

Exile & Return: Ezra, Nehemiah & Ruth

The Exile & Return: Ezra; Nehemiah and Esther. This class is the current installment of the Bible track and explores the world immediately following the return of God's OT people from Babylonian exile. We will learn of God's faithfulness to His covenant people in the story of Esther; how God saved them from satanic inspired annihilation. In Ezra and Nehemiah, we will witness God's promise fulfilled through the mouth of Jeremiah: God indeed brought His people back into the land during a time of both conflict, and unprecedented spiritual renewal.

The objective of this class is to develop a thorough understanding of God's redemptive plan among the community of post-exilic Jews who returned to the land of their forefathers to rebuild the city of Jerusalem as well as those Jews who chose to remain in exile. The continuation of God's historical purposes is expressed in the pages of these three books (Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther) in a manner unique in the OT canon of scripture. 6854

Introduction: Last week we began our journey through the pages of Ezra, and witnessed the astounding reality that God providentially controls every detail globally as well as personally. He called Cyrus by name generations before he was born, and divinely determined that he would be the "anointed one" used of God to restore the captives of Judah to their land of promise and rebuild the temple. This week we witness the challenges faced by the returnees when they endeavored to remain faithful to God (and the king) while constructing the temple. We will also explore the ethnically related challenges that confronted the returnees, and continued to plague the Jews even during the time of Christ. These ethnic challenges contributed to the king's decree to cease building of the temple, and was arguably one of the main contributors to the spiritual lethargy confronted by Haggai and Zechariah (5:1). Finally, we will witness the intervention by Darius the king, and the completion and dedication of the temple. This period, much like previous spiritual renewals, was demarcated by a celebration of Passover, the redemptive meal of the covenant. Keep in mind that many of these events occurred prior to the first arrival of Ezra in Jerusalem. The subtitle for today's lesson is, *Opposition to Reconstruction*.

Part One: *Who are the people of God?* If ethnic and religious synthesis was a challenge for God's people prior to exile, ethnic and religious distinction, and what this should look like, became the challenge for God's people at the time of the return. The two groups who returned under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar immediately pursued the rebuilding of the temple, which we saw last week, began with the reconstruction of the altar. The first verse of chapter four reveals the inception of the opposition to reconstruction. It is both internal (a result of the exclusive nature of the people of God) as well as external (the work of the "adversaries" of Judah and Benjamin). We read, "*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 father's 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 Esarhaddon king of Assyria who brought us here.'* But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of the 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*'" (4:1-3). Let us take time to dissect and better understand what is happening here.

The "adversaries" of the Jews, can also be translated from the original Hebrew as "oppressors". The question arises, whether they were oppressors prior to this event, or did the events that transpire after their assistance is refused create the occasion for them to be labeled as such. Surely the events that are described in the following verses can be characterized as oppression, and adversarial, what is not known

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is whether they did anything adversarial before the request described in verse one. Who were these people, and why did they have an interest in rebuilding the temple? Once spurned, why did they oppose the construction of the very edifice they had volunteered to rebuild?

The “adversaries” described themselves as being brought to the land by Esarhaddon the king of Assyria (4:2). According to Charles F. Fensham, “Esarhaddon ruled from 681 B.C. to 669 B.C. Nowhere in the Bible is it explicitly stated that Esarhaddon deported people from Samaria and brought other people back...We know, however, from a cylinder of Esarhaddon that he conquered Sidon during one of his campaigns, and it is most likely that Northern Israel (Samaria) was also involved in the rebellion against the Assyrians. With such a rebellion, the deportation could have taken place as the fulfillment of a curse of a vassal treaty.”¹ So, ethnically, they were probably the descendants of Assyrians who were relocated to the northern parts of Israel at the time of the Assyrian conquest of the Northern kingdom mixed with descendants of Jews who remained behind or were relocated to Samaria by later conquering kings. In 2 Kings 15:29 & 17:6 we read, *“In the days of Pekah, king of Israel, Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria came and captured Ijon, Abel-beth-maccah, Janoah, Kedesh, Hazor, Gilead, and Galilee, and all the land of Naphtali, and he carried the people captive to Assyria. In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria, and he carried the Israelites away to Assyria and place them in Halah, and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes.”* Then, in 2 Kings 17:24-28 we read, *“And the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the people of Israel. And they took possession of Samaria and lived in its cities. And at the beginning of their dwelling there, they did not fear the Lord. Therefore, the Lord sent lions among them, which killed some of them. So, the king of Assyria was told, ‘The nations that you have carried away and placed in the cities of Samaria do not know the law of the god of the land. Therefore, he has sent lions among them, and behold, they are killing them, because they do not know the law of the god of the land.’ Then the king of Assyria commanded, ‘Send there one of the priests whom you have carried away from there, and let him go and dwell there and teach them the law of the god of the land.’ So, one of the priests whom they had carried away from Samaria came and lived in Bethel and taught them how they should fear the Lord.”*

