

# CHAPTER 4

## INTRODUCTION TO EZRA 4

The contents of this chapter are the offer the Samaritans made to the Jews, to assist them in building the temple, which having refused, they gave them all the trouble they could, (<sup><1500E></sup>Ezra 4:1-6) and a letter of theirs to Artaxerxes, king of Persia, full of accusations of them, (<sup><1500E></sup>Ezra 4:7-16) and the answer of Artaxerxes to it, giving orders to command the Jews to cease building the temple, (<sup><1500E></sup>Ezra 4:17-22) which orders were accordingly executed, and the work ceased till the second year of Darius, (<sup><1502E></sup>Ezra 4:23,24).

**Ver. 1.** *Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin,* etc.] The Samaritans, as appears from (<sup><1502E></sup>Ezra 4:2,10),

*heard that the children of the captivity;* the Jews, who had been in captivity seventy years, and were just come out of it, and still were not quite free, but under the jurisdiction and control of the king of Persia:

*builded the temple unto the Lord God of Israel;* that they were going about it, and had laid the foundation of it, which might soon come to their ears, the distance not being very great. Josephus<sup>f38</sup> says they heard the sound of the trumpets, and came to know the meaning of it.

**Ver. 2.** *Then they came to Zerubbabel, and the chief of the fathers,* etc.] These they addressed, as knowing that if they could not prevail with them, they could never succeed in their design; and these were no doubt the principal of the Samaritans that applied:

*and said unto them, let us build with you;* that is, the temple, they proposed to join with them, and assist them in it; which proposal at first sight might seem very agreeable and welcome, and would have been so had they been sincere, but they were not; they hoped, by getting among them, to have sown discord among them, and disunited them; and so by these or other means to have retarded the building; or if it went forward, that they might have a claim to it as theirs, at least as to set up their own idols in a part of it; the reasons they gave follow:

*for we seek your God as ye do*; which was false, for they did not worship him alone, but with idols, nor in the same manner as the Jews did:

*and we do sacrifice unto him*; but even that could not recommend them to the Jews, since they ought not to sacrifice, even to the Lord himself, but at Jerusalem: there is a various reading here; the textual reading is, “we do not sacrifice”; that is, to idols; the marginal reading is, “we sacrifice to him”, which we follow; Aben Ezra takes in both, perhaps most rightly; “we do not sacrifice to any other, but to him”; which was also false:

*since the days of Esarhaddon, king of Assur, who brought us up hither*; to Samaria, from Babylon, and other places; (see <sup><1724></sup>2 Kings 17:24).

**Ver. 3.** *But Zerubbabel, and Joshua, and the rest of the chief of the fathers, said unto them*, etc.] The prince and high priest, and chief of the people:

*you have nothing to do with us to build an house to our God*; being neither of the same nation, nor of the same religion:

*but we ourselves together will build to the Lord God of Israel*; we and we only, who are together as one man, united in one body of people, and in the same religious sentiments, being Israelites; we separately, without admitting strangers among us, will build a temple to the God of Israel:

*as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, hath commanded us*; thereby letting them know that they acted by his authority, and the commission they had from him only concerned themselves, and not others.

**Ver. 4.** *Then the people of the land weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building.*] By threatening them, or by dissuading the workmen from going on, by endeavouring to hinder their having materials from the Tyrians and Zidonians, or money out of the king’s revenues to bear the expenses as ordered; (see <sup><1504></sup>Ezra 6:4).

**Ver. 5.** *And hired counsellors against them, to frustrate their purpose*, etc.] Either to advise and persuade the king of Persia’s officers in those parts not to supply them with money, or to influence the great men at his court to get the edict revoked: and this they did

*all the days of Cyrus king of Persia*; who, though the hearty friend and patron of the Jews, yet being engaged in wars abroad with the Lydians and Scythians, and leaving his son as viceroy in his absence, who was no friend

unto them, the work went on but slowly, attended with interruptions and discouragements:

*even until the reign of Darius king of Persia;* who was Darius Hystaspis, between whom and Cyrus were Cambyses the son of Cyrus, and Smerdis the impostor, who pretended to be Smerdis, the brother of Cambyses; a space of about fifteen years.

