

# LESSON 11

## Ezra 4

From Ezra 4 until the end of Nehemiah there is nothing but conflict.

We might hope that we can avoid conflict in the service of God, but, if we did, we would be the first. And if our goal is to just avoid conflict, then we are most likely not doing much in the service of God. Jesus certainly did not avoid conflict. Some decide that the safest course is to just do nothing in an attempt to avoid all conflict (and we will see that same attitude in Ezra), but all that strategy does is create conflict with God. We must be focused on pleasing God and doing God's will, and that will very often create conflict, both from inside and from outside.

Yes, we much preach the word in love, but I like what R. L. Whiteside said about that:

“Much is said about preaching the truth in love and so it should be preached. But in love of what? The preacher should so love the truth that he will not sacrifice any of it nor pervert it, and he should so love people that he will not withhold from them even one unpleasant truth. He that does either of these things loves neither the truth nor the people.”

Preaching the word in love does not mean that we will avoid all conflict. What it means is that conflict should not be our goal when we preach the word.

From this point on in Ezra, nothing that these people attempt to do for God will go unchallenged. Does that sound familiar?

The conflict we see in the remainder of this book, and how the people of God react to that conflict (sometimes in the right way, and sometimes in the wrong way) will provide some valuable lessons for us today.

## Ezra 4:1-3

Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the children of the captivity builded the temple unto the LORD God of Israel; 2 Then they came to Zerubbabel, and to the chief of the fathers, and said unto them, Let us build with you: for we seek your God, as ye do;

and we do sacrifice unto him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assur, which brought us up hither. 3 But Zerubbabel, and Jeshua, and the rest of the chief of the fathers of Israel, said unto them, Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God; but we ourselves together will build unto the LORD God of Israel, as king Cyrus the king of Persia hath commanded us.

The “adversaries” in verse 1 are the same people we looked at in Ezra 3:3.

Verse 2 gives us a big clue as to the origin of some of these adversaries: “we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria who brought us here.”

The king of Assyria in 722 when the northern tribes were carried off was Sargon II. His three immediate successors were Sennacherib, Esarhaddon, and Ashurbanipal. The second of that group, Esarhaddon, reigned from 681 to 669 BC

We know that Sargon II repopulated the northern kingdom after he carried off the Israelites, and verse 2 here is telling us that Esarhaddon must have continued that same policy, including moving some further south into Syria and Palestine. In verse 10 of this chapter will see a resettlement by Ashurbanipal, who reigned after Esarhaddon.

So what does this mean? What it means is that some, and perhaps many, of these surrounding adversaries of the Jews had been forcibly settled in the area by the Assyrians after the Assyrians had emptied the land of its former inhabitants, the Jews of the northern tribes. When they arrived, the land had been largely empty, and they had been given the land by a royal edict from an Assyrian king. Now these Jews had arrived with a royal edict of their own from a Persian king to take land that they claimed was their land by priority of ownership. No one should be surprised by the conflict that resulted.

But verse 2 is interesting for another reason – for what these resettled Assyrians say to the Jews: “for we seek your God, as ye do; and we do sacrifice unto him.” How can we explain that? How did they know anything about God? 2 Kings 17 answers that question.

2 Kings 17:24-28 – And the king of Assyria brought men from Babylon, and from Cuthah, and from Ava, and from Hamath, and from Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the children of Israel: and they possessed Samaria, and dwelt in the cities thereof. 25 And so it was at the beginning of their dwelling there, that they feared not the LORD: therefore the LORD sent lions among them, which slew some of them. 26 Wherefore they spake to the king of Assyria, saying, The nations which thou hast removed, and placed in the cities of

Samaria, know not the manner of the God of the land: therefore he hath sent lions among them, and, behold, they slay them, because they know not the manner of the God of the land. 27 Then the king of Assyria commanded, saying, Carry thither one of the priests whom ye brought from thence; and let them go and dwell there, and let him teach them the manner of the God of the land. 28 Then one of the priests whom they had carried away from Samaria came and dwelt in Bethel, and taught them how they should fear the LORD.

So even these resettled Assyrians had no excuse! They had learned (the hard way!) how to fear God.

One of the themes of Ezra is the importance of maintaining purity, and we see that theme here. These neighbors (tellingly already called adversaries in verse 1) approach the Israelites and say to them, “Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do.” How often today do we hear that same ecumenical plea!

And how did the Jews respond? “Sure! Come on in! Let’s all just agree to disagree! Grab a guitar and we can all just celebrate Jesus together!” No, that is not what they said at all.

What the Jews said in verse 3 was, “Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God; but we ourselves together will build unto the LORD God of Israel.”

The Jews knew very well that these people, despite their claims, did not worship God as the Jews did. How did they know that? They had eyes! They could read God’s word, and they could observe how their neighbors worshiped – and what they worshiped.

Let’s keep reading in 2 Kings 17.

