

Ezra

Chapter 4

Adversaries Oppose the Rebuilding

Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the LORD, the God of Israel, ² 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." ³ But 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." ⁴ Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build ⁵ 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. ⁶ And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.

4:1–23 A summary of various attempts to thwart the efforts of the Jews. In vv. 1–5 the author describes events in the reign of Cyrus (559–530 B.C.), in v. 6 the reign of Xerxes (486–465) and in vv. 7–23 the reign of Artaxerxes I (465–424). He then reverts in v. 24 to the time of Darius I (522–486), during whose reign the temple was completed (see 5:1–2; 6:13–15; Haggai; Zec 1:1–17; 4:9). (CSB)

4:1 *adversaries.* The people who offered their "help" (v. 2) were from Samaria. (CSB)

Also called "people of the land." One reason the Judeans set up the altar was out of fear of these people (3:3). Opposition from outsiders to the various building projects is a recurring theme in both Ezr (4:6–23) and Ne (4:1–9). (TLSB)

Israel. God's covenant people of the OT. (TLSB)

4:2 After the fall of Samaria in 722–721 B.C., the Assyrian kings brought in people from Mesopotamia and Aram. These people served their own gods but also took up the worship of the Lord as the god of the land (2Ki 17:24–41). (CSB)

build with you ... worship. After Assyria had captured the northern Israelite capital of Samaria in 722 BC, various outsiders were imported into the land of Israel by several Assyrian kings, including Esarhaddon (681–669 BC). These had received some training in how to worship the God of Israel, but they likely mingled the worship practices of Moses with pagan religious practices. (TLSB)

Esarhaddon. See note on 2Ki 19:37. (reigned 681–669 B.C. Assyrian inscriptions speak of a struggle among Sennacherib's sons for the right of succession to the Assyrian throne. Sennacherib's designation of Esarhaddon as heir apparent, even though he was younger than

several of his brothers, may have sparked the abortive attempt at a coup by Adrammelech and Sharezer.) (CSB)

4:3 The returned exiles, fearing they would commit themselves to a false worship refused the offer of these neighbors to jointly build the temple. (TLSB)

It was undoubtedly this mixed worship which influenced the exiles to reject the participation and fellowship of the Samaritans in the rebuilding of the temple. Because they resented this rejection, the Samaritans began to oppose the temple at Jerusalem. This hostility lasted into the NT times. (John 4 records the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well). (PBC)

Cyrus ... commanded us. They justified this refusal by citing Cyrus's order. (TLSB)

4:4 *peoples around them.* Josephus (*Antiquities*, 11.2.1) singles out especially the Cutheans (see 2Ki 17:24, 30). (CSB)

Native population, a mixture of racial strains and blend of religious beliefs (6:21; 2Ki 17:24–33). Later, they came to be known as Samaritans. (TLSB)

made them afraid. The Hebrew for this verb often describes the fear aroused in a battle situation (Jdg 20:41; 2Sa 4:1; 2Ch 32:18). (CSB)

Fear, evident previously (3:3), now grew so great that work on the temple ceased. (TLSB)

4:5 *hired.* Cf. the hiring of Balaam (Dt 23:4–5; Ne 13:2) and the hiring of a prophet to intimidate Nehemiah (Ne 6:12–13). (CSB)

The “people of the land” (v 4) turned the Persian advisers and god-fearing officials against the Judeans not only with words but also with money. Cf 7:14. (TLSB)

The Samaritans hired men whom we would call “lobbyists” to turn the Persian government against the rebuilding project and cut off funds. This lobbying continued for about twenty years, throughout the remaining years of Cyrus's reign, through the reigns of Cambyses and Pseudo-Smerdis, who are not mentioned in the Bible, and into the reign of Darius I which began in 521 B.C. (PBC)

frustrate ... Darius. Cyrus was evidently persuaded to back off from supporting the temple rebuilding. His successor, Cambyses (528–523 BC), continued the same policy. The returnees had to wait until the second year of the third Persian king, Darius (522–486 BC), before they were permitted to resume the project, a delay of some 15 years and a great loss of momentum. (TLSB)

4:6–23 These letters record later attempts by the adversaries to frustrate the building of the walls of Jerusalem.