**Ver. 6.** *And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign,* etc.] According to Jarchi, this was Ahasuerus the husband of Esther; but, as most think <sup>f39</sup>, was Cambyses, the son and successor of Cyrus; so Josephus <sup>f40</sup>; who was an enemy to the Egyptians; and, fearing the Jews might take part with them, was no friend to them; their enemies therefore took the advantage of the death of Cyrus, and the first opportunity after Cambyses reigned in his own right:

*and wrote they unto him an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem;* full of hatred and enmity, spite and malice, charging them as a turbulent, disobedient, and rebellious people.

**Ver. 7.** *And in the days of Artaxerxes,* etc.] The same with Ahasuerus, in the preceding verse; and who also is Cambyses, which is his name in Heathen authors, Artaxerxes being a common name to the kings of Persia; though some <sup>f41</sup> think this was Smerdis, the magician and impostor, who was between Cambyses and Darius; but as he reigned but seven months, it is not very likely that he should be wrote unto, and an answer received from him; besides he sent to every nation he ruled over <sup>f42</sup>, and so to the Jews, and proclaimed to them freedom from tribute and the militia for three years, to ingratiate himself to them:

*wrote Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, and the rest of their companions;* or his company; for Jarchi thinks only one person is meant; that Mithredath Tabeel is the name of one of the adversaries of Judah; and that Bishlam is an appellative, and signifies that he wrote in peace, or in a way of salutation and greeting; but they seem to be the names of governors in the cities of Samaria under the king of Persia: these wrote

*to Artaxerxes king of Persia;* instigated by the Samaritans:

*and the writing of the letter was written in the Syrian tongue, and interpreted in the Syrian tongue;* or Chaldee, of which Ezra gives a copy in the Chaldee language; the meaning either is, that it was written both in

Syriac letters, and in the Syriac language; for sometimes words are written in one language and in the character of another, as the Syriac is sometimes written in, Hebrew characters, and the Hebrew in Roman; or else there was a postscript added to this letter, explaining some things in it, which also was written in the same language: some take <sup>f43</sup> the word “nishtevan”, rendered “written”, to be the name of a province on the borders of the country beyond Euphrates, whose figure and characters were in high esteem, and fit to write in to kings; but the words and language were Syrian, and needed interpretation.

**Ver. 8.** *Rehum the chancellor, and Shimshai the scribe, wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king in this sort.*] This means the same letter as before; which, according to Jarchi, was sent in the name of Mithredath Tabeel and his company, was ended by Rehum, master of words or sense, and written by Shimshai the scribe, whom he makes to be a son of Haman <sup>f44</sup>; but it was written rather in all their names.

**Ver. 9.** *Then wrote Rehum the chancellor, and Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their companions,* etc.] who all signed the letter; namely, the governors of the following nations;

*the Dinaites, the Apharsathchites, the Tarpelites, the Apharsites, the Archevites, the Babylonians, the Susanchites, the Dehavites, and the Elamites;* which were colonies from several parts of Chaldea, Media, and Persia, and were settled in the several cities of Samaria, as several of their names plainly show, as from Persia, Erech, Babylon, Shushan, and Elimais; some account for them all, but with uncertainty; according to R. Jose <sup>f45</sup> these were the Samaritans who first were sent out of five nations, to whom the king of Assyria added four more, which together make the nine here mentioned, (see <sup><1724></sup>2 Kings 17:24).

