

# CHAPTER 4

The good work of rebuilding the temple was no sooner begun than it met with opposition from those that bore ill will to it; the Samaritans were enemies to the Jews and their religion, and they set themselves to obstruct it.

**I.** They offered to be partners in the building of it, that they might have it in their power to retard it; but they were refused (v. 1-3).

**II.** They discouraged them in it, and dissuaded them from it (v. 4, 5).

**III.** They basely misrepresented the undertaking, and the undertakers, to the king of Persia, by a memorial they sent him (v. 6-16).

**IV.** They obtained from him an order to stop the building (v. 17-22), which they immediately put in execution (v. 23, 24).

## <1501> EZRA 4:1-5

### OPPOSITION MADE TO THE JEWS

We have here an instance of the old enmity that was put between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. God's temple cannot be built, but Satan will rage, and the *gates of hell will fight against it*. The gospel kingdom was, in like manner, to be set up with much struggling and contention. In this respect the glory of the latter house was greater than the glory of the former, and it was more a figure of the temple of Christ's church, in that Solomon built his temple when there was *no adversary nor evil occurrent*, (<1184>1 Kings 5:4); but this second temple was built notwithstanding great opposition, in the removing and conquering of which, and the bringing of the work to perfection at last in spite of it, the wisdom, power, and goodness of God were much glorified, and the church was encouraged to trust in him.

**I.** The undertakers are here called the *children of the captivity* (v. 1), which makes them look very little. They had newly come out of captivity,

were born in captivity, had still the marks of their captivity upon them; though they were not now captives, they were under the control of those whose captives they had lately been. Israel was God's son, his first-born; but by their iniquity the people sold and enslaved themselves, and so became children of the captivity. But, it should seem, the thought of their being so quickened them to this work, for it was by their neglect of the temple that they lost their freedom.

**II.** The opposers of the undertaking are here said to be *the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin*, not the Chaldeans or Persians (they gave them no disturbance — “let them build and welcome”), but the relics of the ten tribes, and the foreigners that had joined themselves to them, and patched up that mongrel religion we had an account of, <sup><1273></sup>2 Kings 17:33. *They feared the Lord, and served their own gods too.* They are called *the people of the land*, v. 4. The worst enemies Judah and Benjamin had were those that *said they were Jews and were not*, <sup><619></sup>Revelation 3:9.

**III.** The opposition they gave had in it much of the subtlety of the old serpent. When they heard that the temple was in building they were immediately aware that it would be a fatal blow to their superstition, and set themselves to oppose it. They had not power to do it forcibly, but they tried all the ways they could to do it effectually.

**1.** They offered their service to build with the Israelites only that thereby they might get an opportunity to retard the work, while they pretended to further it. Now,

**(1.)** Their offer was plausible enough, and looked kind: “*We will build with you, will help you to contrive, and will contribute towards the expense; for we seek your God as you do,*” v. 2. This was false, for, though they sought the same God, they did not seek him only, nor seek him in the way he appointed, and therefore did not seek him as they did. Herein they designed, if it were possible, to hinder the building of it, at least to hinder their comfortable enjoyment of it; as good almost not have it as not have it to themselves, for the pure worship of the true God and him only. Thus are the *kisses of an enemy deceitful*; his words are smoother than butter when war is in his heart. But,

**(2.)** The refusal of their proffered service was very just, v. 3. *The chief of the fathers of Israel* were soon aware that they meant them no kindness, whatever they pretended, but really designed to do them a mischief, and

therefore (though they had need enough of help if it had been such as they could confide in) told them plainly, “*You have nothing to do with us, have no part nor lot in this matter, are not true-born Israelites nor faithful worshippers of God; you worship you know not what,* <sup><R02></sup>John 4:22. You are none of those with whom we dare hold communion, and therefore we ourselves will build it.” They plead not to them the law of their God, which forbade them to mingle with strangers (though that especially they had an eye to), but that which they would take more notice of, the king’s commission, which was directed to them only: “The king of Persia has commanded us to build this house, and we shall distrust and affront him if we call in foreign aid.” Note, In doing good there is need of the *wisdom of the serpent*, as well as the *innocency of the dove*, and we have need, as it follows there, to *beware of men,* <sup><R06></sup>Matthew 10:16, 17. We should carefully consider with whom we are associated and on whose hand we lean. While we trust God with a pious confidence we must trust men with a prudent jealousy and caution.

