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Opposition during the Reign of Cyrus
Ezra 4: 1-5

Opposition during the Reign of Cyrus DIG: What psychological ploy is used here against Isra'el? Why did Zerubbabel and the others respond as they did (4:3 and 3:2)? Cyrus reigned 29 years (559-530). What was the impact of such protracted opposition?

REFLECT: What clues tell you who has a part in God's work, and who is opposed to Him? Are such clues "presumption," the spiritual gift of discernment, or faith? When has someone tried to wear you out or scare you away from completing a certain task? From completing a ministry task? Did you continue or quit? Why?

536 BC during the ministry of Zerubbabel (**to see link click Ag – The First Return**).
Compiled by the Chronicler from the Ezra memoirs
(see **Ac – Ezra-Nehemiah from a Jewish Perspective: The Ezra Memoirs**).

Work on the Temple had begun, but then stopped because of this opposition.

Within weeks of returning, **the** former **exiles** gathered in **the Temple** area to rebuild the bronze altar and celebrate the Feast of Sukkot (**to see link click Aq – Rebuilding the Bronze Altar and the Festival of Sukkot**). In the spring of the second year, about six months after **their** return to **Jerusalem**, **they** gathered again in **the City** to celebrate laying **the foundation** for **the Temple** (see **Ar – The Start of Rebuilding the Temple**). Now it was time to begin in earnest the work of rebuilding **the House of God** itself.

News of the rebuilding project reached those from afar, and as the work began, a delegation arrived, identified by **the Chronicler** as **the enemies of Judah and Benjamin (Ezra 4:1)** and **the people of the land (Ezra 4:4a,** also seen in **9:1-2** and **11, 10:2** and **11; Nehemiah 9:24** and **30, 10:31-32).**



Opposition during the reign of Cyrus (see the commentary on **Dani'el Ag – Cyrus and Darius**)**: When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a Temple for ADONAI, the God of Isra'el (Ezra 4:1).** Many of these **enemies of Judah and Benjamin** were from **Samaria**, but also included **people** from **Ashdod**, **Ammon**, **Mo'ab**, and **Edom**. **They** were the descendants of those who were relocated into the cities of the Northern Kingdom after the fall of **Samaria** to **the Assyrians** and Sargon II in 722 BC. The Bible gives no record of **Esarhaddon** having done the same thing, but we do know from the cylinder of **Esarhaddon** that **he** conquered Sidon during one of **his** campaigns, and it is most likely the Northern Kingdom (**Samaria**) was also involved in the rebellion against **the Assyrians**.

The origins of **the Samaritans** began in **Second Kings 17:24-33.** The northern Kingdom of Isra'el had been conquered by **the Assyrians**. **They** treated **their** conquered territories differently than the Babylonians. The Babylonians brought only the best and the brightest back to Babylon (see the commentary on **Jeremiah Gt – In the Thirty-Seventh Year of the Exile Jehoiachin was Released from Prison**). **The Assyrians**, however, took a different approach. **The king of Assyria** (primarily Sargon II, though later Assyrian rulers, including Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal, settled additional non-Israelites in **Samaria**) **brought people from Babylon, Kuthah, Avva, Hamath and Sepharvaim and settled them in the towns of Samaria to replace the Israelites. They took over Samaria and lived in its towns (Second Kings 17:24).** The problem was that these **people** brought **their** gods with them and began worshiping **their** gods in **Samaria**. But lions kept eating the new settlers.
So one day they asked a Levite why they kept being eaten by lions and he suggested that they were worshiping the gods of the lands where they came from, but not the **God of Samaria**. Therefore, **they** began worshiping **YHVH**, but in addition to **their** other gods. The problem of **the Samaritans** was not that they were half-breeds racially, but half-breeds spiritually. They had a hybrid religion

because they combined the true faith of worshiping **the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob** with pagan idolatry.

