

## “We Alone Will Build to the LORD”

### The Fourth in a Series of Sermons on Ezra-Nehemiah

*Text: Ezra 4:1-24; Revelation 12:1-12*

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We have all heard stories in the news about someone who desires to build a massive home, gets all of the necessary permits, and the starts construction. The neighbors, who have smiled and waved everyday for years, seem to be perfectly okay with the project. They never said a word when the matter came before the city council and a public hearing. But once the building got underway and it became apparent that the home’s second story would block the neighbor’s view, suddenly a lawsuit is filed, an injunction issued, and building stops, until months or even years later when the matter is finally resolved. We see a similar episode in our text, as the Israelites, who have the permission and blessing of the Persian king to rebuild their temple, now discover that their neighbors to the north—who even offer to help the Israelites with the work—are actually conspiring to stop the rebuilding project dead in its tracks. Their efforts reach all the way to the Persian royal court and Ezra’s initial reports of progress give way, instead, to an apparent end to efforts to rebuild Jerusalem and its temple.

As we continue our series on the books of Ezra-Nehemiah, we move into Ezra 4, where we learn that the initial progress in rebuilding the temple, about which we read last time, has now come to a sudden and unforeseen halt. Israel’s adversaries lobby for a work stoppage and succeed. Last time, we read in chapter 3 of the how the altar was rebuilt at the temple site, and the daily sacrifices were re-instituted. Under the leadership of Jeshua and Zerubbabel, once again the Israelites celebrate their historic feasts according to the law of Moses. These feasts played a significant role in Israel’s history and, in part, established their identity as the people of YHWH.

Just as Israel’s history took an unexpected turn when the Israelites were set free from their Babylonian captivity by Cyrus in 538 BC, then returned home and began the work of rebuilding their city and their temple, Israel’s circumstances change unexpected yet again. The work on the temple comes a grinding halt. In fact, everything of which we read from here on in both books of Ezra and Nehemiah will be framed in terms of an eighty year conflict instigated by Israel’s neighbors, lasting until Ezra himself appears on the scene in 458.<sup>1</sup> In chapter 4:1-5, 24, Ezra informs us that effort to rebuild the city and the temple will face strong opposition until the temple is finally completed about 516 BC. In verses 6-23, Ezra jumps ahead in time to give background to the reader regarding the numerous complaints about Israel which came before the Persian court, even after the temple was completed. Motivated by unbelief, and characterized by political intrigue among the local population and the Persian kings, the entire account of the struggle to rebuild the temple and the city—especially the city’s walls—must be seen in light of the backdrop of Satan’s continual efforts to thwart the purposes of God as depicted as a war in heaven in Revelation 12:1-12, our New Testament lesson.

In the prophecy of Zechariah (chapter 3:1-10), given during the time the temple was being rebuilt, we read of Satan’s on-going efforts to bring the failures of Joshua (Jeshua), the high priest, to the Lord’s attention in the heavenly court. As recounted in Zechariah’s heavenly vision, Joshua’s priestly garments were stripped from him, and he was given spotless new priestly clothing by the Lord’s angel. Last time,

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<sup>1</sup> Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 48.

we saw that it was during this period—around the time the work stoppage begins—that YHWH spoke to the people of Israel through the prophet Haggai (2:4–9), telling his people,

Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, declares the LORD. Be strong, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the LORD. Work, for I am with you, declares the LORD of hosts, according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt. My Spirit remains in your midst. Fear not. For thus says the LORD of hosts: Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the LORD of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, declares the LORD of hosts. The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the LORD of hosts.

The Lord’s purposes will not be thwarted. The temple will be rebuilt and the greater glory will come, because Jesus Christ, Israel’s Messiah and the true temple will come.

Yet, our passage raises a question about God’s sovereign purposes, because the Lord allows the progress to be interrupted, and the work on the temple to come to a halt. We are tempted to ask, “if the Lord could turn the heart of Cyrus to release his people, and if he could stir the hearts of his people to return to the land and rebuild, when then does the Lord not turn the hearts of Israel’s deceitful pagan neighbors?” “Why does YHWH allow the episode of which we will soon read?” Ezra never tells us why the Lord allows the delay in the rebuilding of the temple. Ezra only recounts the fact of this skirmish in the ongoing war between YHWH and Satan. In this particular battle, it is Satan who stirs up the hearts of Israel’s neighbors to seek to stop Israel’s progress once the rebuilding of the temple gets underway. Although we know the work will eventually get underway again and the temple will be rebuilt—the Israelites in Jerusalem in those days did not know this, and YHWH is teaching them to trust his promises. Of course, he does the same with us when we encounter the various difficulties in life, which YHWH intends to turn to our good—even if we cannot see nor understand these things at the time.

