

EZRA

Lesson 7, Chapter 4

If Ezra and Nehemiah (which is the story of the return of the Jews to Judah and the rebuilding of the Temple on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem) demonstrate one thing that is rather easy for us to identify with, it is that a religious conviction is often mistakenly perceived by others as a political position. It is also true (especially after OT times) that religious and spiritual beliefs can become politicized and woven together with human governments to form a kind of perverse system of population control that uses an insincere spiritual aura to manipulate people and bring about mankind's insatiable hunger for power. We see these twin phenomena happen regularly in the Bible, and throughout secular human history, and certainly in our modern era as well.

Early in Ezra chapter 3, which occurs within a few months after the first wave of the Jews' return to Judah, we find a rising political opposition to the Jews' sincere spiritual desire to rekindle true Biblical Torah observance by reconstituting the Priesthood and rebuilding the Temple. Now, in the opening verses of Ezra chapter 4, we find this situation escalating as a group of representatives of some of the nearby inhabitants to Jerusalem, many of whom are foreigners who moved into Judah during the Jews' exile to Babylon, want to continue their political and economic influence over Jerusalem and Judah by joining with the Jews in their rebuilding project. And when their offer is flatly rejected, we read that they began a persistent campaign to frustrate and undermine the rebuilding efforts. Was Zerubbabel right to stiff-arm the seemingly friendly advances of the Samaritans? Yes; very much so. This is a good example of the prohibition against what the Torah calls illicit mixing, or later the NT calls it unequal yoking. Love and peace and mercy do not trump God's direct commandment that His people are not to mix themselves (ourselves) with those who are antagonistic towards the God of Israel, nor to join with them in common cause just because it seems pragmatic or convenient or politically correct.

Interestingly we don't hear of a firm objection of the Samaritans to the religion of the Jews being re-established; rather we mainly hear politically charged accusations concerning matters of territorial control, loyalties, and taxation. Did the locals (which we shall call Samaritans for the sake of an easy term to remember) then at first pretend that theirs was a religious stance but in reality their underlying and conscious goal was to fight against the Jews repopulating the land? Yes, it seems so. Their aim was to retain political and economic superiority. They mistook Zerubbabel's sincere desire to reignite proper worship to the God of Israel for a want of political power. So the Samaritans decided to combat this seeming threat by putting a "spin" on their objections by using reasons and causes that would catch the ear of the politicians (especially the Persian king), even if those stated reasons and causes were huge stretches or

outright lies against the Jews.

Yet it can't be overlooked that not all the Jews who came back had spiritual matters in the forefront of their minds. Some (those called the heads of their father's clans) had an agenda of reclaiming their land holdings and possessions that they had left behind when they were forcefully exiled to Babylon, but were now being held by others (some foreigners, some Jews, and some mixed ethnicities) who they saw as squatters. No doubt this group of Jews counted themselves as among the pious and used a high-minded spiritual rationale for their return, even though it was only a thinly veiled cover for their primary intent, which was property recovery. And the Samaritans would have suspected that this was the real aim of ALL of the returning Jews. So from the beginning the Samaritans didn't accept that the rebuilding of Jerusalem was about religion and spirituality, but instead it was about reestablishing Jewish political control and a re-occupation over the region.

We see a similar thing happen some 5 centuries later when Yeshua of Nazareth began His ministry. His motives were purely spiritual, and whatever kingship He claimed was also spiritual. He had no political aspirations, no personal ambitions, and certainly had no intent to start or lead a rebellion against the Romans. And yet the mere fact that He had a following that grew into thousands made him suspect and a political threat both to the corrupt Jewish religious authorities and to the local Roman provincial governor, Pontius Pilate. In fact we find Messiah working tirelessly among His disciples to make it clear that He was no warrior leader or politician, and they should not involve themselves in such matters either; some of them got it, others (like Judas Iscariot) didn't.

And in our day we see how especially Fundamental or Evangelical Christianity is perceived less as a spiritual movement and more and more as a growing political and social threat. Otherwise why would our various levels of government (but especially our Federal government) care at all about the personal spiritual beliefs of American citizens? And despite many Christian leaders trying their best to explain that the Church isn't about politics but rather it is about far more important spiritual and eternal matters, there are those among us who claim to be part of the Church, but who have co-opted the spiritual and intertwined it with the political, either as an unintended misjudgment or as a fully intended means to gain power and influence. Either way, the result has been to discredit our faith.

