

Lesson 3: Ezra 2:21 – 4:6

Why Study Ezra?

It is easy to become discouraged when we look at the sad state of many congregations of the Lord's church. Women are assuming leadership roles; musical instruments are entering the worship service; elders are disappearing; baptism is being watered down. But Ezra has a message for us, and it is message of purity, proper worship, continuity, and restoration. The message of Ezra is a message we need to hear. It is a message for the faithful remnant.

Verses 21-35

21 The sons of Bethlehem, 123. 22 The men of Netophah, 56. 23 The men of Anathoth, 128. 24 The sons of Azmaveth, 42. 25 The sons of Kiriath-arim, Chephirah, and Beeroth, 743. 26 The sons of Ramah and Geba, 621. 27 The men of Michmas, 122. 28 The men of Bethel and Ai, 223. 29 The sons of Nebo, 52. 30 The sons of Magbish, 156. 31 The sons of the other Elam, 1,254. 32 The sons of Harim, 320. 33 The sons of Lod, Hadid, and Ono, 725. 34 The sons of Jericho, 345. 35 The sons of Senaah, 3,630.

Verses 21-35 describe people by their geography as opposed to their clan, and we previously discussed some possible reasons for that distinction. Because Nehemiah's list has "Gibeon" in place of "Gibbar," in verse 20, some surmise that the geographical list actually begins in verse 20.

Some of the descriptions begin with "the *sons of*" while others begin with "the *men of*." The NIV obliterates this distinction, and, while it is true that the phrases appear to be synonymous here, it should make you wonder what else the NIV is obliterating. (If there is ambiguity in the original text, a good translation carries that ambiguity over into the English version—a bad translation does not.)

By listing people both by clan and by geographical location, God is confirming their connection to those who occupied the land prior to the exile. This was not just some new group with which God decided to start over, but rather this group was very closely connected to those who had been taken captive. These people were *returning* – and that word makes no sense unless they are connected to those who were taken away.

Verses 36-39

36 The priests: the sons of Jedaiah, of the house of Jeshua, 973. 37 The sons of Immer, 1,052. 38 The sons of Pashhur, 1,247. 39 The sons of Harim, 1,017.

Having listed the laymen, the author now lists the temple ministers in verses 36-58. The first four of these verses lists the priests, which appear to have made up about 10% of the returnees.

David had organized the priests into 24 family groups in 1 Chronicles 24, but only four of those 24 groups are represented here. These four groups are also the only ones listed several generations later when Ezra returned (Ezra 10:18-22).

Notice that the house of Jeshua is mentioned in verse 36. Some point to this verse as evidence that the author was getting these figures from a much later list (at which point Jeshua, they say, had 973 descendants). But all the verse says is that the *house* of Jeshua had 973 people; that is, it is the clan or family size rather than the number of descendants. Also, we could be seeing another Jeshua here; it was a very common name, and in fact we do see another Jeshua in the very next verse.

Verses 40-42

40 The Levites: the sons of Jeshua and Kadmiel, of the sons of Hodaviah, 74. 41 The singers: the sons of Asaph, 128. 42 The sons of the gatekeepers: the sons of Shallum, the sons of Ater, the sons of Talmon, the sons of Akkub, the sons of Hatita, and the sons of Shobai, in all 139.

Verses 40-42 list the Levites, the singers, and the gatekeepers. Each of these groups is listed to emphasize the continuity of those who returned with those who were carried away. Jeshua the Levite in verse 40 is not the same Jeshua from verse 2 who was the High Priest – again, it was a common name.

The Levites were members of the tribe of Levi who were not also descendants of Aaron. They were prohibited from offering sacrifices on the altar. Because they had no land inheritance, they lived in 48 Levitical cities and were supported by tithes. They were butchers, doorkeepers, singers, scribes, teachers, and sometimes even temple beggars.

The first thing we notice about the Levites listed here is that their number was small compared to the number of priests. Later, Ezra would have only 38 Levites travel back with him. (Ezra 8:15-20) This

may have been because the Levites would have had no inheritance to return to. (Although Ezra 7:24 tells us they were also exempt from taxes.) Other possibilities are that fewer Levites were deported because they were from the poorer class, or the Levites may have returned to secular occupations during the exile.