4:6 *Xerxes.* See the book of Esther. When Darius died in 486 B.C., Egypt rebelled, and Xerxes, the son of Darius, had to march west to suppress the revolt. (CSB)

Ahasuerus. Hbr name of the Persian king the Greeks called Xerxes (486–465 BC). Esther became his queen (Est 2:16–17). (TLSB)

accusation. Perhaps this accusation, about which there is no further information, was somehow related to the fact that Xerxes, in his first year as king, was occupied with putting down a revolt in Egypt. (TLSB)

4:1–6 To maintain pure worship, the Judeans reject the offer from the people of the land, who insist on taking part in building the temple and in joining the worship services. When God’s people today consider the boundaries of pure others, they may feel challenged as they work to fulfill both callings. Clear boundaries in doctrine and practice are necessary because a corrupt gospel is no Gospel at all (cf Gal 1:8). Thanks be to God for maintaining the preaching and teaching of His life-giving Word, which has spanned the centuries to reach us too. What a joy to share that blessed message with those who repent. • Preserve Your mission of grace among us, O Lord, and grant us clear understanding of the boundaries between true and false worship. Amen. (TLSB)

The Letter to King Artaxerxes

7 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. 8 Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king as follows: 9 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, 10 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. 11 (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 12 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 and repairing the foundations. 13 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. 14 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, 15 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. 16 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.”

4:7 Artaxerxes. Three Persian kings bore this name: Artaxerxes I (465–424 B.C.), II (404–358) and III (358–338). The king here is Artaxerxes I. (CSB)

Persian king (464–424 BC), successor to Xerxes. He authorized Ezra’s return to Jerusalem (7:6). (TLSB)

wrote to Artaxerxes. Near Eastern kings employed an elaborate system of informers and spies. Egyptian sources speak of the “ears and eyes” of Pharaoh. Sargon II of Assyria had agents in Urartu whom he ordered: “Write me whatever you see and hear.” The King’s Eye and the King’s Ear were two officials who reported to the Persian monarch. (CSB)

Like the letter in vv 11–16, this was evidently hostile to the Judeans. (TLSB)

4:8–6:18 For this passage the author draws upon Aramaic documents; a further Aramaic section is 7:12–26. (CSB)

4:8 *Rehum ... Shimshai*. Two Persian officials who also wrote a letter (preserved in vv 11–16) to Artaxerxes against Jerusalem. (TLSB)

commander. An official who had the role of a chancellor or commissioner. Perhaps Rehum dictated, and Shimshai wrote the letter in Aramaic. (Alternatively, Shimshai may have been a high official rather than a scribe.) The letter would then be read in a Persian translation before the king (v. 18). According to Herodotus (3.128), royal scribes were attached to each governor to report directly to the Persian king. (CSB)

High Persian civilian official who gives orders or issues edicts. *scribe*. Responsible for drafting official correspondence (cf 7:6). (TLSB)

4:9 Rehum and Shimshai added the names of others who signed the accusation. The signatories held various offices and had come to Samaria from several different places in the East. (TLSB)

associates. See vv. 17, 23; 5:3, 6; 6:6 (“fellow officials”); 6:13. One of the striking characteristics of Persian bureaucracy was that each responsibility was shared among colleagues. (CSB)

Babylonians. During the reign of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal (669–627 B.C.), a major revolt had taken place (652–648), involving Shamash-Shum-Ukin, the brother of the king and the ruler over Babylonia. After a long siege Shamash-Shum-Ukin hurled himself into the flames. Doubtless these men of Babylon and the other cities mentioned were the descendants of the rebels, whom the Assyrians deported to the west. (CSB)

Susa. The major city of Elam (in southwest Iran). Because of Susa’s part in the revolt, Ashurbanipal brutally destroyed it in 640 (two centuries before Rehum’s letter). (CSB)

