

Chapter Four

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. What would have been the result if Israel had accepted the help of their neighbors?
2. What was the most effective tool which Satan used to stop the Lord's work?
3. Can you find any errors in the letter written by their enemies, and if so, how do you account for them?
4. Why was the Persian king so easily influenced?
5. Do you see any ways in which the people of Israel could have improved their methods?

OUTLINE

- B. The work is interrupted by Israel's enemies.
 1. Opposition develops, (vss. 1-5).
 2. Israel's enemies write letters to prevent rebuilding (vss. 6-16).
 3. Artaxerxes replies and orders the work stopped (vss. 17-22).
 4. This brings the restoration to a halt (vss. 23, 24).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- B. The work is interrupted by Israel's enemies.
 1. Opposition develops.

TEXT, 4:1-5

- 1 Now when the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the people of the exile were building a temple to the LORD God of Israel,
- 2 they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers' households, and said to them, "Let us build with you, for we, like you, seek your God; and we have been sacrificing to Him since the days of Esar-haddon king of Assyria, who brought us up here."

- 3 But Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest of the heads of fathers' households of Israel said to them, "You have nothing in common with us in building a house to our God; but we ourselves will together build to the LORD 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 frightened them from building,
- 5 and hired counselors against them to frustrate their counsel all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.

COMMENT

In chapter four we see opposition finally appearing and becoming clearly identifiable. It can be anticipated that when God's people get busy, Satan will raise opposition.

It is not just history we are reading, for "these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come" (I Cor. 10:11). If the O.T. teaches us valuable lessons about the nature and works of the Eternal, All-powerful, All-loving God, it also has something valuable to say about the nature of our enemy, and of the methods which he still uses.

Verse 1 mentions the enemies; they are more fully described in verses 2, 9, 10. We recognize them primarily as the Samaritans, known to us from the N.T. From this and other passages of the O.T. we can understand why the Samaritans were so bitterly resented by the Judeans in the N. T.

Verse 2 shows that the strongest opposition for God's people is from the half-godly.¹ The Samaritans claimed first that they worshiped the same God as Israel. While they called Him by the same name, they understood His nature in a much different way and their worship followed very different patterns. Their second claim will explain this: they asserted that they had been sacrificing

1. For N.T. parallels, see Rev. 3:9, 15ff.

to Israel's God since the days of Esar-haddon, 150 years earlier. When Israel had been conquered by the Assyrians in 722 or 721 B.C., the Assyrians had taken many of the people, especially the well-to-do, with them into captivity; then they imported other conquered peoples into their land, as a means of discouraging revolt. By shuffling populations around, they sought to put all of them into strange environments thus making revolt more difficult and unlikely. II Ki. 17 gives the full story of the beginning of these policies; note especially verses 24ff., and 33. This was followed by 1) marriages between the Israelites remaining in the land and the heathen immigrants, which God had forbidden; and 2) natural calamities in the land. The Assyrians sought to minimize these calamities by returning priests of the God of Israel to the land to teach proper forms of worship on the premise that there are many gods, each possessing different territories; and each god must be worshiped on the soil identified with him (compare II Ki. 5:17) or he would become angry and vent his rage on the land.

Sargon had been king of Assyria when Israel's capital, Samaria, fell. His policy of deportations was continued by the next two kings, Sennacherib and Esar-haddon. The persons speaking in verse two identify themselves as among the later groups of people imported into Israel's former territory, possibly after the fall of Tyre to Assyria in 671 B.C. These peoples and their successors continued to use only the books of Moses in their religious practices, even to modern times. The Samaritan woman whom Jesus meets furnishes an illustration of some of their likenesses and differences compared to Judea (Jn. 4:20, 25).

The Samaritans may have had a political motive for their actions as described here. "By joining the new Jewish group in their venture the Samaritans may have sought identification with them and thus a salvaging of something of their political position."²

2. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 596.