The extremely small number of Levites is very strong evidence *against* the common modernist view that the law was actually written or rewritten during this time, as opposed to during the time of Moses. In the law (Numbers 18:21, 26), it is assumed that the Levites would greatly outnumber the priests because, for example, the Levites received the tithes and passed only a tenth (a tithe of the tithe) to the priests. Plus, under the Law, the Levites lived in 48 Levitical cities—whereas here we hardly have 48 Levites! Had the law been rewritten during this time as some argue, it would never have reached us in the form that we now have it. “Nothing proves more clearly how mistaken is the view that in post-exilic times, the Torah was still being added to and revised.”

Nehemiah combines the singers with the Levites. According to 1 Chronicles 15:16-24, David had organized the singers into 24 groups to correspond to the 24 groups of priests. The work and the organization of the gatekeepers are described in 1 Chronicles 9:17-29.

Verses 43-54

43 The temple servants: the sons of Ziha, the sons of Hasupha, the sons of Tabbaath, 44 the sons of Keros, the sons of Siaha, the sons of Padon, 45 the sons of Lebanah, the sons of Hagabah, the sons of Akkub, 46 the sons of Hagab, the sons of Shamlai, the sons of Hanan, 47 the sons of Giddel, the sons of Gahar, the sons of Reaiah, 48 the sons of Rezin, the sons of Nekoda, the sons of Gazzam, 49 the sons of Uzza, the sons of Paseah, the sons of Besai, 50 the sons of Asnah, the sons of Meunim, the sons of Nephisim, 51 the sons of Bakbuk, the sons of Hakupha, the sons of Harhur, 52 the sons of Bazluth, the sons of Mehida, the sons of Harsha, 53 the sons of Barkos, the sons of Sisera, the sons of Temah, 54 the sons of Neziah, and the sons of Hatipha.

Verses 43-54 list the temple servants, which comes from a Hebrew word that literally means “the given” or “the dedicated ones.” Ezra 8:20 tells us that they attended the Levites, which most likely means they assisted the Levites in performing the more mundane duties.

The many foreign names in this list indicate that this group probably consisted of people of non-Israelite descent. Numbers 31:47 tells us that some war captives were given to serve the Levites. Ezekiel 44:6-9

tells us that Israel was not always careful about using foreigners as temple servants and may have even allowed them to serve as priests. Exodus 12:48 and Numbers 15:14-16 tell us that foreigners were welcome, but they had to follow the law. (“One law and one rule shall be for you and for the stranger who sojourns with you.”)

Verses 55-58

55 The sons of Solomon’s servants: the sons of Sotai, the sons of Hassophereth, the sons of Peruda, 56 the sons of Jaalah, the sons of Darkon, the sons of Giddel, 57 the sons of Shephatiah, the sons of Hattil, the sons of Pochereth-hazzebaim, and the sons of Ami. 58 All the temple servants and the sons of Solomon’s servants were 392.

Verses 55-57 list the descendants of Solomon’s servants. This group is closely related to the temple servants because they are both included in the single total given in verse 58. There were only 392 of these servants from all 45 of the families or clans, which means there were on average fewer than 9 per clan.

These servants of Solomon may have come from the native population that Solomon used for work on the temple. The name “Hassophereth” means “the scribe” and the name “Pochereth-hazzebaim” means “the gazelle keeper,” and these may have been the names of guilds. If so, these servants may have been more involved with secular tasks than the temple servants. (But Ezra 7:24 seems to refer to this group as “other servants of this house of God,” so we can’t be certain about what they did.)

Verses 59-63

59 The following were those who came up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addan, and Immer, though they could not prove their fathers’ houses or their descent, whether they belonged to Israel: 60 the sons of Delaiah, the sons of Tobiah, and the sons of Nekoda, 652. 61 Also, of the sons of the priests: the sons of Habaiah, the sons of Hakkoz, and the sons of Barzillai (who had taken a wife from the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and was called by their name). 62 These sought their registration among those enrolled in the genealogies, but they were not found there, and so they were excluded from the priesthood as unclean. 63 The governor told them that they were not to partake of the most holy food, until there should be a priest to consult Urim and Thummim.

Verses 59-63 describe those who had lost their family records. The context here suggests that the towns in verse 59 are most likely the Babylonian towns from which these exiles had come. Apparently

some had lost their family records during the exile, or possibly some of these people were proselytes. Nehemiah 7:5 speaks of “the book of the genealogy,” and for whatever reason these people were not in it. They were not sent back, but were likely given the status of circumcised foreigners, at least temporarily.

The priests among this group were excluded from the priesthood as unclean. Numbers 16:40 warned that “no outsider, who is not of the descendants of Aaron, should draw near to burn incense before the Lord,” and so these men were excluded.

