

EZRA/NEHEMIAH: BUILDING GOD'S HOUSE

2. CIRCLE THE WAGONS

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Ezra 4:1-6

The first three kings of Israel were Saul, David, and Solomon. Solomon was responsible for constructing the first great temple in Jerusalem. When Solomon died in 922 BC¹, his kingdom split into Judah and Israel—also known as the Southern Kingdom and the Northern Kingdom. Two hundred years later, in 722 BC, the Northern Kingdom with its capital at Samaria fell at the hands of the Assyrian Empire. 125 years after that, the Southern Kingdom with its capital at Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. Although our narrative in Ezra and Nehemiah is directed at the Southern Kingdom, it is important to understand what happened in the North. Those events bear directly on our story.

In the book of 2 Kings² (one of the historical books of the Old Testament), we read that in 722 BC, the Assyrians invaded the Northern Kingdom and carried many of the Israelites away back to Assyria. According to scripture, the cause of this devastating loss is that the people of the Northern Kingdom had sinned against God. They did *wicked things*. They served false idols and set up shrines throughout the countryside. Their loss to the Assyrians was viewed as God's punishment for their sins.

The Assyrians imported people from other lands to replace the captured Israelites. These people brought with them their own gods and customs. This caused a great deal of friction within the land so the king located an Israelite priest and sent him through Israel to teach the new people the ways of God. This worked, to some extent. The foreigners worshiped the Lord, but they also continued to worship their own gods as well. The people also appointed their own priests to the high places. As we read in Kings, *So they worshiped the Lord but also served their own gods, after the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away*. These people were known as the Samaritans because they inhabited the region of Samaria.

Naturally, the people of the Southern Kingdom looked upon their neighbors to the north with disdain because of what they considered to be an impure, contaminated worship of the Lord. Seven-hundred years later, The Judeans would continue to look down upon their descendents. When Jesus tells his parable about a

¹ or 931 BC

² 2 Kings 17

Samaritan who actually helps someone, his readers are shocked. A Samaritan, they believed, would never do that.

In 597 BC, when the Babylonian Empire conquered Jerusalem, many of those Jews were carried back to Babylon in the event known as the Babylonian Exile. They remained in exile for 58 years until King Cyrus the Persian defeated the Babylonians and claimed that empire as his own. One of Cyrus' earliest official acts was to free the Jews and allow them to return to Judah. Cyrus issued an edict declaring that God's people were free to return to Judah and that they were to build God a house in Jerusalem. Cyrus donated gold and silver to help finance this project. As we read in Ezra, approximately 50,000 people would make the return journey from Babylon to Judah. Once back in Jerusalem, their first order of business was to rebuild the altar on the site of the temple—the temple which had been destroyed by the Babylonians. Then they began holding regular services of worship to the Lord.

Their next goal was to rebuild the temple itself. It would take them two years before they could begin construction, but on the day of the groundbreaking for the foundation, there was great celebrating.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell of the return of the Exiles and the rebuilding of the city and the temple. Some scholars believe that these two books—Ezra and Nehemiah—were originally one book. They may well have been and we are going to treat them that way. The books appear to consist of three sources. First there are the memoirs—the memoirs of Ezra and the memoirs of Nehemiah. Second are the official letters and documents. Third are the census and genealogical lists. These sources have been brought together to tell the story of the rebuilding of the city and God's active hand in the matter. I want to be clear that what you will not find here is a precise and accurate chronological history of these events. This is a theological retelling.

In our reading for today in chapter 4 of Ezra we are introduced for the first time to *the people of the land*. That is what they are called—*the people of the land*. We are not exactly sure who they are. They appear to be the people in and around Judah inhabiting the region. You get the impression that the returnees from Babylon view these people as wild and untamed, that they are practically feral.

When the returnees begin re-building the temple, they are approached by these people offering to help. They say *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 King Esar-haddon of Assyria who brought us here*. This would appear to be a noble gesture—the entirety of the people banding together to rebuild the temple, worshipping the Lord together.