Christians should be quite familiar with John’s warning, (1 John 3:13), “*Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you.*” This is true of the Israelites as well. Their neighbors hate them. Ezra describes how a group of Israel’s neighbors, at first pretending to be supportive of the exiles’ efforts to rebuild the temple, but who cause all the trouble, eventually reveal themselves to be enemies of the people of God. Although they claim to be worshipers of YHWH, they quickly reveal themselves to be worshipers of YHWH and the pagan gods of the Canaanites. This is known as syncretism, and was widespread in that age. Why worship only one God? Why not worship all the “gods.” You don’t want to leave one god out and offend him.

The reason why we cannot worship “all the gods” so as to make sure we include the right “god” is simple—YHWH is the only true and living God, and he commands that his people worship him and him only. This clash between the true worshipers of YHWH and the smiling but scheming syncretists to the north will play out in our text in the form of eighty plus years of political intrigue between the exiles—now back in the land—and their Persian landlords, in whose empire, the Israelites have been permitted to return and then rebuild their city and their temple.

Ezra’s account of the work stoppage is direct and straightforward and ties his account directly to the chronology of Persian kings, as well as specific events within the massive Persian empire and its royal court. The peoples who conspire together to stop the rebuilding of Jerusalem are able to sustain eighty-

years of slander and palace intrigue which leads to both Ezra and Nehemiah taking their respective roles in ensuring that the temple functions according to God’s word, and that the city and its defenses are rebuilt despite the efforts to oppose this—efforts about which we will soon read.

Satan may attempt to thwart YHWH’s purposes—he may use the most clever means (deception), or the most direct of means (the force of the state), but YHWH always keeps his promises. If the earthly struggle in Jerusalem between YHWH and Satan can be seen in passages such as this, then apostle John sees this same conflict in terms of a war in heaven, a war which Satan loses, and which leads to Satan being eventually cast to earth after the coming of the kingdom of Jesus, whose person and work this rebuilt temple in Jerusalem foreshadows.

With this bigger spiritual struggle in mind, we turn to our text, Ezra 4:1-24 (a portion of which we have already read, and you will need your Bibles open as we cover the rest of it). In verses 1-2, Ezra recounts the scene and the approach of the adversaries feigning friendship. *“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 fathers’ 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.”* The adversaries of Judah and Benjamin (the two tribes, along with Levi which made up the southern kingdom of Judah) were mentioned in the previous chapter—“the people of the land.” These are the neighboring peoples composed of native Canaanites, perhaps some apostate Jews who continued to sacrifice in Jerusalem on their own (unsanctioned), as well as Samaritans, who were also exiles to this region after their own Babylonian captivity, and who were brought to the area (just to the north of Jerusalem) by the Assyrian king Sargon after the fall of the northern kingdom.<sup>2</sup>

What follows will not be a military confrontation, but a war of wits which plays out in the following chapters.<sup>3</sup> These adversaries make an offer to help the Israelites rebuild their temple, claiming to worship YHWH, and stating that they have been sacrificing to him since the days of Esarhaddon, an Assyrian king who may be the king mentioned in 2 Kings 17:24–25. *“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.”* According to verses 29-30 of 2 Kings 17, *“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. But every nation still made gods of its own and put them in the shrines of the high places that the Samaritans had made, every nation in the cities in which they lived.”* The account in 2 Kings 17 concludes in verses 33-34, *“so they feared the LORD but also served their own gods, after the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away. To this day they do according to the former manner. They do not fear the LORD, and they do not follow the statutes or the rules or the law or the commandment that the LORD commanded the children of Jacob, whom he named Israel.”*

If the reference in Ezra 4 to the “people of the land” is to those exiles mentioned in 2 Kings 17, we immediately see why the Israelites responded to them with such a definitive “no.” These people approach under the cover of friendship, and they offer assistance to Zerubbabel. But from what is said in

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<sup>2</sup> Breneman, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Logos on 4:1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 49.

verse 3, it is clear that Zerubbabel understands their nefarious purposes and that although these people might make sacrifices to YHWH as a “god,” they do not worship YHWH as *the* true and living God, as commanded in God’s word. Ezra tells us that “*Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of 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.’*” Thanks, but no thanks! You may go now!