Interesting names in this entire list from Chapter 2 as to etymology include Hakupha in verse 51, which means “humpbacked,” Hagabah in verse 45, which means “locust,” Parosh in verse 3, which means “flea,” and Hassophereth in verse 55, which means “the woman scribe” (and there has to be an interesting story behind that one!).

Barzillai in verse 61 is also interesting, and is in fact unique in Scripture in having taken the name of his father-in-law. The elder Barzillai appears to be the same person in 2 Samuel 17:27 and 19:32 who helped David when he fled from Absalom. It is interesting that the priest who married his daughter took his name, and some surmise it was so he could inherit land (in violation of Numbers 18:20), which could explain the trouble his descendants were experiencing here.

The descendants of Hakkoz (in verse 61) were later reinstated if Meremoth, the priest in Ezra 8:33, is the same Meremoth described in Nehemiah 3:4 as the son of Hakkoz. The word “governor” in verse 63 is a Persian word and likely refers to Sheshbazzar.

The Urim and Thummin in verse 63 were sacred lots of some sort that were used to discern the will of God. The words Urim and Thummin are spelled with the first letter and the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The Septuagint translates them as “lights and perfections.” We see them elsewhere in Scripture:

- (1 Samuel 14:41) Therefore Saul said, “O Lord God of Israel, why have you not answered your servant this day? If this guilt is in me or in Jonathan my son, O Lord, God of Israel, give Urim. But if this guilt is in your people Israel, give Thummim.”
- (Numbers 27:21) And he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the Lord.

- (Exodus 28:30) And in the breastpiece of judgment you shall put the Urim and the Thummim, and they shall be on Aaron's heart, when he goes in before the Lord.

Apparently they were small objects carried by the High Priest in his garments and used to answer questions that required a yes or no response. Such also occurred in the New Testament in Acts 1:26 when Matthias was chosen over Justus by the casting of lots. Josephus says that the Urim and Thummin provided answers by a miraculous shining of the jewels on the High Priest's breastplate.

The phrase "until there should be a priest" in verse 63 could refer to the unavailability of a priest qualified to use the Urim and Thummin.

Verses 64-70

64 The whole assembly together was 42,360, 65 besides their male and female servants, of whom there were 7,337, and they had 200 male and female singers. 66 Their horses were 736, their mules were 245, 67 their camels were 435, and their donkeys were 6,720. 68 Some of the heads of families, when they came to the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem, made freewill offerings for the house of God, to erect it on its site. 69 According to their ability they gave to the treasury of the work 61,000 darics of gold, 5,000 minas of silver, and 100 priests' garments. 70 Now the priests, the Levites, some of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants lived in their towns, and all the rest of Israel in their towns.

The numbers in the list add up to 29,818, which is 12,542 fewer than the total of 42,360 given in verse 64. Nehemiah 7 provides that same total, although the sum in his list is 31,089 (which is 11,271 fewer). As we discussed, the differences in the individual numbers might be explainable as rounding or copyist errors, but what about the larger total? Some suggest it included the women (but that would be a surprisingly small number of women), while others suggest it includes families from tribes other than Judah and Benjamin. Most likely, some families were simply omitted from the itemized list, but were included in the total (which we also saw with the temple items).

Why are we told in verses 65-66 about how many servants and horses and donkeys they had? That information tells us about the economic condition of the people, and it indicates there were some wealthy people among them. The very large number of slaves (about one to every six freeman) combined with the gold and silver in verse 69 points to great wealth by some, but not by all. The rich had horses

while the poor had donkeys, and the donkeys outnumber the horses 9 to 1.

When Haggai prophesied about 20 years later, the economic situation appears to have worsened considerably. A run of bad harvests and high prices combined with enemy intervention had left them with nothing but their expensive paneled homes to remind them of their former prosperity—and to remind them of their neglect of God’s house. (Haggai 1:4)

Verse 63 provides a hint of what was to come when it says that “some of the heads of families ... made freewill offerings.” Some gave, but others it appears did not. Haggai 1:7-11 links the worsened economic condition to the people’s neglect of the temple: it was “because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house.” (Haggai 1:9)

This entire chapter is a prelude to the great events of rebuilding the temple and restoring proper worship that were to come. It was a great joy for these people to be involved in the plan of God, as we see in Psalm 126 (which many think refers to this period of time):

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then they said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them." The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad. Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negeb! Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy! He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.