In *verse 3*, the response of Israel's leaders has been criticized as unnecessarily severe and uncharitable.³ However, some things may be said in their defense. 1) It was this same intermarriage with the people of the land, the Canaanites, and intermingling of Israel's religion with their heathen neighbors which had brought about their downfall (Jgs. 1:27ff.; 2:11ff.). Solomon's marriages to many foreign wives and his subsequent building of temples where they might worship their various gods (I Ki. 11:4-11) had sown the seeds that grew to the kingdom's division and eventual destruction. Note that Solomon built more than one temple. 2) The leaders of Judah and Benjamin had already shown a willingness to use the help of foreigners. They were not so ungracious as to refuse to employ foreigners for labor, or to refuse their contributions. The people of Tyre and Sidon had already given assistance (Ezra 3:8), and in an earlier era money had been received from Manasseh and Ephraim (II Chron. 34:9). This was not the issue. The real problem apparently was the character of the building, i.e., its control and leadership, and worship to which it would be put. 3) We might also question the sincerity of the Samaritans, who hadn't restored the Temple during the time when they were in total possession of the land.

Verse 4 marks the virtual halt of the project, because of 1) discouragement; and 2) fear. The account will continue to elaborate on the steps taken by their enemies, but the injury has already been done; the opposition has been effective.

In *verse 5*, the counselors have been compared to lobbyists in our times, hired to influence those who form government policies.⁴ The era from Cyrus to Darius, mentioned here, would include also the reigns of Ahasuerus and Artaxerxes.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 595. The writer conditions this on p. 599, questioning if, without these policies, "Judaism and the law and the prophets alike, (would) have survived amid the rising flood of Hellenistic syncretism through the centuries between the O.T. and the N.T."

4. G. Coleman Luck, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 31.

2. Israel's enemies write letters to prevent rebuilding.

TEXT, 4:6-16

- 6 Now in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.
- 7 And in the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, and the rest of his colleagues, wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the text of the letter was written in Aramaic and translated from Aramaic.
- 8 Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to King Artaxerxes, as follows:
- 9 then wrote Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe and the rest of their colleagues, the judges and the lesser governors, the officials, the secretaries, the men of Erech, the Babylonians, the men of Susa, that is, the Elamites,
- 10 and the rest of the nations which the great and honorable Osnappar deported and settled in the city of Samaria, and in the rest of the region beyond the River. And now
- 11 this is the copy of the letter which they sent to him: "To King Artaxerxes: Your servants, the men in the region beyond the River, and now
- 12 let it be known to the king, that the Jews who came up from you have come to us at Jerusalem; they are rebuilding the rebellious and evil city, and are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations.
- 13 "Now let it be known to the king, that if that city is rebuilt and the walls are finished, they will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and it will damage the revenue of the kings.
- 14 "Now because we are in the service of the palace, and it is not fitting for us to see the king's dishonor, therefore we have sent and informed the king,
- 15 so that a search may be made in the record books of your fathers. And you will discover in the record books, and learn that that city is a rebellious city and damaging to kings and provinces, and that they have incited revolt within it in past

days; therefore that city was laid waste.

- 16 "We inform the king that, if that city is rebuilt and the walls finished, as a result you will have no possession in the province beyond the River."

COMMENT

The Ahasuerus of *verse 6* is taken to be a title rather than a name; Young's *Analytical Concordance* gives its meaning as "King." He is identified as Cambyses in Persian history. The designation, Ahasuerus, is used again of a later king throughout the book of Esther, and of an earlier king in Dan. 9:1. No disposition of the letter mentioned here is recorded in the Bible; possibly it was ignored by the king.

Likewise in *verse 7*, Artaxerxes may be a title meaning "Great King," according to the same source. Another Artaxerxes will appear in Ezra 7, a generation later. These instances reinforce the likelihood that both of these are titles and not personal names.