Ancient capital of Elam and later of Persia; east of Babylonia. (TLSB)

4:10 *Ashurbanipal*. The last great Assyrian king, famed for his library at Nineveh. He is not named elsewhere in the Bible, but he is probably the king who freed Manasseh from exile (2Ch 33:11–13). (CSB)

Osnappar. Probably refers to the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal (668–c 627 BC).(TLSB)

deported. Ashurbanipal may be the unnamed Assyrian king who brought people to Samaria according to 2Ki 17:24. It is characteristic of such deportations that the descendants of populations that had been removed from their homelands nearly two centuries earlier should still stress their origins. (CSB)

Samaria. The murder of Amon king of Judah (642–640 B.C.; see 2Ki 21:23; 2Ch 33:24) was probably the result of an anti-Assyrian movement inspired by the revolt in Elam and Babylonia. The Assyrians may then have deported the rebellious Samaritans and replaced them with the rebellious Elamites and Babylonians. (CSB)

Refers both to the former capital of Israel and to the territory around that city, c 40 mi N of Jerusalem. (TLSB)

Trans-Euphrates. Lit. “beyond the River,” i.e., the Euphrates River. From the Palestinian point of view the land “beyond the River” was Mesopotamia (Jos 24:2–3, 14–15; 2Sa 10:16). From the Mesopotamian point of view the land “beyond the River” included the areas of Aram, Phoenicia and Palestine (1Ki 4:24). The Persians also called this area Athura. (CSB)

For administrative purposes, the Persian Empire was divided into 20 districts, called satrapies. The fifth of these was known as Beyond the River because it was made up of territory beyond, or west of, the Euphrates. Its satrap was responsible to the emperor for Syria, Samaria, and Cyprus. “The province of Judah” (5:8) constituted a smaller unit of control within his satrapy. (TLSB)

4:11–16 Rehum’s letter to Artaxerxes. (TLSB)

4:12 *Jews.* Aram *yehudaye’*, “the Judeans.” Not to be confused with modern practitioners of the Jewish religion, which was a later development. (TLSB)

rebellious and wicked city. Jerusalem’s past history justified this description, though it was hardly the only city deserving such characterization. (TLSB)

repairing the foundations. As Isaiah had foretold (Isa 58:13–14). (CSB)

Work that Nehemiah eventually completed (Ne 6:15). A walled city was defensible and, therefore, more likely to rebel. (TLSB)

4:13 Most of the gold and silver coins that came into Persia’s treasury were melted down to be stored as bullion. Very little of the taxes returned to benefit the provinces. (CSB)

tribute, custom, or toll. Various taxes owed to the king. Jerusalem lay between the major trade routes from Egypt to Mesopotamia. A Judean rebellion could significantly affect trade relations. (TLSB)

4:14 *we eat the salt of the palace and it is not fitting for us to witness.* Lit. “we eat the salt of the palace.” Salt was made a royal monopoly by the Ptolemies in Egypt, and perhaps by the Persians as well. (CSB)

Possibly refers to a ceremony in which salt was eaten to ratify an oath or covenant (cf 2Ch 13:5). (TLSB)

4:15 *book of the records.* See 5:17; 6:1; Est 2:23; 6:1–2. There were several repositories of such documents at the major capitals. These royal archives preserved documents for centuries. In the third century B.C. the Babylonian priest Berossus made use of the Babylonian Chronicles in his history of Babylon, which covered events from the Assyrian to the Hellenistic (beginning with Alexander’s conquest of Babylon in 330 B.C.) eras. (CSB)

Historical records (some of which survive) of ancient kingdoms such as Babylonia and Persia. The most complete book of ancient records is the Bible. (TLSB)

4:16 *make known to the king.* Bureaucrats sought to avoid future charges of negligence. (TLSB)

no possession. Hyperbole. Judah had not firmly controlled the region since the time of Solomon, nearly 500 years earlier. (TLSB)