The point is that as we read Ezra and Nehemiah from this point forward, just mentally picture the religious/social/political can-of-worms that is America today and realize that this is hardly a new phenomenon. It has always been difficult for humans to sort out where the boundaries between the spiritual and the political lay or what the proper mix of the two ought to be (or if they should be mixed at all). What we can be assured of is that this conundrum will continue (and get even more muddled and reach its zenith when the Anti-Christ appears) until Messiah comes to settle the matter once and for all.

Let's re-read Ezra Chapter 4. We have a great deal to talk about today that lies hidden just below the surface of the divinely inspired words that forms its sentences and paragraphs.

RE-READ EZRA CHAPTER 4 all

We talked last week about the difficulties with the Book of Ezra in extracting a timeline and part of this is due to the restructuring of all the Bible books into chapters, paragraphs, and verses by scholars centuries after the Bible (New and Old Testaments) was completed and closed up. But sometimes it is also due to the form and purpose of an ancient literary editor who first wrote these books. And we find at places in Ezra and Nehemiah, it is as though the editor is looking through a microscope or telescope at a high magnification so as to see finer details; and then he backs away to get a wide angle view, only to zoom in once again. Or he does what I do at times and that is to begin to give you information, but then veer off into a detour that I think is necessary to provide some additional background that makes what I'm trying to communicate to you more clear and complete.

The difference between me and an ancient Hebrew editor is that I **tell** you that we're going to take a detour. Or in modern literary convention, sometimes a modern writer will take his detour by means of extensive footnotes; or perhaps he will use parentheses as a means of interrupting the flow momentary to add some nuance before returning to the subject at hand. This happens extensively in Ezra chapter 4.

Essentially Ezra chapter 4 is structured such that verses 1 -5 describe the main subject, then verses 6 – 23 are a “detour”, then verse 24 returns us to the main subject. It would have been nice had the editor said that “he digresses” at this point, or gives us some warning that he is inserting some additional info that is not chronologically connected with the rest of the subject material surrounding it. But that isn't how the ancient Hebrew writer did things, so we'll have to adapt to him.....not him to us.

Let me show you what I mean as concerns Ezra chapter 4. Follow along carefully with me as we re-read verses 1 – 5 and then immediately jump to verse 24. Watch how it flows and connects.

^{CJB} **Ezra 4:1** *When the enemies of Y'hudah and Binyamin heard that the people from the exile were building a temple to ADONAI the God of Isra'el,*

² they approached Z'rubavel and the heads of fathers' clans and said to them, "Let us build along with you; for we seek your God, just as you do; and we have been sacrificing to him since the time of Esar-Hadon king of Ashur, who brought us here."

³ But Z'rubavel, Yeshua and the rest of the heads of fathers' clans in Isra'el answered them, "You and we have nothing in common that you should join us in building a house for our God. We will build by ourselves for ADONAI the God of Isra'el, as Koresh king of Persia ordered us to do."

⁴ Then the people of the land began discouraging the people of Y'hudah, in order to make them afraid to build.

⁵ They also bribed officials to frustrate their plan throughout the lifetime of Koresh king of Persia and on into the reign of Daryavesh king of Persia.

²⁴ So the work on the house of God in Yerushalayim ceased; it remained at a standstill until the second year of the reign of Daryavesh king of Persia.

What we just read deals with the reigns of Kings Cyrus and Darius. This was the time period from 559 to 486 B.C. (about 73 years). How about the part we skipped over (verses 6 – 23)? It is dealing with a time AFTER Cyrus and Darius, because as we read in verse 6, this action took place during the reign of ***Achashverosh*** (King Xerxes), and then in verse 7 the time leaps ahead again to ***Artach'shashta*** (King Artaxerxes, Xerxes' son). The reigns of Xerxes and then Artaxerxes begin where Darius left off at 486 B.C. and then continued to 424 B.C. So Ezra chapter 4 deals with around 120 years of history. If we don't understand that the editor paused after verse 5, then went on a detour at verse 6 and continued that detour through verse 23 in order to give us some needed information and context about all the trouble that the Samaritans caused the Jews by writing letters to the various Persian Kings; then picks up again at verse 24 with Kings Cyrus and Darius, then nothing about the timeline of Ezra chapter 4 makes any sense. And that is why so many modern scholars insist that whoever wrote Ezra was a very poor historian who got the order and era of the kings of Persia all wrong or that this is simply a fictional story and was never intended to have any historical accuracy. Nothing could be further from the truth. The editor of Ezra is likely the same as the editor of the Books of Chronicles, and his history and order of events is precise and correct. We just have to approach the reading of his works according to the ancient Hebrew way of thinking and writing and not with a 21st century Western worldview and expectation.

