3** - *“Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the descendants of the captivity were building the temple of the LORD God of Israel, <sup>2</sup>they came to Zerubbabel and the heads of the fathers’ houses, and said to them, “Let us build with you, for we seek your God as you do; and we have sacrificed to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here.” <sup>3</sup>But Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest of the heads of the fathers’ houses of Israel said to them, “You may do nothing with us to build a house for our God; but we alone will build to the LORD God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us.”*”

#### Background Notes

Most of the Jews who returned from the exile in Babylon were from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. Who were the enemies - the “adversaries of Judah and Benjamin” (v1)? In Ezra 4, the primary adversaries were the Samaritans. When the Assyrian Empire conquered the northern ten tribes of Israel in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century BC, the Assyrian kings repopulated the land with foreign peoples. *“Then the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Ava, Hamath, and from Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the children of Israel; and they took possession of Samaria and dwelt in its cities” (2 Kings 17:24).* Esarhaddon was one of the Assyrian kings who continued this policy of repopulation (v2).

The foreign peoples began to intermarry with Jews who had been left in the territory of the northern kingdom of Israel, and their descendants became known as the Samaritans. They were a mixed race and mixed religion, and they were not welcome into the community of the Jews who returned from Babylon. This continued right on to the time of our Lord. In John 4, the Samaritan woman said to the Lord Jesus, *“Jews do not associate with Samaritans.”*

So in Ezra 4, Samaritans were the primary enemy of the Jews. At first they tried the tactic of compromise, and when that didn’t work they moved to open opposition.

#### Doctrinal Points

##### 1. The work of the Lord is hindered by compromise.

The adversaries *“came to Zerubbabel and the heads of the fathers’ houses, and said to them, “Let us build with you, for we seek your God as you do; and we have sacrificed to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here” (v2).* The Samaritans practiced a syncretic form of religion. Parts of the Jewish Law were mixed in with the

pagan religions of the foreign peoples who had repopulated northern Israel. *“Each national group made its own gods in the several towns where they settled, and set them up in the shrines at the high places...<sup>32</sup> They worshiped the Lord, but they appointed all sorts of their own people to officiate for them as priests.<sup>33</sup> They worshiped the Lord, but they also served their own gods, according to the customs of the nations from which they had been brought...<sup>41</sup> Even while these people were worshiping the Lord, they were serving their idols. To this day their children and grandchildren continue to do as their ancestors did.” (2 Kings 17:29, 32-33,-41).*

Eventually the Samaritans built a temple on Mount Gerizim. And in John 4, the Samaritan woman indicated Mount Gerizim when she said to the Lord, *“Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship” (John 4:20).* Samaritans still exist today, and they still practice their religion on that mountain.

The Samaritans did not want Judah to prosper, so they tried to infiltrate by using compromise. *“Let us join you. After all, we all worship the same God.”* They knew that if they could infiltrate the Jewish population, they could cause confusion and hold up the Temple project.

Satan, the enemy of our souls, still uses the tactic of compromise. Satan might try to whisper: *“Be more tolerant! How can you say that Jesus is the only way? In the end, all roads lead to God!”* Or, *“Let’s have people of all faiths join together in one world religion. That would achieve world peace! You’d only need to compromise your doctrine a little here and there.”*

What’s the answer? The answer is that **the truth must not be compromised!** Jesus is the only way of salvation. We must be firm, or the work of the Lord will suffer confusion and disaster. The Jewish leaders said, *“You may do nothing with us to build a house for our God; but we alone will build to the LORD God of Israel...” (v3).* In the same way, we must stand firm. We cannot compromise. Jude 3 says, *“We must contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.”* The work of the Lord is hindered by compromise.

## **2. The work of the Lord is hindered by opposition.**

**Ezra 4:4-5** - *“The people around them tried to discourage the people of Judah, and make them afraid to go on building. They bribed officials to work against them to frustrate their plans all the days of Cyrus king of Persia.”* Then verse 24 - *“Thus the work on the house of God at Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius, King of Persia.”*

Verses 6- 23 form a parenthesis that traces the opposition from King Cyrus’s time all the way down to King Artaxerxes, the Persian king at the time of Nehemiah. Ezra probably wrote this book about 450BC, shortly before Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem in 445BC. Let’s read about this opposition in verses 6-23, with a few comments.