**2.** When this plot failed they did what they could to divert them from the work and discourage them in it. They weakened their hands by telling them it was in vain to attempt it, calling them *foolish builders*, who began what they were not able to finish, and by their insinuations troubled them, and made them drive heavily in the work. All were not alike zealous in it. Those that were cool and indifferent were by these artifices drawn off from the work, which wanted their help, v. 4. And because what they themselves said the Jews would suspect to be ill meant, and not be influenced by, they, underhand, *hired counsellors against them*, who, pretending to advise them for the best, should dissuade them from proceeding, and so *frustrate their purpose* (v. 5), or dissuade the men of Tyre and Sidon from furnishing them with the timber they had bargained for (<sup><R07></sup>Ezra 3:7); or whatever business they had at the Persian court, to solicit for any particular grants or favours, pursuant to the general edict for their liberty, there were those that were hired and lay ready to appear of counsel against them. Wonder not at the restlessness of the church’s enemies in their attempts against the building of God’s temple. He whom they serve, and whose work they are doing, is *unwearied in walking to and fro through the earth* to do mischief. And let those who discourage a good work, and weaken the hands of those that are employed in it, see whose pattern they follow.

## THE JEWS MISREPRESENTED

Cyrus steadfastly adhered to the Jews' interest, and supported his own grant. It was to no purpose to offer any thing to him in prejudice of it. What he did was from a good principle, and in the fear of God, and therefore he adhered to it. But, though his reign in all was thirty years, yet after the conquest of Babylon, and his decree for the release of the Jews, some think that he reigned but three years, others seven, and then either died or gave up that part of his government, in which his successor was Ahasuerus (v. 6), called also *Artaxerxes* (v. 7), supposed to be the same that in heathen authors is called *Cambyses*, who had never taken such cognizance of the despised Jews as to concern himself for them, nor had he that knowledge of the God of Israel which his predecessor had. To him these Samaritans applied by letter for an order to stop the building of the temple; and they did it in the beginning of his reign, being resolved to lose no time when they thought they had a king for their purpose. See how watchful the church's enemies are to take the first opportunity of doing it a mischief; let not its friends be less careful to do it a kindness. Here is,

**I.** The general purport of the letter which they sent to the king, to inform him of this matter. It is called (v. 6) *an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem*. The devil is the *accuser of the brethren* (<6120>Revelation 12:10), and he carries on his malicious designs against them, not only by accusing them himself before God, as he did Job, but by acting as a lying spirit in the mouths of his instruments, whom he employs to accuse them before magistrates and kings and to make them odious to the many and obnoxious to the mighty. Marvel not if the same arts be still used to depreciate serious godliness.

**II.** The persons concerned in writing this letter. The contrivers are named (v. 7) that plotted the thing, the writers (v. 8) that put it into form, and the subscribers (v. 9) that concurred in it and joined with them in this representation, this misrepresentation I should call it. Now see here,

**1.** How the *rulers take counsel together against the Lord* and his temple, with their companions. The building of the temple would do them no harm, yet they appear against it with the utmost concern and virulence, perhaps

because the prophets of the God of Israel had foretold the *famishing* and *perishing* of all the *gods of the heathen*, <sup><3021></sup>Zephaniah 2:11; <sup><3011></sup>Jeremiah 10:11.

**2.** How the people concurred with them in imagining this vain thing. They followed the cry, though ignorant of the merits of the cause. All the several colonies of that plantation (nine are here mentioned), who had their denomination from the cities or countries of Assyria, Chaldea, Persia, etc., whence they came, set their hands, by their representatives, to this letter. Perhaps they were incensed against these returned Jews because many of the ten tribes were among them, whose estates they had got into their possession, and of whom they were therefore jealous, lest they should attempt the recovery of them hereafter.

**III.** A copy of the letter itself, which Ezra inserts here out of the records of the kingdom of Persia, into which it had been entered; and it is well we have it, that we may see whence the like methods, still taken to expose good people and baffle good designs, are copied.