Ezra 3

Verse 1

1 When the seventh month came, and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem.

The events in the first six verses of Chapter 3 appear to have taken place in 538, the same year that Cyrus issued his decree and the Jews first returned under Sheshbazzar. The seventh month was Tishri (September–October). It was also in the seventh month that

Solomon gathered the people together to dedicate the first temple (1 Kings 8:2).

The seventh month was the most important month in the Jewish calendar. On the first day they would have celebrated the New Year and the Feast of Trumpets. On the tenth day was the Day of Atonement. From the fifteenth until the twenty-first day they would have celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles.

Verse 1 tells us that the people gathered “as one man.” They had a common bond and a common purpose, and they understood that a united worship was vital in dealing with dangers from outside. I’m sure I don’t need to point out the lessons for us in that description.

Verse 2

2 Then arose Jeshua the son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel with his kinsmen, and they built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God.

Two major leaders stand out in the first half of Ezra, and we see them both (again) in verse 2: Jeshua and Zerubbabel. Jeshua was the High Priest as well as the grandson of the High Priest prior to the exile, and Zerubbabel was the grandson of Jehoiachin, the King prior to the exile.

Verse 2 says that Zerubbabel was the son of Shealtiel, King Jehoiachin’s eldest son, but 1 Chronicles 3:19 lists him as the son of Pedaiah, another son of Jehoiachin. Why the difference? The most likely explanation was that there was a levirate marriage (Deut. 25:5-10) between Pedaiah and the widow of Shealtiel. (A Levirate marriage is a type of marriage in which the brother of a deceased man is obligated to marry his brother’s widow.)

Again, we wonder what happened to Sheshbazzar, the leader of the people on their return in Chapter 1? As we discussed earlier, some surmise that Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel are two names for the same person. Others suggest that Zerubbabel may have been a subordinate leader under Sheshbazzar. Meyers suggests that Sheshbazzar may have been an elderly figurehead, with Zerubbabel being in charge of the day-to-day affairs. In 5:16, we will be told that “Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God that is in Jerusalem.”

Many times the hardest part of a project is just getting it started. Someone needs to step up and take the initiative, and that is why

having good leadership is so important. Zerubbabel and Jeshua got things moving, and, as we discussed, their combined leadership as Priest and King was so effective that Zechariah used it to describe the perfect King and High Priest who was to come.

The first thing the people did was build an altar. David had also built an altar before there was a temple (2 Samuel 24:25). Ezra 4:2 and Jeremiah 41:5 indicate that there may have already been an altar there, which the Jews would have then taken down in order to put up their own. If so, that may explain some of the hostility that we are about to see. But hostile or not, the people were right to take down the defiled altar and build a new one “as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God.” A central theme of this book is that man must worship God as God desires (rather than as man desires), and we see that happening here in verse 2.

Verses 3-6

3 They set the altar in its place, for fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands, and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening. 4 And they kept the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the rule, as each day required, 5 and after that the regular burnt offerings, the offerings at the new moon and at all the appointed feasts of the LORD, and the offerings of everyone who made a freewill offering to the LORD. 6 From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD. But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid.

Verse 3 tells us that “fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands.” Yes, they were afraid, and they had reason to be. They were in a strange place surrounded by hostile people. Courage is not the lack of fear; courage is the will to act in spite of fear. And these people were courageous with a courage that came from their reliance on God.

Their example is an example for us. No matter who or what surrounds us, God’s people should never be a timid people. I am sometimes reminded of one of my favorite G.K. Chesterton quotes: “We are on the road to producing a race of man too mentally modest to believe in the multiplication table.” And, of course, remember what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 16:13 – “Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong.”

The “peoples of the lands” likely included the surrounding peoples (Ashdod, Samaria, Ammon, Moab, and Edom), those of foreign descent now living in Judah, and Jews who had remained behind and

who had not maintained their faith but rather had compromised with the world. Also, included were those mentioned in 4:2 who had been settled there by the Assyrians. Each of these groups would have been hostile to what was now taking place. In fact, Ezra has much to say about how we should live in a hostile environment. (If we don't find the world a hostile place, then perhaps we are too much like the world. We are told to expect persecution if we lead a Godly life. 1 Timothy 3:12)

As we see so often in the Old Testament, building an altar was a significant act that often marked a renewed dedication to following God. Verse 3 tells us that they set the altar in its place – which means they put in the same position it occupied prior to the exile.

We also see that the daily sacrifices were restored. And how did they know what to do. They did “as it is written,” and they did “according to the rule.” Turning back to God's word is the only possible path to restoration of proper worship and service to God.