These pagans do not mind that a temple is being built. They do mind that this temple will be the place where sacrifices are made to YHWH, who demands exclusive worship.<sup>4</sup> As the author of Kings put it, “*they do not fear the Lord,*” nor do they “*follow the statutes or the rules or the law or the commandment that the LORD commanded the children of Jacob.*” To worship YHWH plus pagan gods, is to deny YHWH. Zerubbabel is not being rude and could probably use the help. But he knows that allowing these men to participate, will put pagan idolaters in a place where they might have great sway over the Jewish exiles who were not discerning. As one writer puts it, “there are times when narrowness and intolerance is the way to faithfulness.”<sup>5</sup> This is surely one of those times. Nothing good can come of these adversaries getting involved in the rebuilding efforts.

Having been curtly dismissed, the people of the land seek other ways to stop the rebuilding of the temple. They will begin harassing the Jewish people, threatening them, and bribing the Persian officials to pull the building permit, and cut-off the funding. And when that doesn’t work, they begin officially petitioning the Persian kings to stop the process—slandering the Israelites in the process. The Jews in Jerusalem were isolated from Persia, their supply lines from Lebanon were long, and their fortifications were still in ruins. The people of the land knew all of this quite well. The best time to stop the Jews is now, before they become strong.

We read in verses 4-5, “*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.*” We know that this period of intimidation and threats lasted from about 536 BC when the rebuilding stopped, until 520 BC when work on the temple resumed—this after Cyrus had died, and Darius taken his place. The threats, intimidation, and bribery worked for a time, because we read in Ezra 4:24, “*then the work on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped, and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.*” This was in 520 BC.

In verses 6-23, Ezra skips ahead in time to give us a running chronology from the point after the temple has been rebuilt in 516 BC, until a Persian king (Artaxerxes) orders the construction of the walls to stop about 458. The walls of the city were finally rebuilt in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah in 445 BC. In this section (vv. 6-23), Ezra recounts those events which ultimately led to him being sent to Jerusalem along with Nehemiah. In verse 6, Ezra describes how the people of the land take things one step further after harassing the Israelites—they petition the Persian king Darius’ successor to stop the rebuilding project altogether. “*And in the reign of Ahasuerus [Xerxes I], in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.*” This petition comes at a point after the scene described in verses 4-5, even perhaps after the temple had been finished as commanded by YHWH through the prophets Haggai and Zechariah.

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<sup>4</sup> Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 778.

<sup>5</sup> Davis, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (part four).

We know that Darius died in 486 BC, and about that time that Egypt rebelled against Persian rule, with the Persians regaining control under Xerxes I in 483 BC.<sup>6</sup> Although nothing, apparently, came of the appeal mentioned in verse 6 (the appeal which follows in verse 7 seems to be yet another appeal coming later),<sup>7</sup> we can imagine that the people of the land accused the Israelites of not being loyal subjects to the Persian king, implying that the Israelites may have been tacitly supporting the Egyptians. This complaint must have come after Darius' death in 486, so work on the temple was already completed, and this complaint must have focused upon the rebuilding of the city's walls (as we will see in Ezra 4:12).<sup>8</sup>

Xerxes and his son Artaxerxes (who ruled from 464-423 BC) were likely not as supportive of the Israelite rebuilding project as their predecessors Cyrus and Darius had been. The Persians were facing serious military troubles in Egypt (to the southwest of Jerusalem) and by this time, the Jews had been back in their land for more than fifty years, with their temple rebuilt and sacrifices long underway. Not only were there are pressing military problems, it is likely that neither Xerxes nor his son Artaxerxes were as familiar with the Jews as Cyrus and Darius had been, and by now there had been a series of reports coming to the Persian court from the area to the north of Jerusalem that the Jews are not loyal to either Xerxes or his son. Time for the Persians to do something about their disruptive Jewish vassals.

Verse 7, mentions an additional accusation coming to the Persian Court from the people of the land (which was sent after the accusation in verse 6). This one is sent during the reign of Artaxerxes. In verse 7, we read that "*in the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam and Mithredath and Tabeel and the rest of their associates wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia. The letter was written in Aramaic and translated.*" Ezra even names the accusers, who are known to be from the province beyond the River (the Jordan) to the north of Jerusalem. Coming from people who may have been trying to gain favor from Persian officials, this letter too, apparently, produced no reply from the Persian court.

