

Ezra and Nehemiah

Study 2: Temple Rebuilding and Opposition (Ezra 3-4)

Context

With their journey completed, the returned exiles focus immediately on the Jerusalem temple.

The first task of rebuilding the altar and the foundation (chapter 3) shows the obedient worship and ensuing rejoicing of God's people.

The challenge from adversaries (chapter 4) shows the nature and methods of those who oppose the Lord and his people—often with temporary success.

This is very similar to Ezra 11-13 that was studied in the sermons on 22nd January.

Ezra 3 – Rebuilding the Altar

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

Q1: Why did the people give priority to the rebuilding of the altar?

To offer burnt offerings because they were frightened of the people in Judah who were not part of the group returning from exile.

The altar provided a way for his sinful people to approach God.

Leviticus 23 – The Feast of Booths

33. And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,
34. "Speak to the people of Israel, saying, On the fifteenth day of this seventh month and for seven days is the Feast of Booths to the LORD.
35. On the first day shall be a holy convocation; you shall not do any ordinary work.
36. For seven days you shall present food offerings to the LORD. On the eighth day you shall hold a holy convocation and present a food offering to the LORD. It is a solemn assembly; you shall not do any ordinary work.
42. You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All native Israelites shall dwell in booths,
43. that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God."

Q2: Why were the Jewish Festivals, and especially the Feast of Booths important?

To remind them of the rescue from Egypt.

In the wilderness, they lived in tents (booths)

On return from exile many people would have been living in tents.

Hebrews 10

1. For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near.
2. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins.
3. But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year.
12. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.
14. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

Q3: Why do we not need a physical altar?

We have no need to offer repeated sacrifices.

We have Jesus.

Ezra 3 – Rebuilding the Temple Foundations

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.
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.

Q4: Why did the old men weep?

They remembered the glory of the original temple and feared that the new one could not possible as magnificent.

Possibly with joy.

1 Chronicles 16 - David's Song of Thanks (on the occasions when the ark first entered Jerusalem)

4. Then he appointed some of the Levites as ministers before the ark of the LORD, to invoke, to thank, and to praise the LORD, the God of Israel.
7. on that day David first appointed that thanksgiving be sung to the LORD by Asaph and his brothers.
8. "Oh give thanks to the LORD; call upon his name; make known his deeds among the peoples!
9. Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of all his wondrous works!
10. Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice!
11. Seek the LORD and his strength; seek his presence continually!
12. Remember the wondrous works that he has done, his miracles and the judgments he uttered,
13. O offspring of Israel his servant, children of Jacob, his chosen ones!
14. He is the LORD our God; his judgments are in all the earth.
15. Remember his covenant forever, the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations,
16. the covenant that he made with Abraham, his sworn promise to Isaac,
17. which he confirmed to Jacob as a statute, to Israel as an everlasting covenant,
18. saying, "To you I will give the land of Canaan, as your portion for an inheritance."
19. When you were few in number, of little account, and sojourners in it,
20. wandering from nation to nation, from one kingdom to another people,
21. he allowed no one to oppress them; he rebuked kings on their account,
22. saying, "Touch not my anointed ones, do my prophets no harm!"
23. Sing to the LORD, all the earth! Tell of his salvation from day to day.
24. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvellous works among all the peoples!
25. For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, and he is to be feared above all gods.
26. For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the LORD made the heavens.
27. Splendour and majesty are before him; strength and joy are in his place.
28. Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength!
29. Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering and come before him! Worship the LORD in the splendour of holiness;
30. tremble before him, all the earth; yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved.
31. Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice, and let them say among the nations, "The LORD reigns!"
32. Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it!
33. Then shall the trees of the forest sing for joy before the LORD, for he comes to judge the earth.
34. Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!

Q5: What is the focus of David's song?

Praise

Remember what God has done

Tell others about it

Q6: How does the way we worship today compare to David's song?