**1.** They represent themselves as very loyal to the government, and greatly concerned for the honour and interest of it, and would have it thought that the king had no such loving faithful subjects in all his dominions as they were, none so sensible of their obligations to him, v. 14. *Because we are salted with the salt of the palace* (so it is in the margin), “we have our salary from the court, and could no more live without it than flesh could be preserved without salt;” or, as some think, their pay or pension was sent them in salt; or “Because we had our education in the palace, and were brought up at the king's table,” as we find, <sup><3005></sup>Daniel 1:5. These were those whom he intended to prefer; they did *eat their portion of the king's meat*. “Now, in consideration of this, *it is not meet for us to see the king's dishonour;*” and therefore they urge him to stop the building of the temple, which would certainly be the king's dishonour more than any thing else. Note, A secret enmity to Christ and his gospel is often gilded over with a pretended affection to Caesar and his power. The Jews hated the Roman government, and yet, to serve a turn, could cry, *We have no king but Caesar*. But (to allude to this), if those that lived upon the crown thought themselves bound in gratitude thus to support the interest of it, much more reason have we thus to argue ourselves into a pious concern for God's honour; *we have our maintenance from the God of heaven* and are *salted with his salt*, live upon his bounty and are the care of his providence; and

therefore it is not *meet for us to see his dishonour* without resenting it and doing what we can to prevent it.

2. They represent the Jews as disloyal, and dangerous to the government, that Jerusalem was *the rebellious and bad city* (v. 12), *hurtful to kings and provinces*, v. 15. See how Jerusalem, *the joy of the whole earth* (~~Psalm~~ Psalm 48:2), is here reproached as the scandal of the whole earth. The enemies of the church could not do the bad things they design against it if they did not first give it a bad name. Jerusalem had been a loyal city to its rightful princes, and its present inhabitants were as well affected to the king and his government as any of his provinces whatsoever. Daniel, who was a Jew, had lately approved himself so faithful to his prince that his worst enemies could find no fault in his management, ~~Daniel~~ Daniel 6:4. But thus was Elijah most unjustly charged with troubling Israel, the apostles with *turning the world upside down*, and Christ himself with *perverting the nation and forbidding to give tribute to Caesar*; and we must not think it strange if the same game be still played. Now here,

(1.) Their history of what was past was invidious, that *within this city sedition had been moved of old time*, and, for that cause, *it was destroyed*, v. 15. It cannot be denied but that there was some colour given for this suggestion by the attempts of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah to shake off the yoke of the king of Babylon, which, if they had kept close to their religion and the temple they were now rebuilding, they would never have come under. But it must be considered,

[1.] That they were themselves, and their ancestors, sovereign princes, and their efforts to recover their rights, if there had not been in them the violation of an oath, for aught I know, would have been justifiable, and successful too, had they taken the right method and made their peace with God first.

[2.] Though these Jews, and their princes, had been guilty of rebellion, yet it was unjust therefore to fasten this as an indelible brand upon this city, as if that must for ever after go under the name of *the rebellious and bad city*. The Jews, in their captivity, had given such specimens of good behaviour as were sufficient, with any reasonable men, to roll away that one reproach; for they were instructed (and we have reason to hope that they observed their instructions) to *seek the peace of the city where they were captives and pray to the Lord for it*, ~~Jeremiah~~ Jeremiah 29:7. It was therefore very unfair,

though not uncommon, thus to impute the iniquity of the fathers to the children.

(2.) Their information concerning what was now doing was grossly false in matter of fact. Very careful they were to inform the king that the Jews had *set up the walls of this city*, nay, had *finished* them (so it is in the *margin*) and *joined the foundations* (v. 12), when this was far from being the case. They had only begun to build the temple, which Cyrus commanded them to do, but, as for the walls, there was nothing done nor designed towards the repair of them, as appears by the condition they were in many years after (<sup><140B></sup>Nehemiah 1:3), all in ruins. *What shall be given*, and what *done*, to *these false tongues*, nay, which is worse, *these false pens? sharp arrows*, doubtless, *of the mighty*, and *coals of juniper*, <sup><140B></sup>Psalms 120:3, 4. If they had not been perfectly lost to all virtue and honour they would not, and if they had not been very secure of the king's countenance they durst not, have written that to the king which all their neighbours knew to be a notorious lie. See <sup><149Z></sup>Proverbs 29:12.