4:7–16 Ezra illustrates the strong and unreasonable opposition that the Judean settlers faced from regional Persian officials. Today, God’s people may face similar bureaucratic opposition when seeking building permits, etc., for churches and schools. Pray for your governing officials who do not seem to recognize the valuable contribution God’s people make in civil life. Give thanks for faithful officials who do recognize the benefits of godly service. Through the Gospel, the King of heaven will transform hearts and minds so that all may see His merciful goodness. • O Lord, make me salt and light for my community by faithfully and patiently bearing witness to Your Word and will. Amen. (TLSB)

The King Orders the Work to Cease

17 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 **18** the letter that you sent to us has been plainly read before me. **19** 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. **20** And mighty kings have been over Jerusalem, who ruled over the whole province Beyond the River, to whom tribute, custom, and toll were paid. **21** 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. **22** And take care not to be slack in this matter. Why should damage grow to the hurt of the king?” **23** 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. **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.

4:17–21 Artaxerxes responded to Rehum’s letter by issuing a decree that Jerusalem not be rebuilt immediately. (TLSB)

4:18 *read.* Since the king probably could not read Aramaic, he would have had the document read to him. (CSB)

4:19 *rebellion.* There is some truth in the accusation. Jerusalem had rebelled against the Assyrians in 701 B.C. (2Ki 18:7) and against the Babylonians in 600 and 589 (2Ki 24:1, 20). (CSB)

4:20 *mighty kings.* E.g., David and Solomon. (TLSB)

4:21–23 As a result of the intervention of the provincial authorities, Artaxerxes I (see v. 11 and note on v. 7) ordered that the Jews stop rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem (see note on Ne 1:3). The events of vv. 7–23 probably occurred prior to 445 B.C.. The forcible destruction of these recently rebuilt walls rather than the destruction by Nebuchadnezzar would then be the basis of the report made to Nehemiah (Ne 1:3). (CSB)

4:21 Artaxerxes does not rule out permitting the building of the walls sometime in the future. His letter anticipates further governmental investigation. The walls were finally built under Nehemiah (Ne 2:8; 6:15). (TLSB)

4:22 *hurt of the king?* Reflects the prediction made in v 16. (TLSB)

4:23 *by force.* Rehum's use of force to stop the rebuilding of the walls is described in Ne 1:3: "The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire." (TLSB)

4:24 After this long digression describing the opposition to Jewish efforts, the writer returns to his original subject of the rebuilding of the temple (vv. 1–5). (CSB)

Repeats the report in vv 4–5, that work on the temple stopped for the remainder of Cyrus's reign, during the entire rule of Cambyses (528–523 BC), until the second year of Darius's reign (522–486 BC). Though the official letters of ch 4 concern the walls of Jerusalem, they prevent work on the temple as well. (TLSB)

second year of the reign of Darius. According to Persian reckoning, the second regnal year of Darius I began on Nisan 1 (Apr. 3), 520 B.C., and lasted until Feb. 21, 519. In that year the prophet Haggai (Hag 1:1–5) exhorted Zerubbabel to begin rebuilding the temple on the first day of the sixth month (Aug. 29). Work began on the temple on the 24th day of the month, Sept. 21 (Hag 1:15). During his first two years, Darius had to establish his right to the throne by fighting numerous rebels, as recounted in his famous Behistun (Bisitun) inscription. It was only after the stabilization of the Persian empire that efforts to rebuild the temple could be permitted. (CSB)

520 BC (5:1–2; Hg 1:14–15). (TLSB)

4:17–24 Artaxerxes' response and the violent intervention of local officials stop the civil building projects in Jerusalem, most notably the work on the temple. Underlying the physical struggles of our world are always spiritual struggles. Through Scripture, keep aware of spiritual struggles and make them the focus of your prayers against Satan. Take courage from the Lord's mastery of His creation and the manner in which He works for the good of His people, especially shown in the civil punishment and glorious resurrection of His Son for our redemption. • Hear the cry of Your people, mighty King, and work among us for our blessing. Amen. (TLSB)