And so, according to verses 8-10, yet another accusation (the third) is sent to Artaxerxes, the text of which is actually preserved for us in Ezra 4:11-16. Ezra tells us the circumstances (in verses 8-10) behind this letter before producing the text (vv. 11-16). "*Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king as follows: 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.*" Clearly, the people of the land do not want to see Israel with a rebuilt temple and Jerusalem with rebuilt fortifications. If Cyrus thought happy subjects were loyal subjects, then Israel's neighbors to the north thought weak Persian subjects (the Israelites) would not be a threat to them.

Their letter to Artaxerxes reads as follows: "*(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 are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city. They are finishing the walls

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<sup>6</sup> Edwin Yamauchi, Expositor's Bible Commentary, 4:717ff.

<sup>7</sup> Williamson, Ezra, Nehemiah, 60-61.

<sup>8</sup> Waltke, An Old Testament Theology, 779.

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."

The letter implies that Israel is failing to pay the promised taxes and tribute (v. 13) and the rebuilding of the walls is an indication that Israel will become a threat to Persian security (v. 16). Artaxerxes' response is recorded in verses 17-22. "*The king sent an answer:*"

To Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe and the rest of their associates who live in Samaria and in the rest of the province Beyond the River, greeting. And now the letter that you sent to us has been plainly read before me. And I made a decree, and search has been made, and it has been found that this city from of old has risen against kings, and that rebellion and sedition have been made in it. And mighty kings have been over Jerusalem, who ruled over the whole province Beyond the River, to whom tribute, custom, and toll were paid. Therefore make a decree that these men be made to cease, and that this city be not rebuilt, until a decree is made by me. And take care not to be slack in this matter. Why should damage grow to the hurt of the king?"

The people of the land have gotten their wish. The rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls must stop—king's orders. In verse 23, Ezra recounts how this bad news was conveyed to the Israelites by their neighbors to the north. "*Then, when the copy of King Artaxerxes' letter was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their associates, they went in haste to the Jews at Jerusalem and by force and power made them cease.*" This round in the redemptive drama goes, it seems, to those doing the bidding of Satan. The Jews have rebuilt their temple. That is a religious matter. But the walls of the city are a political-military matter. The rebuilding of fortifications by a people with a record of rebellion must stop. It will fall to Nehemiah (as recounted in the book which bears his name) to set this matter right before the Persian court.

Although the chronology of Ezra 4 can be a bit confusing (since verse 24, speaks of an earlier event—the work stoppage on the temple in 536 BC, work which had begun again in 520 and which was completed in 516), Ezra's point in verses 6-23 is to recount how the opposition from Israel's adversaries to the rebuilding of the city and its temple does not cease until the work is finally completed in 445 BC. Israel's enemies claimed to worship YHWH, but did not. They offered to help, but instead made threats and created decades of suspicion and political intrigue in the Persian Court, eventually convincing Artaxerxes to stop the rebuilding of the city's walls. No wonder Ezra describes them as "adversaries."

Ezra's careful recounting of the opposition from the "peoples of the land" and the careful chronology of the Persians kings, is intended to remind us that although from one perspective this is a spiritual war being fought in heavenly places (as in the scene in Revelation 12), the flesh and blood battle transpires in human history, even in the midst of the courts of historical empires. This is not a story of the "once upon a time in a land far away," but an historical account which includes a letter actually read in a Persian court, and the letter of response actually composed by a flesh and blood Persian king, whose name we know, and whose life is well documented.

In verse 24, Ezra returns to the point he made in verses 4-5, *“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.”* In about 536, BC, under the pressure and duress of the people of the land, work on the temple came to a stop. In verse 24, we read, *“then the work on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped, and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.”* Things looked bad in 536 when work on the temple stopped, but in 520 BC YHWH ensures that work begins again. Things looked especially dire when the Persian court ordered the rebuilding of the city’s walls to stop. God will prevail and accomplish his purpose in the midst of these bad circumstances as well good.

In the next chapter of Ezra (which takes us back to 520 BC), we will read that the work on the temple resumes and the temple will be completed. Despite the efforts of the pagan syncretists who profess to believe in YHWH, but who *“do not fear the LORD, and they do not follow the statutes or the rules or the law or the commandments of the Lord,”* YHWH always keeps his promises and fulfills his sovereign purposes. The reason why he allows these interruptions is so we learn an important spiritual lesson. There are times when we must say *“we alone will build to the LORD.”* The reality is that there are neighbors all around us who hate our profession of faith in Jesus Christ, especially the fact that we profess Jesus to be the only Savior, and that his death and resurrection is the only means by which sinners can be saved. They come with smiles, while seeking to stop the work of Christ’s kingdom (which they cannot accomplish). When they come, we say, *“thanks but no thanks, we build alone.”*