Notice how careful they were to follow every detail. They set in the altar *in its place*. They performed the sacrifices *by number according to the rule*. There is a lesson there for us. Details are important, and we neglect them at our peril. If we don't care about the “little” things, then that apathy very soon carries over to the “big” things—which perhaps should tell us that those “little” things are not really that little! When it comes to making sure our worship is pleasing to God, there are no little matters. God cares about the details, and so must we.

The Feast of Tabernacles or Feast of Booths in the fall was one the three most important Jewish celebrations, with the other two being Passover in the spring and Pentecost in the summer. During that feast, the people lived for seven days in booths or tents to remind them of God's protection of their ancestors in the wilderness – although they had just experienced such protection themselves as they traveled back from Babylon. It will be at this same feast that Ezra will read the law to the people much later in Nehemiah 8:14-18.

The heart that loves God desires to worship him in a way that pleases him, and these people had that heart. We see that heart in the freewill offerings that were brought in verse 5.

The point of verse 6 is that even though the sacrificial system had been reinstated, there was much that remained to be done. A partial restoration is not a restoration at all; it is more of a

reformation. And while a reformation may accomplish some needed reforms, those reforms are not enough unless they proceed toward a complete restoration of proper worship. Ezra is not describing a *reformation* movement; Ezra is describing a *restoration* movement. There is a huge difference between the two.

Verse 7

7 So they gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and the Tyrians to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the grant that they had from Cyrus king of Persia.

Verse 7 is one of the most important verses in Ezra, which might seem like an odd statement when you read verse 7. But verse 7 tells us something very important about this group of former exiles – they sincerely wanted to give God their very best.

Even though their group was small and relatively poor, they set very high standards when it came to doing God's work. They hired talented masons and carpenters, and they ordered the finest materials. In short, they were not wallowing in mediocrity, which I fear is becoming increasingly common in our modern world when it comes to doing God's work.

These people were a focused people and a dedicated people; they were not a laid-back people or a casual people when it came to doing God's work. Their desire was to give God their very best in everything they did. Is that our desire also? Or do we perhaps have another agenda? There is an easy test – we just need to ask ourselves, “is this the best we can do?” If the answer is consistently “No, not by a long shot” or “I hope not,” then it would seem we must have other priorities. Giving God your best does not happen by accident, but rather it must be your driving goal – or it won't happen. Again, their example is an example for us.

Solomon had also used cedar trees from Lebanon in constructing the first temple, but he had paid for that timber himself. Here the timber was paid for by the grant from Cyrus. God's people had fallen from their former glory because of their disobedience.

What we see in verse 7 is a beautiful parallel link, not only with the first temple, but also with the church that was to come. Isaiah 60:11-13 describes the church in similar terms:

Your gates shall be open continually; day and night they shall not be shut, **that people may bring to you**

the wealth of the nations, with their kings led in procession. ... **The glory of Lebanon shall come to you**, the cypress, the plane, and the pine, to beautify the place of my sanctuary, and I will make the place of my feet glorious.

Verses 8-9

8 Now in the second year after their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak made a beginning, together with the rest of their kinsmen, the priests and the Levites and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity. They appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to supervise the work of the house of the LORD. 9 And Jeshua with his sons and his brothers, and Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, together supervised the workmen in the house of God, along with the sons of Henadad and the Levites, their sons and brothers.

We are now in the second month of the second year, and verse 8 tells us that Zerubbabel and Jeshua “made a beginning.”

Solomon also began building his temple in the second month (1 Kings 6:1). This was the month after Passover, or April-May on our calendar, and it was the beginning of the dry season, which made it the ideal time to start building. Even so, as will see, they did little more than repair the foundation until nearly 20 years later during the time of Haggai and Zechariah in 520 BC, at which time they made another beginning (5:2).

What caused the delay? Maybe we can blame it on the Levites. Verses 8-9 tell us that Zerubbabel and Jeshua delegated the work to them. Maybe the Levites dropped the ball. The job was delegated to them, and nothing happened for 20 years. (I could insert a “deacon” joke here!) We will see what actually happened when we get to Chapter 4.

Verses 10-13

10 And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the directions of David king of Israel. 11 And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, “For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.” And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. 12 But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers’ houses, old men

who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, 13 so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.

Verses 10-13 show the reaction of the people when the new foundation was laid – they praised God, they sang, they gave thanks, they shouted, and they wept.