One final word regarding the identity of these “adversaries” before we explore the question why they were not allowed to assist. In verse four of the fourth chapter they are described as, *“the people of the land”*. The term in Hebrew is, עַם־הָאָרֶץ. This term is somewhat obscure, since it is used in a pejorative sense in later literature. In rabbinical writings, and texts originating around the time of Christ, the phrase can refer to simple, ignorant, and uneducated members of the covenant community. However, many of the returnees were lacking in religious education, which created the need for Ezra to be sent to offer instruction, so it is more likely that the phrase refers to those who were living in the land at the time of the return, who were ethnically mixed or from gentile nations.

Now, why would these people have an interest in rebuilding the temple? Well, one explanation is that they did not. Perhaps, they were simply pretending to want to assist so they could get close enough to the builders to cause them harm. However, the text offers no explicit indication that this was the case. What is more likely, is that they were sincere in their desire for inclusion. They were probably descendants of those who had been in the land since the Assyrian repopulation project mixed with those who had been brought from Elam and Babylonia by Esarhaddon. If their claim to be worshippers

¹ Fensham, Charles F. *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*. Pg. 60-61.

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of God since the time of this king (nearly 150 years prior) were true, then they may well be the descendants of Jews exiled during the time of the Assyrians who were brought back to the land along with a mixed multitude from Elam and Babylonia at the time of Esarhaddon. Regardless, these people felt they had a right to rebuild the temple along with the returnees. Were they justified in their expressed entitlement?

The response of the leaders of the returnees was unanimous, *“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”* (4:3b). Scholars (accurately in my opinion) look to this incident as the line of demarcation between the Jews and the people group that will later become known as the Samaritans.² Now, the bigger question is whether the leaders responded accurately and justly when they refused to allow the “people of the land” to aid them or were they creating problems for themselves that would endure for generations? The answer to this question is extensive and to answer fully is beyond the scope of this study. What should be acknowledged is the difficulty the attempt to exclusively define the people of God created for the leaders of the returning generation. The actions of the “people of the land” were indeed adversarial from this point forward, even to the point of aligning themselves with gentile kings instead of those whom they claimed were their fellow-worshippers.

One might argue that there would have been little harm in allowing the *people of the land* to help with the reconstruction of the temple, and would have been substantively the same as accepting aid from King Cyrus himself for the work of rebuilding. Nevertheless, the leaders who were present and responsible for making the decision considered refusing the aid of these people and avoiding whatever detriment worshipping with them might bring to be of greater worth than the speedy reconstruction of the temple. The result was a firm statement on the part of the returning community – “You are not the people of God, you have no right to the temple!” Was this a cementing of a former prejudice that predated the exile and extends all the way back to the reign of King Rehoboam or were the people of Judah drawing the circle of inclusion at its appropriate boundary?

Part Two: An Attempt to Redefine God’s Purpose – The response of the *people of the land* was one of vehement opposition. They were not content to return to their sand box and sulk in their own little corner. They were unwilling to allow a temple to be built if they had no part in its construction. Ezra 4:4 states, *“Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build and bribed counselors against them to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.”* Whether the next section (4:7-16) details personalities affiliated with the people of the land or if this is an unrelated round of yet more opposition is unclear. However, there is indication that the coalition included the previously mentioned people in the introductory lines of the letter. Critical to our discussion is the motive and reasoning behind seeking to end the city’s reconstruction.

We read, *“Rehum 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 Osnappar deported and settled in the cities of Samaria and in the rest of the province Beyond the River. ¹(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 greeting. And now be it known to the king that the Jews who came up from you to us have gone to Jerusalem. They*

² See Fensham, pg. 67

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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" (Ezra 4:9-16). There are three notable comments that should be made concerning the text of the letter. First, the enemies of the people of God call the City of Jerusalem a "wicked" city. Now, it is true that many times in the writings of the major prophets, God Himself refers to Jerusalem as wicked, but always in a pre-exilic context. Thus, we have the enemies of God's people trying to ascribe to them an identity they possessed prior to God's just judgment.