Let's view the structure of Ezra chapter 4 in yet another, and complimentary, way. Verses 1-5 are all about rebuilding the Temple and the context is that it includes the reigns of Cyrus, then Cambyses, then Bardiya (a short-lived imposter), then Darius. Verses 6 – 23 are all about rebuilding the defensive walls of the City of Jerusalem, and this action occurs during the reigns of Xerxes and then his son Artaxerxes. Then verse 24 returns to addressing the Temple reconstruction beginning at the time of Cyrus and then finally Darius. This switching back and forth can be pretty hard to follow, but once we understand what we're looking for then it gets much easier.

We looked carefully at the first 3 verses last week that explained how all of this animosity between the returning Jews and the Samaritans began, and it was with the refusal of Zerubbabel to allow the Samaritans to become partners in the rebuilding. Verse 4 tells us what the consequences were for this refusal: ***“Then the people of land began discouraging the people of Judah in order to make them afraid to build.”*** And while we don’t know all the different ways the Samaritans brought about this discouragement, we do find in the next few verses that officials from the province of Judah wrote letters to the King of Persia complaining about this rebuilding and giving him warnings that this was going to lead to big trouble.

In fact, we hear of 4 separate instances of the use of public officials to try and stop the work on the Temple and on the walls of Jerusalem. In verse 4 we find that the Samaritans bribed local officials during the reigns of Cyrus through Darius to try to disrupt the Jews’ plans. We aren’t told just what this bribery led to and how it is that local officials made construction impossible. But whatever it was, it was effective.

Next in verse 6 we hear that an official charge against the Jews living in Judah was brought forth during the reign of King Xerxes. We don’t know exactly who brought this charge and if it was brought to Xerxes, or just to his royal court; and we don’t know the precise nature of the charge. But, again, whatever it was it proved disruptive and effective.

Then in verse 7 we hear about a letter written to King Artaxerxes by some men named Bishlam, Mitradat, Tav’el and also some other unnamed co-conspirators. We don’t know exactly who these men are or what their government positions were (although there’s been no lack of speculation and guessing). They wrote the letter in Aramaic, which was the language of the royals of Persia. The purpose for doing this is because if it was written in some other language, then it would first have to be translated by the royal scribes and then re-written. That would result in a delay and as far as these men were concerned the matter was serious and needed immediate attention.

Then later in verse 8 is the occasion of yet another letter written to King Artaxerxes, this time from Rechum and Shimshai his secretary. No doubt these were high officials, but it is unlikely that Rechum was the governor of the province of Beyond the River, to which Judah belonged. He was high enough that he would have the king’s ear, but the highest officials had to speak the king’s language, Aramaic, and apparently Rechum didn’t. We learn that the letter sent by Rechum was not written in Aramaic, because verse 18 makes it clear that that the letter didn’t reach the King until it had been translated.

Then beginning in verse 9 we get a copy of the letter that was sent to King Artaxerxes, along with a list of cohorts who signed on in agreement. Exactly who they are and what their positions were is unknown to us. But since their positions weren’t included, apparently they

were well known within the Persian royal court and there was no point in listing them as far the editor of the Book of Ezra was concerned. The letter isn't dated but it cannot have been later than the time of Nehemiah, about 440 B.C.

So here's what we can learn from all of these official complaints and letters: if we only deal with the ones listed here the Samaritans began using official Persian channels against the Jews beginning about 557 B.C. (almost immediately upon their return from exile) and it never ceased right through about 445 B.C. Think about that: can you imagine in our day keeping up a political opposition to some building project for well over a century through several different government administrations? Some of this involves Middle Eastern culture in which dishonor and offenses and insults aren't ever forgotten. Western culture is all about short attention spans. We think a long war is 10 years. We think a generation or maybe two is a long time to overcome and replace established traditions and customs. To a Middle Easterner, whether in the Biblical or the modern era, that amount of time isn't worth thinking about.

But also consider the Jews' side of things; they had to persist for several generations to finally accomplish what they first came to Judah to do: rebuild the Temple and reconstruct the walls of Jerusalem. As you can imagine they ran hot and cold as the years rolled by. They would try again to start construction, they would be thwarted again, and those leaders who led the effort would fall away and so did the interest and velocity to do anything. Then a new batch of leaders would have to catch the vision and arise, and they'd take up the cause and try again. We are only getting the super-condensed, Reader's Digest account in Ezra and Nehemiah and most of the details are left out. But a lot more happened over almost one and one-quarter centuries than we're reading about here.