The Artaxerxes of *verse 7* is thought to be Pseudo-Smerdis, who pretended to be a son of Cyrus and who usurped the throne for about seven months. We see the appropriateness, then, of the phrase, "in the days of," in place of the phrase, "in . . . his reign," applied to the former king in the previous verse. Thus the Bible subtly records the fact that the legitimacy of his rule was questioned. This dates the correspondence in 523 B.C., thirteen years after the work on the Temple had begun.

Bishlam, Mithredath, and Tabeel are unidentified in any contemporary historical source. Tabeel, judging from his name ("God is good") was a worshiper of God as the Samaritans would be. These three were apparently various officials of the Persian territory between the Euphrates River and the Mediterranean Sea (*verse 11*). Their letter is reproduced in *verses 11-16*. Reference is made to the text in Aramaic; the portion from 4:8 to 6:18 is in Aramaic, probably because the bulk of it is taken from official Persian documents, to which Ezra would have had

access. The language used by the Persians for their international correspondence was Aramaic.

While Aramaic is very similar to Hebrew, as Dutch is to German or Portuguese is to Spanish, nevertheless they are different languages. During the Captivity the common people of Israel began to speak in Aramaic; only the government officials had been acquainted with it before (II Ki. 18:26). Consequently the Hebrew spoken in Judea in the N.T. was actually Aramaic, as can be observed from some of the words used by Jesus ("Raca," Mt. 5:22; "Bar-jonah," Mt. 16:17; "Talitha Kum," Mk. 5:41; "Ephphatha," Mk. 7:34).

Rehum, in *verse 8f*, is not to be identified with the man in Ezra 2:2, who was a leader of the returnees. His title, "commander," would make him a counsellor of the Persian king. The next name mentioned, Shimshai the scribe, would be the royal secretary. Obviously, then, the lesser officials named in *verse 7* ("the rest of the colleagues" in *verse 9*) had gotten these more influential figures, closer to the king, to sign the actual letter.

Verses 9, 10 are the salutation of the letter. Erech, Babylon, and Elam (with Susa as its capital) in *verse 9* were some of the conquered peoples whom the Assyrians settled in Samaria. Osnappar in *verse 10* is probably a shortened form of Ashurbanipal, known as Esar-haddon's successor. The region beyond the river, as already noted, would be the territory ruled by Persia between the Euphrates River (Babylon) and the Mediterranean Sea, and under one general administration. The words, "And now," are used in Aramaic correspondence of that age to mark the transition between the salutation and the body of a letter.⁵

Verse 11 summarizes the salutation and concludes again with the customary phrase, "and now." Note that the writers identify themselves to the king as "Your servants": a claim to loyalty in contrast to the disloyalty which they claimed to warn him against.

5. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 599.

Verse 12 shows the bias and exaggeration of these foes. The words, "rebellious and evil city," are intended solely to discredit; there was nothing in Israel's conduct that warranted this judgmental title, at that time. The following words are of the same piece; God's people are accused of rebuilding the city walls, when they were authorized only to rebuild the Temple. In fact, the accusation treats with silence the work being done on the Temple. Lies are the Devil's progeny, as Jesus informs us (Jn. 8:44, 55). It is not until the time of Nehemiah, a half century later, that the Bible speaks of an organized effort to restore the city walls.

The exaggeration is all the more evident in that the words "are finishing" may be translated just as correctly "have finished," as in the KJV. The falsehood is obvious. In verses 13, 16, the letter itself acknowledges that the walls had not actually been finished.

We do not mean that every example of exaggeration is an evidence that a person is deliberately working for the Devil; exaggeration is used for a variety of purposes. A well-meaning Christian on occasion may innocently or unintentionally use this device. But it is God's nature that His speech coincides with reality and with constructiveness (Heb. 6:18 states this principle, and Gen. 1:3 gives an example); and the Christian seeks to be as much like God as possible (Lev. 11:44; I Pet. 1:16).

What we have in the verse before us, however, is a designed misstatement intended for destructive purposes.