2 Kings 17:33-41 – 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. The LORD made a covenant with them and commanded them, “You shall not fear other gods or bow yourselves to them or serve them or sacrifice to them, but you shall fear the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt with great power and with an outstretched arm. You shall bow yourselves to him, and to him you shall sacrifice. And the statutes and the rules and the law and the commandment that he wrote for you, you shall always be careful to do. You shall not fear other gods, and you shall not forget the covenant that I have made with you. You shall not fear other gods, but you shall fear the LORD your God, and he will deliver you out of the hand of

all your enemies.” However, they would not listen, but they did according to their former manner. So these nations feared the LORD and also served their carved images. Their children did likewise, and their children’s children—as their fathers did, so they do to this day.

Yes, they feared God, but they also “did according to their former manner” and “served their carved images.” And that is not something God wanted his people to just “agree to disagree” about!

The Jews had a choice to make – peace with their neighbors or peace with God; conflict with their neighbors or conflict with God. Should they accept these neighbors into their group along with their false worship, or should they not? Should they seek peace at any price even when that price is their faithfulness and obedience to God?

I think we all know the right answer in Ezra 4, but do we know the right answer when this same problem comes to our own door? Do we know the right answer when our own neighbors, many of whom have cast the word of God behind their backs, show up and say, “Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do”?

The world says there are many churches; the Bible says there is one. The world says we can each go the church of our choice; the Bible says that we must obey the gospel so that God will add us to the church of his choice. The world says there are many paths to God; the Bible says there is one and only one. The world says that each of us is free to worship God however we choose; the Bible says that we must worship God in spirit and in truth.

What do we do when the world shows up at our door and says, “Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do”? We have an example of what to do here in Ezra 4.

But are we really supposed to say today what they said way back then? Well, look who is doing the talking in verse 3 – Zerubbabel and Jeshua. We have already looked at those two, the descendant of royalty and the High Priest, and we have seen how they are used to prefigure the perfect King and High Priest who was to come.

These people had a big choice, and it is a choice that comes time and time again to the people of God – would they trust in God or would they trust in man? Would they embrace their neighbors for security, or would they look to God for security?

Their ancestors had often looked to Egypt or Assyria for help rather than to God – what would these descendants do? Here they made the right decision – they determined to trust in the arm of God

rather than the arm of man.

Here is the answer they gave to their neighbors in verse 3: “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.”

But that answer is so harsh! It is so black and white! It is so unloving! But is it? Was their answer unloving? Many today would say it was, but of course we know it was not. It was the most loving answer they could give. First, it shows their love for God and their desire to obey God no matter the consequences. But second, it showed love for their neighbors. The most unloving thing they could have done would have been to tell those neighbors they were right with God when they were not right with God.

But notice that their answer in verse 3 adds something else – “as king Cyrus the king of Persia hath commanded us.” Why did they say that?

One reason have already mentioned is that the two groups had dueling royal decrees. Another possible reason is that Cyrus’ decree had not charged these neighbors with rebuilding the temple, and so technical adherence to that decree would prevent the Jews from working with those neighbors. But there must be more to it than that because we know that these exiles would not have worked with these neighbors even if Cyrus’ decree had been silent on the issue.

A more important reason to mention the decree of Cyrus is that the Jews knew who was really behind that decree. We were told in the opening verses that God had stirred Cyrus to make that decree, and we know that the decree was made at the time that Jeremiah had prophesied it would occur. Also, we know that God through Isaiah had mentioned Cyrus by name hundreds of years before Cyrus was born. In short, Cyrus’ decree was God’s decree, and that is how these people properly saw it.

As we said in an earlier lesson, the phrase “we have been sacrificing to him” in verse 2 seems to confirm that there was most likely an altar already in place before the exiles began to build their own altar, and verse 2 likewise confirms that that previous altar would have been defiled and not built according to God’s word, which means it would have been torn down before the restored altar was built.

And that is yet another lesson in restoration. True restoration begins by removing whatever is false. True restoration does not seek to reform falsehood, but rather it removes falsehood – and then it builds in its place that which is true.

## Ezra 4:4-5

4 Then the people of the land weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building, 5 And hired counsellors against them, to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.

Yes, this is the same group who two verses earlier said, “Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do!” Verses 4-5 explain why that group was called “adversaries” in verse 1. The knives have come out and the opposition begins in earnest.

Remember that Ezra is writing this about 80 years after these events in Chapter 4 occurred. In just a moment, Ezra will look back over the history from his time to this time and illustrate other examples of opposition that occurred during those 80 year that followed. Why does Ezra do that? Because those later examples will completely justify the response that the Jews gave in verse 3 to the offer of help in verse 2.

The phrase “people of the land” in verse 4 is interesting. To the Jews, that phrase later became a synonym for the ignorant or the vulgar with regard to knowledge of the law. Those who did not know or follow the law were called the people of the land.

The phrase “weakened the hands” in verse 4 is the same word that was applied against Jeremiah in 38:4 by his enemies. There is nothing wrong with weakening the hands of those opposed to God (as Jeremiah was doing), but here it is God’s people whose hands are being weakened – and we must never let the world do that to us.

The counselors in verse 5 were likely Persian officials bribed to obstruct the building in every possible way.