Now let's connect some pretty interesting dots before we move on. The gist of the letter sent to Artaxerxes is that the Jews are rebels, and they intend on destroying the peace that is being enjoyed in the Beyond the River province. And further, the Jews have a history of sedition and not paying taxes. This could result in less revenue for the Persian treasury and all kings had personal survival as job #1 on their list, and building up the treasury ran a close second.

No doubt these accusations were generally the same in every letter writing campaign to every Persian king. Remember: we're looking at a long span of time here, over the reigns of several kings. So it's not like each letter had to have a different agenda and list of complaints or the king would tire of hearing about it. Therefore Xerxes would have been buffeted with the same complaints. But before those letters ever reached his eyes, his scribes and his royal court would have known about the issues and dealt with them at a lower level to try to resolve them if at all possible (that was their job). Not resolving the issues was a failure on their part.

Open your Bibles to Esther chapter 3. It's just a few pages back from the Book of Ezra. We'll read part of it in a moment but here's the connection I want you to notice: the time of Esther

takes place during the reign of King Xerxes. This is of course the same Xerxes (***Achashverosh***) that we're reading about in Ezra. So at the same time that Esther is being considered as the next queen of Persia, and that the wicked Haman is planning on how to get rid of Mordechai and a couple of million Jews, several thousand Jews had already ventured back to Judah and are in the midst of trying (and failing) to rebuild the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem; and the Samaritans are continually conspiring with local Persian officials by sending nasty-grams to King Xerxes and his royal court. In fact, by the time of Esther, the Jews have been free for at least 50 years, and a number of waves of returning Jews have arrived back in Judah, reclaimed their property, tried to work on the Temple and the city walls of Jerusalem, and confronted the disagreeable Samaritans. As we open Esther chapter 3 decades of bad feelings between the Jews of Judah and the local Samaritans have now built to the boiling point.

READ ESTHER CHAPTER 3: 1 – 11

Here we find some kind of seeming irrational hatred of Jews by Haman. Part of it is simply because Haman is descended from Amalek, the eternal earthly enemy of Israel, and so Haman has buried (deep within his soul) the spirit of Amalek. But now, perhaps when we overlay the stories of Ezra and Esther, we can see that the Jews still living in Persia couldn't escape the fact that their Jewish brethren who had immigrated back to Judah had also gained a poor reputation among the non-Jewish Persians (at least among the Persian government officials and those close to the royal court and the king). Haman would have been fully aware of the "Jewish problem" in Judah, but apparently the matter hadn't yet been escalated to Xerxes for his personal attention. And as history shows, Xerxes was an incorrigible king who was primarily interested in partying and leisure. He did not like to handle affairs of state anymore than was forced upon him. So Haman tells the king that there is this people who are scattered all over the Persian Empire who don't observe the king's laws, instead they have their own laws. He doesn't identify them, which is further proof that Xerxes had no knowledge of the complaints against the Jews of Judah. When speaking of obeying other laws Haman can only be referring to the Law of Moses, which Zerubbabel and later Ezra were trying to reinstitute in Judah.

Here's where we have to widen our view and understand that Judah was part of the Persian Empire and within the past 50 years a great concentration of Jews now repopulated Judah. And as far as the Persian government was concerned, the Jews of Judah had become a pain in the neck. Now it was a very long way (about a 4 month's journey) from Susa, the capital city of Persia where the story of Esther takes place, to Jerusalem. And no one who didn't have to would ever consider making the arduous journey. The King certainly hadn't been there so far as we know, and probably neither had Haman. So whatever official correspondence they received from Judah about the goings on there was of course from government officials and was considered accurate if not gospel.

We can be sure that the general Persian population didn't have high regard for those troublesome Jews far to the south in the Beyond the River provincial district called Judah, and we can be equally as sure that the majority of Persian Jews sympathized with their Jewish brethren who now lived in Judah. So while there's no evidence of an overwhelming tension between the Jewish and non-Jewish Persians, it must have lay just under the surface and some Persians probably had pretty strong feelings about it. Thus when Haman offered the non-Jewish Persians the opportunity to attack the Jewish Persians and take their property, a sizeable number welcomed it, if even the majority didn't seem to want to participate.

