

Ezra 4:1-24 – The Building Stops

God revealed his plan to Jeremiah that the people of Judah would be kicked out of the land because of their perpetual sin. Their false prophets were numerous, their king burned God's word in the fire and their idols were numerous. The captivity in Babylonia would not be short. The exiles were there for 70 years and then those whose spirits were stirred by God returned to Judah and Jerusalem. They made a good start by rebuilding the altar and offering the required burnt offerings according to the law of Moses. They kept the Feast of Booths. A few months later, they began laying the foundation of the temple. Everything was looking good but now we come to chapter four.

Read Ezra 4:1-5, 24.

At the end of chapter 3 the joy of the laying of the foundation of the temple was tempered by the weeping of those who had seen Solomon's temple before it was destroyed. In 4:1 we are introduced to the enemies (adversaries) of Judah. Who were these enemies? When they heard of the temple rebuilding, what did they say to Zerubbabel and the other leaders? Beware of Greeks bearing gifts and beware of Samaritans offering help. (4:1-2)

Did the Samaritans truly worship Yahweh? Where did they offer sacrifices to Yahweh. How often did they do this? (4:2)

What did Zerubbabel and the other leaders tell the Samaritans? Did they do the right thing? What reason did they give for refusing the Samaritan's help? (4:3)

What did the Samaritans do in response to being rejected? How did their actions reveal their true intentions when they offered their "help"? (4:4-5)

As a result of the Samaritans actions, what happened to the temple rebuilding project? When did the project finally resume? (4:24)

Read Ezra 4:6-16.

Ahasuerus was identified by some older commentators as one of the kings between Cyrus and Darius. More recent scholarship indicates that Ahasuerus was the well known king Xerxes who succeeded Darius.

Verse 6 mentions an accusation that was written to Xerxes against the returned exiles. Verse 7 mentions a letter that was written to Artaxerxes, but we don't know the contents. Another letter is mentioned in verses 8-16 with the response in verses 17-22. This means that verses 4:6-16 are out of chronological order. By the time these letters were written, the temple was already rebuilt. The letters to Artaxerxes occurred during the time when Ezra and Nehemiah were alive.

Verses 8-16 mention another letter to Artaxerxes, the successor to Xerxes, which was written against Jerusalem. This time the content was revealed. Who were the people involved in creating and sending the letter? What insight does this give us into the makeup of the inhabitants of Samaria. (4:8-10)

How did the letter refer to the city of Jerusalem? Was this a fair statement? (4:12)

What motivation did the letter give to the king to stop the rebuilding of Jerusalem. (4:13-14, 16)

What did the letter say king Artaxerxes would find about Jerusalem if he looked at the record books? (4:15)

Read Ezra 4:17-23.

King Artaxerxes sent a response to the letter? Who were the recipients of the response? (4:17)

What did Artaxerxes find about Jerusalem when he had people look through the record books? (4:19-20)

What decree did Artaxerxes make in response to the search of the records? (4:21-22)

What did the people of Samaria do with Artaxerxes' letter of response? What work was stopped in verse 23? What work was stopped in verse 24? What is the relationship of verses 23 and 24?