**Ver. 10.** *And the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Asnappar brought over,* etc.] The river Euphrates:

*and set in the cities of Samaria;* placed there in the room of the Israelites carried captive; this Asnappar was, according to Jarchi and others <sup>f46</sup> Sennacherib; but, with Grotius, Shalmaneser; rather he was Esarhaddon, the son of the former, and grandson of the latter; so Dr. Prideaux <sup>f47</sup>; though he might be only some commander of the Assyrian monarch, who carried them over by his orders:

*and the rest that are on this side the river;* the river Euphrates:

*and at such a time*; which may respect the date of the letter, which, no doubt, was expressed, though not here given; or this, as some think, was the same with our etc. something following, unto King Artaxerxes greeting, or something like that; though David de Pomis<sup>f48</sup> takes it to be the general name of the people beyond the river.

**Ver. 11.** *This is the copy of the letter they sent unto him, even unto Artaxerxes the king*, etc.] Which Ezra brought with him from Babylon, and is contained in the five following verses:

*thy servants the men on this side the river, and at such a time*; this was the inscription of the letter, or the beginning of it.

**Ver. 12.** *Be it known unto the king*, etc.] The intent of this letter was, that it might be known to the king what follows:

*that the Jews which came up from thee to us are come unto Jerusalem*; this they observe partly out of contempt of the Jews, having been lately captive in Babylon, and partly to insinuate what ingratitude they were guilty of; that having got their liberty, and come to Jerusalem, they made use of it to the king's detriment:

*building the rebellious and the bad city*; as they suggest it had been to kings, even his predecessors, in former times, (~~CHAP~~ Ezra 4:15)

*and have set up the walls thereof, and joined the foundations*; which was a falsehood; for the most they had done was setting up the walls of their houses in Jerusalem, and laying the foundation of the temple; as for the walls of the city, they had not as yet done anything unto them.

**Ver. 13.** *Be it known now unto the king*, etc.] And let it be seriously and thoroughly considered by him and his counsellors:

*that if this city be builded, and its walls set up again, then will they not pay toll, tribute, and custom*; being able to defend themselves against the king's forces, sent to reduce them to their obedience; these three words take in all sorts of taxes and levies on persons, goods, and merchandise:

*and so thou shall endamage the revenue of the kings*; not only his own, but his successors';

*this they thought would be a very striking and powerful argument with him.*

**Ver. 14.** *Now because we have maintenance from the king's palace*, etc.] Have posts under the king, to which salaries were annexed, by which they were supported, and which they had from the king's exchequer; or "salt"<sup>f49</sup>, as in the original, some places of honour and trust formerly being paid in salt; hence, as Pliny<sup>f50</sup> observes, such honours and rewards were called "salaries":

*and it was not meet for us to see the king's dishonour*; to see any thing done injurious to his crown and dignity, to his honour and revenues, when we are supported by him; this would be ungrateful as well as unjust:

*therefore have we sent and certified the king*; of the truth of what is before related; and, for the further confirmation of it, refer him to the ancient records of the kingdom, as follows.

**Ver. 15.** *That search may be made in the book of the records of thy fathers*, etc.] That is, his predecessors in the Babylonian monarchy; though, as the Medes and Persians were included in that, and joined the Babylonians in their wars with others, and particularly with the Jews, the records of the Medes and Persians might also be applied to:

*so shalt thou find in the book of the records, and know that this city is a rebellious city, and hurtful unto kings and provinces, and that they have moved sedition within the same of old time*; against the king of Babylon, particularly in the times of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah:

*for which cause was this city destroyed*; as it was by Nebuchadnezzar; (see ~~1231~~ 2 Kings 24:1,20 25:1,9).

**Ver. 16.** *We certify the king, that if this city be builded again, and the walls thereof set up*, etc.] As it formerly was, and now attempted, as they suggest:

*by this means thou shalt have no portion on this side the river*; the river Euphrates; intimating that the Jews would not only shake off his yoke, and refuse to pay tribute themselves, but would seize on all his dominions on that side the river, and annex them to their own.

**Ver. 17.** *Then sent the king an answer unto Rehum the chancellor, and to Shimshai the scribe*, etc.] This affair, upon examination, being found to be of importance, the king of Persia thought fit to send an answer to the

above letter, which was doing them an honour, and gave them the power and authority they wished to have:

*and to the rest of their companions that dwelt in Samaria*; in the kingdom, province, and cities of Samaria:

*and unto the rest beyond the river*; the river Euphrates, the rest of the nations before mentioned, (<sup><15749></sup>Ezra 4:9,10).