Thus we see Haman hating all the Jewish people, and then going to King Xerxes with an offer to donate a huge amount of silver to the Persian treasury if he was given official sanction to wipe out the Jews; this would have included those troublesome Jews in Judah who wanted to rebuild the Temple (although Xerxes didn't seem know that just yet). And clearly the Samaritans would have relished the opportunity to kill off all those Jews who were trying to rebuild the Temple and reestablish themselves as the rightful residents of Judah. If there was a true concern that if the Jews of Judah rebuilt the Temple and the city walls they would rebel and stop paying taxes and tribute, then how much could dead Jews pay? Haman essentially decided that no taxes is no taxes whether it was as the result of a refusal to pay, or because the potential taxpayers were wiped out. Thus his generous offer to give to the Persian treasury an amount of money to make up for the lost revenues from all the Jews he planned to liquidate.

And remember: King Xerxes' name was attached to the death decree that was sent to every corner of His empire: Judah included. So as we read the Book of Ezra about what was happening with the Jews in Judah at the time of Xerxes' reign, in the Book of Esther we're reading about the same time period, only about what is happening with the Jews in the capital city of the Persian Empire, Susa.

Let's return now from our detour back to the letter of complaint sent to Artaxerxes in Ezra chapter 4. Artaxerxes was the king to follow Xerxes, so this issue of Haman and the decree to kill the Jews had occurred several years earlier. Essentially Rechum and his cohorts challenge King Artaxerxes to have a search of their official records made to see what could be dug up about Jerusalem and the Judahites. The result they say the king will find is that the Jews are dangerous, as they constantly rebel. The fear they plant in the king's mind is that if the defensive walls of Jerusalem are rebuilt, it will become a fortress of sedition and center of incitement against the Persian Empire. And that Jerusalem had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar almost 150 years earlier because of the Jews' intransigent attitude and refusal to submit and show allegiance to their conquerors. In fact, they say, a completion of the rebuilding project will mean an end to the entire province of Beyond the River, not merely the district of Judah.

Starting in verse 17 the king responds just as Rechum had hoped for. After a delay so that the

letter Rechum sent could be translated into Aramaic, the records search in Susa was concluded and Rechum's accusations were confirmed. Jerusalem had historically been a place of rebellion and trouble. And the Jews had refused to pay taxes and tribute. The Bible confirms this.

2Kings 24:1-10 CJB

1 It was in Y'hoyakim's time that N'vukhadnetzar king of Bavel invaded. Y'hoyakim became his vassal for three years, but then he turned against him and rebelled.

² ADONAI sent against him raiding parties from the Kasdim, Aram, Mo'av and the people of 'Amon; he sent them against Y'hudah to destroy it, in keeping with the word of ADONAI which he had spoken through his servants the prophets.

³ Yes, it was at ADONAI's order that this happened to Y'hudah, in order to remove them from his sight because of the sins of M'nasheh and all he had done,

⁴ and also because of the innocent blood he had shed- for he had flooded Yerushalayim with innocent blood, and ADONAI was unwilling to forgive.

⁵ Other activities of Y'hoyakim and all his accomplishments are recorded in the Annals of the Kings of Y'hudah.

⁶ Then Y'hoyakim slept with his ancestors, and Y'hoyakhin his son took his place as king.

⁷ The king of Egypt did not leave his own land any more, because the king of Bavel had captured all the territory of the king of Egypt between the Vadi of Egypt and the Euphrates River.

⁸ Y'hoyakhin was eighteen years old when he began his reign, and he ruled in Yerushalayim for three months. His mother's name was N'chushta the daughter of Elnatan, from Yerushalayim.

⁹ He did what was evil from ADONAI's perspective, following the example of everything his father had done.

¹⁰ It was then that the officers of N'vukhadnetzar king of Bavel marched on Yerushalayim and laid siege to the city.

Thus the king's letter to Rechum (verse 21) gave him instructions to stop the construction work immediately, and it should not begin again unless the king himself gave the order. Rechum immediately acted by force of arms to shut down all building operations. This ends the

detour that the editor of Ezra took us on to provide some background for the issue of the Samaritans constantly conspiring with the Persian government to inhibit the rebuilding of the Temple.

So, now, in verse 24, the editor returns to the subject matter at hand, and explains that after the Temple reconstruction was halted it would not be until early in Darius's reign that the hopes and dreams of the Jewish returnees to reconstruct the Temple and restart Torah observance would begin anew. But also that all the halts and trouble with the Persian government were caused by a determined effort of the Samaritans, deemed the enemies of the Jews.

We'll begin chapter 5 next time.