This pressure against the Jews would continue for about 16 years (until 520 BC), and as we will see, it eventually stopped the work on the temple. But it did not stop all building activities – Haggai will later tell us that some of the Jews were much more focused on their own paneled homes than they were on the house of God.

The mention of Darius in verse 5 and again in verse 24 marks the intervening verses as an excursus or a parenthetical. We talked about this at length in our introductory lessons.

Ezra does not return to the specific opposition of verses 4-5 until verse 24. The remaining verses in Chapter 4 discuss later oppositions to the building of the walls under the reign of Ahasuerus (Xerxes I, husband of Queen Esther) and the reign of Artaxerxes I, who allowed both Ezra and Nehemiah to return.

## Ezra 4:6

6 And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, wrote they unto him an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.

Ahasuerus (or Xerxes I) was the Persian king who reigned from 486 until 465, following the reign of Darius I. Ahasuerus was the husband of Queen Esther.

All verse 6 tells us is that the opposition and letter writing by their hostile neighbors continued through the reign of this king. We are not told whether they received any response to their letter.

When we get to our study of Esther, we will see that Ahasuerus had some other things on his mind! When Darius died at the end of 486 BC, Egypt rebelled, and Xerxes had to march west to suppress the revolt and finally regained control by the end of 483. Xerxes is best known for his massive invasion of Greece as recounted in Herodotus. His navy and army were defeated by the Greeks at Salamis in 480 and at Plataea in 479.

Where does the name Xerxes come from? Ahasuerus is the Hebrew form of the Persian name Khshayarsha, for which the Greek form is Xerxes. While the Hebrews would carefully match letter for letter in coming up with the Hebrew version of a Persian name, the Greeks followed a different procedure. When Greeks couldn't pronounce a foreign name, they just came up with a new name that was more Greek sounding. By that process, perhaps I should just start referring to Ashurbanipal as Bill or Ted!

The tombs of these Persian kings are located in modern-day Iran. They were looted during the days of Alexander, but the tombs themselves remain to this day.

We will have a lot more to say about Xerxes when we get to the book of Esther, but this is all that Ezra has to say about him.

## Ezra 4:7-8

7 And in the days of Artaxerxes wrote Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, and the rest of their companions, unto Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the writing of the letter was written in the Syrian tongue, and interpreted in the Syrian tongue. 8 Rehum the chancellor and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king in this sort:

Artaxerxes was the Persian king who followed Xerxes I, and he reigned from 464 until 424. He became king by murdering his older brother.

It was during his reign that Ezra returned in 458 and Nehemiah returned in 445. Again, we are told that the opposition continued into this king's reign, but here we are given more detail, including a copy of an actual letter sent to the king by the opponents of the Jews.

A major concern during the first half of Artaxerxes' reign was an Egyptian revolt that began in 460 and that was supported by the Greeks. That revolt in Egypt would have caused the king to listen very seriously to these charges of sedition in nearby Palestine.

In Chapter 2 we saw the wall of honor. Here we see a wall of dishonor, as the Bible records the names of the opponents: Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, Rehum, and Shimshai.

From verse 8 here in Ezra 4 until Ezra 6:18, the text is in Aramaic (called the "Syrian tongue" in verse 7). (Recall that we also saw a lengthy Aramaic section in Daniel.)

Why the switch in language? Most likely it was because Ezra's source documents, the letters and the replies, were written in Aramaic – as Ezra explicitly tell us. The Jews became bilingual during the exile, and so, most likely, Ezra simply recorded his comments on the letters in Aramaic to avoid switching back and forth between Hebrew and Aramaic.

## Ezra 4:9-10

9 Then wrote Rehum the chancellor, and Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their companions; the Dinaites, the Apharsathchites, the Tarpelites, the Apharsites, the Archevites, the Babylonians, the Susanchites, the Dehavites, and the Elamites, 10 And the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Asnappar brought over, and set in the cities of Samaria, and the rest that are on this side the river, and at such a time.

Verses 9-10 probably came from the official summary of the letter that would have been located on the outside of the papyrus scroll.

The “noble Asnappar” in verse 10 is King Ashurbanipal, who ruled Assyria from 669 until 633. He was famous for his large library in Ninevah. He is not named elsewhere in the Bible, but he is likely the king who freed Manasseh in 2 Chronicles 33.

The KJV has a mistranslation in verse 9 where it reads “the Susanchites, the Dehavites, and the Elamites.” The word translated “Dehavites” really just means “that is,” so that the phrase should be “Elamites of Susa,” in contrast to the other people of Susa. Susa took part in a revolt against Ashurbanipal and was completely destroyed in 640 BC.

Many of these people were descendants of deportees who had been removed from their homelands nearly two centuries earlier – and yet they remember and stress their origins in this letter.

There is no historical support for the notion today that people in the Middle East will eventually agree to just forget the past and live together in peace if we can just send enough politicians over to talk to them. In fact, the major schisms in the Middle East today all trace back to events that occurred centuries or even millennia ago.

The actual text of the letter appears in verses 11-16.

#ezra-esther