Secondly, the enemies of God's people redefined God's purpose in judgement. We know from the pages of scripture that the reason Jerusalem was led into captivity was their rejection of God and unfaithfulness to His covenant. The letter states, *"...this city is a rebellious city, hurtful to kings and provinces, and that sedition was stirred up in it from old. That was why this city was laid waste..."* (4:15). Now, there is a sense in which this is correct. Revolt and failure to pay tribute was the political reason why Nebuchadnezzar sacked the city (2 Chronicles 36:13); however, the divine purpose, as revealed in scripture was because, *"...they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising His words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against His people, until there was no remedy"* (2 Chronicles 36:16).

Finally, the enemies of God appealed to the real-world fear and paranoia of the king. History records that the time in which the letter was written was filled with outlining provinces rebelling against the king (such as the rebellion led by Megabyzus). Therefore, all they had to do to hit a nerve and solicit a reaction from the king was mention the threat of rebellion in Judea. Of course, their real motives were cloaked in a pious attempt to preserve the king's honor. Consequently, the king ordered the immediate cessation of the reconstruction of the city. Ezra 4:21 states, *"Therefore, make a decree that these men be made cease, and that this city be not rebuilt, until a decree is made by me..."* For the people of God returning from exile, invigorated by the fulfillment of the divine promise through the earlier decree of Cyrus, this must have been discouraging indeed.

Part Three: Rebuilding from the Inside Out! – It is interesting to observe that the main contents of the letter sent to the king in chapter four dealt with terminating the reconstruction of the city of Jerusalem. One can infer that the reconstruction of the temple was also implied since attempts to rebuild the temple initially sparked the controversy. However, chapters six and seven return the emphasis from the exterior of the city (and the rebuilding of the city's walls) to the interior of the city (rebuilding the city's heart). After all, the people of God knew by now that security would not come from a well-fortified wall but from faith and confidence in God. So, God sends His prophets – two men, Haggai and Zechariah who admonished them to rebuild. We read in Haggai 1:7-11, *"Thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider your ways. Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the Lord. You looked for much, and behold it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? Declares the Lord of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house. Therefore, the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and*

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the earth has withheld its produce. And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the ground brings forth, on man and beast, and on all their labors.” The neglect of God’s house brought about by the discouraging oppression of the *people of the land* was causing the health and vitality of the nation to suffer. God’s instructions were clear: do not fear the oppressors, do not fear the king, fear me!

The text reveals the response of the leaders: *“Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and the prophets of God were with them supporting them”* (5:2). As might be expected, this raised the neck hair of the enemies of God’s people. This time, it appears to be the rulers and magistrates who were concerned about the reconstruction of the temple. We read, *“Tattenai the governor of the province Beyond the River and Shethar-bozenai and their associates came to them and spoke to them thus: ‘Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?’”* It seems the concerns of these oppressors had more to do with the legality of the construction project than with any fear of insurrection. The response of the Jewish leaders, though not recorded in the text of the story, is provided in the body of the letter. Their reply is noteworthy and bears quoting, *“We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth (answer to the first issue – the identity of God’s people), and we are rebuilding the house that was built many years ago, which a great king in Israel built and finished. But because our fathers had angered the God of heaven, He gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house and carried away the people to Babylonia (answer to the second issue – an attempt to redefine the purpose of God)”* (5:11-12). The Jews then reference the decree of Cyrus that authorized the construction of the temple.

Darius, the king, made an inquiry into the archives to determine if Cyrus did indeed make such a decree. When he found that the decree was made, but not carried out, he responds accordingly, *“I make a decree regarding what you shall do for these elders of the Jews for the rebuilding of this house of God. The cost is to be paid to these men in full and without delay from the royal revenue, the tribute of the province from Beyond the River. And whatever is needed – bulls, rams, or sheep for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, or oil, as the priests at Jerusalem require – let that be given to them day by day without fail, that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the life of the king and his sons. Also, I make a decree that if anyone alters this edict, a beam shall be pulled out of his house, and he shall be impaled on it, and his house shall be made a dunghill”* (6:8-11).

So, the temple was completed, paid for from the king’s treasury, *“They finished the building by the decree of the God of Israel and by the decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes, king of Persia...”* One is provoked to ask; how did Artaxerxes contribute to the reconstruction of the temple? It was he who ordered it to cease. In the providential plan of God, He used the frustrating decree of an enemy king to ensure that the resources to finish the house would be available. It was Artaxerxes who commissioned Ezra and sent him to Jerusalem with offerings for God’s house. This is indeed a beautiful example that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called by Him (Romans 8:28).

When the house of God was built, the people of God observed the Passover at its appointed time. *“On the fourteenth day of the first month, the returned exiles kept the Passover. For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together; all of them were clean”* (6:19). This celebration is mentioned to textually denote a time of spiritual renewal for the people of God. The stage is set, the people are ready for Ezra, the teacher of the Law of the Lord!