**Ezra 4:6-23** - *"In the reign of Ahasuerus, [King Xerxes of Esther's time] in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. <sup>7</sup> In the days of Artaxerxes [King Artaxerxes of Nehemiah's time] also, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabel, and the rest of their companions wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the letter was written in Aramaic script, and translated into the Aramaic language. <sup>8</sup> Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to King Artaxerxes in this fashion: <sup>9</sup> From Rehum the commander, Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their companions—representatives... of the nations whom the great and noble Ashurbanipal took captive and settled in the cities of Samaria and the remainder beyond the River [the Euphrates River]—and so forth. <sup>11</sup> This is a copy of the letter that they sent him.*

*To King Artaxerxes from your servants, the men of the region beyond the River, and so forth:*

*<sup>12</sup> Let it be known to the king that the Jews who came up from you have come to us at Jerusalem, and are building the rebellious and evil city, and are finishing its walls and repairing the foundations." [So we see that some wall building had gone on even before the return of Nehemiah.] <sup>13</sup> Let it now be known to the king that, if this city is built and the walls completed, they will not pay tax, tribute, or custom, and the king's treasury will be diminished.*

*<sup>14</sup> Now because we receive support from the palace, it was not proper for us to see the king's dishonor; therefore we have sent and informed the king, <sup>15</sup> that search may be made in the book of the records of your fathers. And you will find in the book of the records and know that this city is a rebellious city, harmful to kings and provinces, and that they have incited sedition within the city in former times, for which cause this city was destroyed. <sup>16</sup> We inform the king that if this city is rebuilt and its walls are completed, the result will be that you will have no dominion beyond the River.*

*<sup>17</sup> The king sent an answer: To Rehum the commander, to Shimshai the scribe, to the rest of their companions who dwell in Samaria, and to the remainder beyond the River: Peace, and so forth. <sup>18</sup> The letter that you sent to us has been clearly read before me. <sup>19</sup> And I gave the command, and a search has been made, and it was found that this city in former times has revolted against kings, and rebellion and sedition have been fostered in it. <sup>20</sup> There have also been mighty kings over Jerusalem, who have ruled over all the region beyond the River; and tax, tribute, and custom were paid to them. <sup>21</sup> Now give the command to make these men cease, that this city may not be built until I so order. <sup>22</sup> Be careful not to neglect this matter. Why let this threat grow, to the detriment of the royal interest?*

*<sup>23</sup> Now when the copy of King Artaxerxes' letter was read before Rehum, Shimshai the scribe, and their companions, they went up in haste to Jerusalem against the Jews, and by force of arms made them cease."*

So verses 6-23 are an account of the opposition up to Nehemiah's time. The decision of verse 21 was reversed when King Artaxerxes gave Nehemiah permission to rebuild the city wall of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2). And verses 4-5 connect chronologically with verses 23-24. Verses 4-5: *"The people around them tried to discourage the people of Judah, and make them afraid to go on building. They bribed officials to work against them to frustrate their plans..."* Verses 23-24: *"As soon as the copy of the letter of King Artaxerxes was read to Rehum and Shimshai and their associates, they went immediately to the Jews in Jerusalem and compelled them by force to stop. <sup>24</sup> Thus the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill..."*

Work on the Temple project stopped for fifteen years, from 535BC down to 520BC.

Opposition hindering the work of the Lord is still true today.. If Satan can't get Christians to compromise in their commitment to the Lord and to the truth, he will use many other forms of opposition - including threats, slander, scare tactics and force. Try getting biblical values back into your local schools, for example, and just watch the opposition come out of the woodwork. Stand up for Christ in the secular college classroom and watch your grades suffer. Speak out in public against the social sins of our day, and you will be ostracized.

Recently our website server informed us that an attempt had been made to hack into and damage the content of the Growing Christians website. That's a form of opposition. And opposition hinders the Lord's work - but praise the Lord, we don't have to be afraid of the opposition!

## **Practical Application**

### **Don't fear the opposition.**

At this point, some of you may be saying to yourselves, "I'll be a Christian, but not a bold Christian. I want to get to heaven, but I don't want to be persecuted, or threatened, or despised - or face any form of opposition."

Well, remember - you don't have to fear the opposition. If we're in a difficult situation because of our faith, we can turn the situation over to the Lord. He will give us the strength and courage that we need. There is joy in walking close to the Lord, and there's a thrill of victory in overcoming opposition. And there is reward in the future!

Expect opposition when you step forward in faith in a public way - but don't fear the opposition!