Verse 13 reveals the equally false assumptions drawn from the first falsehood. Tribute, custom, and toll are different forms of taxes.⁶ The word "revenue" in verse 13 is a conjectural translation. It is more likely that it should read "at length"; thus, "at length (eventually) damage will be done to the king."⁷ Their method thus was to aim at the king's self-concern.

Verse 14 enlarges on this. The phrase, "we are in the service of the palace," is most expressive; literally it reads, "we eat the

6. For more detail, see "Word Studies," end of this chapter.

7. Ellicott's *Commentary on The Whole Bible*, III, p. 467.

salt of the palace.” This is first of all a recognition of their dependence on the king: our word “salary” incidentally comes from the Latin word for salt, and reflects the government policy of paying its servants with salt. But it is also a reference to the binding nature of a salt covenant (Num. 18:19; II Chr. 13:5).⁸ They were claiming that they were bound by covenant loyalty to reveal these threats to the king.

In *verse 15* they assert that a check of the records will verify their charges. Esther 6:1 shows how carefully the events of the palace were recorded and consulted. Similar Babylonian records were also available, and are indicated by the phrase, “your fathers (predecessors).” The “Babylonian Chronicle” has been recovered, and even lists food rations for the captives from Judah, including Jehoiachin by name.

Observe that there is no charge of contemporary wrongdoing in this part of the letter, for which they claim any substantiation. It is all what they have done “in past days”; they charge that this was the reason Jerusalem was laid waste after its defeat, some sixty-five years before.

Verse 16 concludes that if Israel is allowed to continue its rebuilding, the result is that they would undermine the Persian government’s control of the total area from the Euphrates to the Mediterranean. That is crediting the people of Jerusalem with tremendous military power or influence far beyond reason. It might easily be argued that the building of an army could lead to military action or revolt; it is hard to see how defensive measures, such as building a wall, would be a threat to the peace of neighboring nations.

8. Oriental custom required that when persons had eaten salt together, they were brothers and must defend one another at all costs. Note what a long-standing and binding custom Judas violated when he broke bread with Jesus and went out and betrayed Him the very same hour (Jn. 13:21-30). Consider also the meaning of the church’s breaking bread together.

More on this in “Word Studies,” end of this chapter.

3. Artaxerxes replies and orders the work stopped.

TEXT, 4:17-22

- 17 Then the king sent an answer to Rehum the commander, to Shimshai the scribe, and to the rest of their colleagues who live in Samaria and in the rest of the provinces beyond the River: "Peace. And now
- 18 the document which you sent us has been translated and read before me.
- 19 "And a decree has been issued by me, and a search has been made and it has been discovered that that city has risen up against the kings in past days, that rebellion and revolt have been perpetrated in it,
- 20 that mighty kings have ruled over Jerusalem, governing all the provinces beyond the River, and that tribute, custom, and toll were paid to them.
- 21 "So, now issue a decree to make these men stop work, that the city may not be rebuilt until a decree is issued by me.
- 22 "And beware of being negligent in carrying out this matter; why should damage increase to the detriment of the kings?"

COMMENT

Verse 17 is the heading and salutation of the letter. Rehum and Shimshai (cf. verse 8) are identified with the lands of Samaria and its neighbors. "Peace" (Shelam) would be the common greeting of their culture. Here again is the "And now" separating the salutation from the body of the letter.

Verse 18 acknowledges receipt of the Samaritans' letter. There is no mention of any defense offered by or sought from the people of Jerusalem. The handling of this case by Artaxerxes, who accepted the letter from Jerusalem's enemies at face value and did not go beyond the walls of his palace to check it for factual accuracy or to gather information from the other side, reveals something of the character of this man who had no

legitimate claim to the throne but who pretended to be someone whom he was not.

Verses 19 and 20 give us the results of the search. Usually when one looks for something long enough, he can find it; so evidence of Jerusalem's rebellious character was uncovered. It would be hard to find a record of any city in history which at some point had not resisted its conquerors.