*Peace, and at such a time*: that is, all health and prosperity, etc.

**Ver. 18.** *The letter which ye sent unto us*, etc.] The plural number is used, being now become courtly for kings thus to speak of themselves:

*hath been plainly before me*; by such that understood both the Syrian and Persian languages; the letter was written in the Syrian language, and the king being a Persian, it was necessary it should be interpreted and explained to him.

**Ver. 19.** *And I commanded, and search hath been made*, etc.] In the records of his predecessors, whether Chaldeans or Persians:

*and it is found that this city of old time hath made insurrection against kings, and that rebellion and sedition have been made therein*: and yet this could not be carried higher than to the times of Zedekiah and Jehoiakim, as before observed, which was not one hundred years ago, unless the rebellion of Hezekiah against the king of Assyria could be thought to be in these records, (<sup><1287></sup>2 Kings 18:7), and yet from hence it is concluded as if in ages past they had been guilty of rebellion and sedition, and even always.

**Ver. 20.** *There have been mighty kings also over Jerusalem, which have ruled over all countries beyond the river*, etc.] As David and Solomon; and the account of these they had in their records, (see <sup><1031></sup>2 Samuel 8:1 <sup><1021></sup>1 Kings 4:21,24)

*and toll, tribute, and custom, was paid unto them*; as appears from the places referred to; and this served to strengthen the insinuation made to the king, that if these people were suffered to go on building, he would lose his tribute and taxes in those parts.

**Ver. 21.** *Give ye now commandment to cause these men to cease*, etc.].  
From building:

*and that this city be not builded until another commandment shall be given from me;* he might suspect that this case, in all its circumstances, was not truly stated, and that hereafter he might see reason to recede from the present orders he gave; and the rather, as by searching, and perhaps on his own knowledge, must have observed, that his father Cyrus had shown favour to the Jews, and had not only set them at liberty, but had encouraged them to rebuild their temple; which might be what they were about, and was the case, and nothing else, except their houses to dwell in.

**Ver. 22.** *Take heed now that ye fail not to do this,* etc.] To put his orders into execution, and at once, without any loss of time, oblige the Jews to desist from rebuilding the walls of their city, which he was told they were doing, though a great falsehood:

*why should damage grow to the hurt of the kings?* of him and his successors, to be deprived of their toll, tribute, and customs, and to have insurrections, mutinies, and rebellions, in the dominions belonging to them.

**Ver. 23.** *Now when the copy of King Artaxerxes letter was read before Rehum, and Shimshai the scribe, and their companions,* etc.] By him or them to whom it was particularly directed:

*they went up in haste to Jerusalem unto the Jews;* not only in obedience to the king's command, but from an eagerness of spirit to put a stop to the proceedings of the Jews, to whom they had an aversion, instigated by the Samaritans:

*and made them to cease by force and power;* from going on with the building of the temple, which they reckoned a part of the city, and within their commission; this they did by showing the power and authority they had under the king's hand, and by the forces they brought with them to compel them to it, should they refuse to obey; or, however, they threatened them highly what they would do, if they did not desist.

**Ver. 24.** *Then ceased the work of the house of God, which is at Jerusalem,* etc.] How far they had proceeded is not said, whether any further than laying the foundation of it; though probably, by this time, it might be carried to some little height; however, upon this it was discontinued:

*so it ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia;* not Darius Nothun, as some think, for from the first of Cyrus to the sixth of his reign, when the temple was finished, was upwards of one hundred years;



yea, according to some, about one hundred and forty; which would carry the age of Zerubbabel, who both laid the foundation of the temple, and finished it, and the age of those who saw the first temple, to a length that is not probable; but this was Darius Hystaspis, who succeeded Cambyses the son of Cyrus, there being only, between, the short usurpation of Smerdis for seven months.