(3.) Their prognostics of the consequences were altogether groundless and absurd. They were very confident, and would have the king believe it upon their word, that if this city should be built, not only the Jews would *pay no toll, tribute, or custom* (v. 13), but (since a great lie is as soon spoken as a little one) that the king would have no portion at all on this side the river (v. 16), that all the countries on this side Euphrates would instantly revolt, drawn in to do so by their example; and, if the prince in possession should connive at this, he would wrong, not only himself, but his successors: *Thou shalt endamage the revenue of the kings*. See how every line in this letter breathes both the subtlety and malice of the old serpent.

## <sup><150H7></sup>EZRA 4:17-24

### THE JEWS MISREPRESENTED

Here we have,

**I.** The orders which the king of Persia gave, in answer to the information sent him by the Samaritans against the Jews. He suffered himself to be imposed upon by their fraud and falsehood, took no care to examine the allegations of their petition concerning that which the Jews were now

doing, but took it for granted that the charge was true, and was very willing to gratify them with an order of council to stay proceedings.

**1.** He consulted the records concerning Jerusalem, and found that it had indeed rebelled against the king of Babylon, and therefore that it was, as they called it, a *bad city* (v. 19), and withal that in times past kings had reigned there, to whom all the countries on that side the river had been tributaries (v. 20), and that therefore there was danger that if ever they were able (which they were never likely to be) they would claim them again. Thus he says as they said, and pretends to give a reason for so doing. See the hard fate of princes, who must see and hear with other men's eyes and ears, and give judgment upon things as they are represented to them, though often represented falsely. God's judgment is always just because he sees things as they are, and it is according to truth.

**2.** He appointed these Samaritans to stop the building of the city immediately, till further orders should be given about it, v. 21, 22. Neither they, in their letter, nor he, in his order, make any mention of the temple, and the building of that, because both they and he knew that they had not only a permission, but a command, from Cyrus to rebuild that, which even these Samaritans had not the confidence to move for the repeal of. They spoke only of the *city*: "Let not *that* be built," that is, as a city with walls and gates; "whatever you do, prevent *that*, lest damage grow to the hurt of the kings:" he would not that the crown should lose by his wearing it.

**II.** The use which the enemies of the Jews made of these orders, so fraudulently obtained; upon the receipt of them they went up *in haste to Jerusalem*, v. 23. *Their feet ran to evil*, <sup><2016></sup>Proverbs 1:16. They were impatient till the builders were served with this prohibition, which they produced as their warrant to *make them cease by force and power*. As they abused the king in obtaining this order by their mis-informations, so they abused him in the execution of it; for the order was only to prevent the walling of the *city*, but, having force and power on their side, they construed it as relating to the *temple*, for it was that to which they had an ill will, and which they only wanted some colour to hinder the building of. There was indeed a general clause in the order, to *cause these men to cease*, which had reference to their complaint about building the walls; but they applied it to the building of the temple. See what need we have to pray, not only for kings, but for all in authority under them, and *the governors sent by them*, because the *quietness* and *peaceableness* of our



lives, *in all godliness and honesty*, depend very much upon the integrity and wisdom of inferior magistrates, as well as the supreme. The consequence was that *the work of the house of God ceased* for a time, through the power and insolence of its enemies; and so, through the coldness and indifference of its friends, it stood still till the second year of Darius Hystaspes, for to me it seems clear by the thread of this sacred history that it was that Darius, v. 24. Though now a stop was put to it by the violence of the Samaritans, yet that they might soon after have gone on by connivance, if they had had a due affection to the work, appears by this, that before they had that express warrant from the king for doing it (Ezra 6) they were reprov'd by the prophets for not doing it, ~~1500~~ Ezra 5:1, v. 1, compared with ~~3000~~ Haggai 1:1, etc. If they had taken due care to inform Cambyses of the truth of this case, perhaps he would have recalled his order; but, for aught I know, some of the builders were almost as willing it should cease as the adversaries themselves were. At some periods the church has suffered more by the coldness of its friends than by the heat of its enemies; but both together commonly make church-work slow work.