The record of Jerusalem is unfortunate, however, in that much of the resistance and rebellion had been useless and ill-advised. The Prophets, and specifically Jeremiah, had cautioned against it from the times of Jehoiakim to Zedekiah (Jer. 21:8, 9; 27:1-23). Their disobedience to God at that point surely added to their burden now: More than a half century has passed, and God's people still pay a price for the sins of their leaders. In truth, it had been the failure of Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah to keep their words to their conquerors that had caused their city to be totally reduced to rubble. (II Ki. 24:1, 12, 20).

The mighty kings of *verse 20* most likely were David and Solomon. It is interesting that Babylon had noticed and recorded the extensiveness of their reigns. Apparently the Persian king believed that David and Solomon's collecting tribute, custom and tolls justified the charge made in vs. 13, that a healthy Jerusalem would endanger his ability to collect these for himself from this whole territory.

Verses 21 and 22 order the official issuance of the command to stop all work, and require strict compliance in carrying it out.

4. The work comes to a halt.

TEXT, 4:23, 24

23 Then as soon as the copy of King Artaxerxes' document was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their colleagues, they went in haste to Jerusalem to the Jews and stopped them by force of arms.

- 24 Then work on the house of God in Jerusalem ceased, and it was stopped until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

COMMENT

Verse 23 speaks of the total stoppage of work by force of arms. It was now 520 B.C.; judging from vs. 4f., it had virtually stopped a minimum of nine years before.

In *verse 24* it is the cessation of work on the Temple that is spoken of specifically; yet it was the wall and the city that were mentioned in the complaint. God's enemies often work by indirection and by subterfuge. Fortunately, it was but a few months till Darius, a more worthy king, ascended the throne. By the second year of his rule, his character would be known by his subjects even in Jerusalem, setting the stage for the events of the next chapter.

WORD STUDIES

1. ENEMY: Tsar: verse 4; the basic idea in the word is to exert pressure: hence, to press in on, or oppress. It is the word used in Psa. 23:5. Of course, most of the people who do this are our enemies; but even our friends or relatives, consciously or unconsciously, can add pressure to us. Many of Israel's most bitter enemies were peoples most closely related to her. God "prepares a table" (provides) for us in the midst of all these situations.
2. DISCOURAGE: Meraph Yadim: vs. 4; literally, as in KJV, "weaken the hands." It means to make the hands hang down, to relax, let fall, or weaken: thus, to discourage. The word is in the repetitive participial form indicating continuity of action; they "continuously again and again weakened the hands."
3. TRIBUTE: Mindah: verse 13; has the basic idea of a gift,

i.e., the kind of a gift measured out; it is always used of another nation, for example to avoid military attack.

4. CUSTOM: Belo: verse 13; payment in kind; i.e., a portion of the crops. This tax would usually be paid by a nation's own citizens.
5. TOLL: Halak: verse 13; "privilege to walk"; hence, payment for passage through a land.
6. SALT: Melach: verse 14. Possibly it means to be rubbed small, or pulverized. Since salt is used to preserve, it was used as a symbol of an enduring, permanent agreement, forever sacred and inviolable. Salt must always accompany offerings (Lev. 2:13), as a symbol of a perpetual bond of friendship and loyalty.

SUMMARY

In chapter four, the Samaritans and other neighbors of Jerusalem offer their assistance to rebuild the Temple, but their help is refused. They therefore seek to interrupt the project by using influence in the Persian court, especially by having a deceptive letter written. Their complaint was that the people were rebuilding walls as a threat of rebellion; they made no mention that the Temple was being built. This resulted in a sixteen-year period of progressively intensified delay, and the eventual order to stop all work. The report of the stoppage in verse 24 may be intended to cover more than one single incident; it was the objective of the continued efforts throughout the time period of this chapter, and was the result of all these incidents. Thus matters stood till the second year of Darius' reign.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Of what nationality were the people most opposed to the building?
2. What four kings of Persia are named?
3. What is meant by "beyond the River"?
4. How long was the work stopped?
5. What past kings of Judah were the cause of an extra burden to them now?