Verse 11 quotes Psalm 100:5 – “For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.” Jeremiah prophesied about this very event in Jeremiah 33:10-11.

Thus says the Lord: In this place of which you say, ‘It is a waste without man or beast,’ in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without man or inhabitant or beast, there shall be heard again 11 the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the Lord: “Give thanks to the Lord of hosts, for the Lord is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!” For I will restore the fortunes of the land as at first, says the Lord.”

Their hearts were full of praise and thanksgiving even though construction had just started. “True faith praises God even before the answer has materialized.”

Verses 12-13 are touching. The older priests, Levites, and family heads who remembered Solomon's temple (“the first house”) wept, presumably because of the difference between that grand edifice and the much simpler version that would now be constructed. They likely had feelings both of longing and regret. Haggai and Zechariah preached about this same sorrowful attitude:

- (Haggai 2:3) Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes?
- (Zechariah 4:10) For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice, and shall see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel.

Yes, there was sadness, but joy was mixed in with that sadness. Verse 13 says that “the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.” Who do you think was listening to all of that joyful shouting? The next verse tells us.

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. From this point on, nothing that these people attempted to do for God would go unchallenged, and the same occurs today. Many just do nothing in an attempt to avoid conflict (and we will see that same attitude in Ezra), but all that strategy does is create conflict with God. **We cannot avoid conflict, and no one who makes that his driving goal does very much in the service of God.**

Verses 1-3

1 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.”

The adversaries in verse 1 are the same peoples we encountered in 3:3. Those from Samaria would have included people brought by the Assyrians from elsewhere in their empire. We know that Sargon II of Assyria repopulated the Northern Kingdom, and Esarhaddon in verse 2 must have continued that same policy, including moving some into Syria-Palestine. A further resettlement by Ashurbanipal is mentioned in 4:10.

As we discussed, one of the themes of Ezra is the importance of maintaining purity, and we that theme here. These neighbors (already called adversaries) approach the Israelites and tell 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 sing Kum Ba Yah! Let’s celebrate Jesus together!” No, that is not what they said at all.

What they said in verse 3 was, “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.” They 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 worshipped – and *what* they worshipped. 2 Kings 17:33-41 tell us how they worshipped—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 “agree to disagree” about!

They took the hard way. The easy way would have been to accept them and their false worship. Who knows? That might have ended the adversity with their neighbors—but it would have created adversity with God. In fact, that hard stand almost certainly *increased* the adversity with the surrounding peoples, but there was no other place for God’s people to stand. It may have been a hard way, but for God’s people it was an easy decision.

Verses 4-5

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.

Now the knives have come out and the opposition begins in earnest. 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 that about 80 year timeframe.

The counselors in verse 5 were likely Persian officials bribed to obstruct the building in every possible way. The phrase “frustrate their purpose” literally means “making weak the hands.” This pressure against the Jews would continue for about 16 years (until 520 BC), and as verse 24 will show us, it was wholly effective, at least at first.

The mention of Darius in verse 5 and again in verse 24 marks the intervening verses as an excursus. The author does not return to the opposition of verses 4-5 until Chapter 5. The remaining verses in Chapter 4 discuss later oppositions to the building of the walls under the reign of Ahasuerus (Xerxes I) and the reign of Artaxerxes I.

How do we know this? For starters, the text mentions those two kings: Ahasuerus in verse 6 and Artaxerxes in verse 7. As noted on the handout for Lesson 1, some argue that verse 6 really refers to

Cambyses II and verse 7 really refers to Smerdis (the person under Darius' foot in the Behistun Inscription on the Lesson 3 handout). Josephus rearranged the account, placing Cambyses before Xerxes and replacing Xerxes with Artaxerxes. But none of that makes much sense to me. Rather, it seems clear that the author is simply jumping ahead a bit in the chronology to make his point.

And what was that point? Ezra had just shown how the Jews rejected the offer for help from their neighbors. In the remainder of Chapter 4 he provides further justification for that decision.

“Without a foretaste of history to reveal the full seriousness of the opposition, we would not properly appreciate the achievements recorded in the next two chapters nor the dangers hidden in the mixed marriages that Ezra would set himself to stamp out.”

Verse 6

6 And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.
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Ahasuerus (or Xerxes I) was the Persian who reigned from 486 until 465, following the reign of Darius I. Ahasuerus was also the husband of Queen Esther. All verse 6 tells us is that the opposition and letter writing continued through the reign of this king. Most likely they simply received no response, or at least no action, to this letter.

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 Bob!