It is very similar. The words from this song are often used as the basis for the songs and hymns we use. I am moved to tears when many people together sing praise to God.

Ezra 4 – Repeated Opposition

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,
 4. "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."
 5. Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build and bribed counsellors against them to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.
 24. Then the work on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped, and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.
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6. And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.

The Letter to King Artaxerxes

7. In the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam and Mithredath and Tabeel and the rest of their associates wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia. The letter was written in Aramaic and translated.
8. Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king as follows:
9. Rehum the commander, Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their associates, the judges, the governors, the officials, the Persians, the men of Erech, the Babylonians, the men of Susa, that is, the Elamites,
10. and the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Osnappar deported and settled in the cities of Samaria and in the rest of the province Beyond the River.
11. (This is a copy of the letter that they sent.)

"To Artaxerxes the king: Your servants, the men of the province Beyond the River, send greeting. And now

12. be it known to the king that the Jews who came up from you to us have gone to Jerusalem. They are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city. They are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations.
13. Now be it known to the king that if this city is rebuilt and the walls finished, they will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and the royal revenue will be impaired.
14. Now because we eat the salt of the palace and it is not fitting for us to witness the king's dishonour, therefore we send and inform the king,
15. in order that search may be made in the book of the records of your fathers. You will find in the book of the records and learn that this city is a rebellious city, hurtful to kings and provinces, and that sedition was stirred up in it from of old. That was why this city was laid waste.
16. We make known to the king that if this city is rebuilt and its walls finished, you will then have no possession in the province Beyond the River."

The King Orders the Work to Cease

17. The king sent an answer:

“To Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe and the rest of their associates who live in Samaria and in the rest of the province Beyond the River, greeting. And now

18. the letter that you sent to us has been plainly read before me.

19. And I made a decree, and search has been made, and it has been found that this city from of old has risen against kings, and that rebellion and sedition have been made in it.

20. And mighty kings have been over Jerusalem, who ruled over the whole province Beyond the River, to whom tribute, custom, and toll were paid.

21. Therefore make a decree that these men be made to cease, and that this city be not rebuilt, until a decree is made by me.

22. And take care not to be slack in this matter. Why should damage grow to the hurt of the king?”

23. Then, when the copy of King Artaxerxes’ letter was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their associates, they went in haste to the Jews at Jerusalem and by force and power made them cease.

For clarification, this chapter covers a period of about 100 years:

- **verses 1-4, refer to opposition in 538 BC when the first group of exiles returned, under King Cyrus**
- **verses 5-6 refer to oppression during the reign of Xerxes I, in 486-464 BC.**
- **verses 7-23 refer to oppression during the reign of Artaxerxes I, in 464–423 BC.**
- **verse 24 describes the period of inactivity before the work restarted under King Darius, around 520 BC**

Q7: What methods were employed by the people who wanted to halt the work?

Infiltrate the activity and frustrate the work from within. (v1-3)

Intimidation (v4)

Bribery (v5)

False accusations (v6-16)

Q8: Can you think of any examples of how people try to frustrate the spread of the Gospel today?

From within (false teaching), trying to make the church fit in with society, rather than being set apart

Intimidation, many regimes, including attacks on free speech in our own country

False accusations, Muslims about Christians

Ridicule

John 15

18. “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.

19. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.

20. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.”

Ephesians 6

10. Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.

11. Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.

12. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.
13. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.

Q9: What do these verses tell us about facing opposition as Christians today?

It is inevitable.

God has provided all of the tools we need to face up to opposition (the whole armour of God).

- belt of truth
- breastplate of righteousness
- shoes: gospel of peace
- shield of faith
- helmet of salvation
- sword of the Spirit

Q10: Have you learned anything today that might change your approach to God?

Explains the structure of the Anglican liturgy

Praise – songs and hymns

Repentance - confession

Remembrance – teaching and the formal statement of our faith, the creed

Trust in God's armour when facing opposition - prayer