But the returnees would have none of it and told them, *You shall have no part in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus of Persia has commanded us.* This seems rather harsh to reject this gracious offer. And I have to admit that I am torn by this because there are clearly two ways to look at the situation. One the one hand, the offer to help rebuild seems genuine. All those living in the land would want to see the great temple rise from the rubble. The city of Jerusalem had never recovered from the defeat of the Babylonians. This would be a new beginning. Why couldn't all those who worshiped the Lord join together? The house of God is not just a building, it is a people, and this would be an opportunity for all God's people to serve God together.

On the other hand, there is the matter of purity. The Jews returning from Babylon no doubt felt that they were the pure, uncontaminated people of God. Their worship was pure; their bloodlines were pure. And this is where these census lists we find in Ezra and Nehemiah come into play. If you are on the list then you are pure. It's like saying your family came to the new world on the Mayflower. In the eyes of some, that makes you pure; it gives you legitimacy. By rejecting the offer of the people of the land, the Jews are circling the wagons to protect themselves.

I will admit, this makes me uncomfortable categorizing people as pure and un-pure for I don't believe that is how God sees us. But the returnees do have a point. While the people of the land do worship the Lord, they also worship other gods in direct defiance of the command *Thou shalt have no other gods before me.* Imagine that the returnees did allow the people to take part in the building of the temple, and they get near the end and the people suggest that maybe they just add a nook for the god Baal, and then maybe a nook for Nergal, and maybe one small altar for Ashima.³ What's the harm, they would argue. The purity that the returnees demanded was not of blood but of devotion. One must worship the Lord and the Lord alone. And they knew this had been lost by the people long before the Babylonians defeated Jerusalem.

So, what happens then is that the people of the land do all in their power to halt the rebuilding effort. They harass the returnees and make them afraid to build. They bribe the local officials. But the most damaging thing they do is to write a letter to the king of Persia claiming to represent all of the people of the province "Beyond the River." They report that the Jews have returned to Jerusalem and *are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city.* And they tell the king that if the city is rebuilt that the Jews will no longer recognize the king and will not pay their taxes or tributes. To prove this, they recommend that the king search the royal archives for evidence to show that historically the Jews have been a rebellious people. If the city is rebuilt the king will lose his hold over the entire province.

³ These are some of the gods listed in 2 Kings 17.

The king responds to the letter saying that yes, a search had been done and they had found evidence of how, in the past, Jerusalem had rebelled against kings. The king then decreed that all building must cease.

When the king's letter is received in the province, those who oppose the Jews rush to Jerusalem and force them to stop all work. For a number of years no progress is made. But the Jewish prophets, especially Haggai and Zechariah, encourage the Jews to continue building and eventually work does resume. When the people of the land learn of this, they demand to know who gave the Jews the authority to rebuild. The governor of the province sends a letter to Darius (who is now king of Persia) explaining the situation. But he tips his hand when he reports that the Jews claim they are only doing what Cyrus had commanded them to do. Darius calls for a search of the archives and a scroll is discovered that corroborates the Jews' claim, that Cyrus had ordered the rebuilding of the temple. Darius responds with a sharply worded letter ordering the governor and others to get out of the way of the Jews and allow all work to proceed. Furthermore, the governor is ordered to pay for the project out of his own budget. I especially like the part where King Darius says that if anyone disobeys his order, *a beam shall be pulled out of the house of the perpetrator, who then shall be impaled upon it.*

Work on the temple continues unimpeded and the project is completed on May 15, 515 BC. At completion, the people celebrate. Even more significantly, they observe the festival of the Passover. The Passover, as you will recall, originates in that night that the Israelites fled Egypt for freedom. For the Jews, after being dragged off to Babylon, to be back in Jerusalem and to have their temple again symbolized freedom for them, it is their new Passover.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are about the returnees rebuilding the house of the Lord. As we know, God's house is where God resides. It is not just a building, it is a people. Individually, we each can be a house of the Lord. The question we have to face is this, Is our devotion to God pure? Is it complete? Do we worship God alone or do we worship other gods as well? Do we desire to be the people of the land or the people of heaven? Amen.