This delegation was, therefore, a people of mixed racial and religious backgrounds, who had no claim to being a part of **the people of God**. Not only did they combine the worship of their gods with the worship of **YHVH**, they were even led by an apostate priest from the north, provided by **the Assyrians**, rather than a true priest from **Jerusalem**.[66] **So they continued to worship ADONAI, but they also [worshiped] their own gods, after the custom of the nations from which they had been deported (Second Kings 17:25-33).**

They approached Zerubbabel and the leading patriarchs and said to them, "Let us build with you, for like you we seek your God and have been sacrificing to Him since the days of Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, who brought us here" (Ezra 4:2). On the surface, this offer sounded reasonable and timely. The sooner **the Temple** was built, the sooner **the Israelites** could worship **ADONAI** in the manner for which **they** had longed for, for seventy long years. And building hardly a *religious* matter! Bricks are bricks. What wrong could there be in accepting a few laborers to sweat alongside the faithful in hauling heavy stones? It could hardly have threatened **Isra'el's** faith. Right?

But Zerubbabel, Jeshua and the rest of the prominent patriarchs of Isra'el said to them, "It is not for you and us to build a House for our God – but we alone will build it for ADONAI the God of Israel, just as Cyrus – king of Persia – has commanded us" (Ezra 4:3). In **Zerubbabel's** eyes, however, for **the exiles** to have assimilated, even in this apparently harmless way, would have seriously compromised **their** future. Those **enemies** did not have the same convictions; they did not submit to the authority of **God's** word; and they were not dedicated to **the One** true **God**. The danger of syncretism was ever present.[67]

God's word was clear. The hard-won insight of the exile, which had transformed disaster into deliverance and horror into hope, was the recognition that **Ha'Shem** demanded exclusive worship (see the commentary on **Exodus Dk – You Shall Have No Other Gods Before Me**). **He** demanded it to the extent that the Babylonian exile was the inevitable outcome of **Isra'el's** past disobedience in that regard. For the returnees to tempt fate at that crucial juncture was unthinkable. Not only that, but **Cyrus'** word was also clear. The official permission to rebuild had been given to **the Jews** alone, and nothing that might jeopardize that political lifeline could be tolerated. That **Zerubbabel's** suspicions were justified is made

perfectly clear in the following chapters.[68]

Pluralism is nothing new. These **Samaritans** and **their friends** claimed to worship the same **God** as **the Jews**, so they insisted on joint participation in the rebuilding of **the Temple** in **Yerushalayim**. Today it is quite common to hear calls for the abandonment of the uniqueness of our faith because of the belief in religious pluralism. This has been the frequent contention, for example, of the World Council of Churches. Had this been the necessary consequence of encountering the multitude of other religions, **Moshe**, **Isaiah**, **Yeshua** and **Paul** would have given up biblical faith long before it became fashionable in our time.

Nothing in modern culture so diminishes our understanding of the greatness of **God's** glory as revealed in the Scriptures as syncretism – the view that there are many ways to God and that all of them are equally valid. This is a lie from the pit of hell. Once one adopts the view that there is more than one way to **God**, pluralism negates the supremacy of the God of the Bible. Believers are immediately labeled as using "hate speech," and are "intolerant." In this age of political correctness, relativism, and pluralism, arguments for the uniqueness of our faith appear to be hostile and militant. Traveling through **the narrow gate** isn't very popular these days (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Dw – The Narrow and Wide Gates**).

The Chronicler seems eager for us to learn that danger lurked in the offer to **Zerubbabel** in the guise of a genuine offer for help. These were wolves in sheep's clothing, plotting mischief and mayhem unless forthrightly opposed. Behind this, for sure, lay **the ruler of demons himself – Satan (Matthew 12:24)**! His hatred toward **God**, and all things that pertain to **God's** Kingdom, is, and was evident. These delegates were **enemies of the cross of Messiah (Philippians 3:18)**, to be resisted with unrelenting zeal.[69]

Having had **their** offer of help refused, **the people of the land** turned to a strategy of systematic discouragement. In C. S. Lewis' The Screwtape Letters, Screwtape, the demonic undersecretary of the Department of Temptation, suggests a plan of attack to a novice in the art of temptation. After mentioning a few strategies, he then makes the recommendations to "work hard . . . on **discouragement** which the patient (the believer) clearly deserves." It is a strategy, Screwtape suggests, that hardly ever fails.

This strategy was employed in **Jerusalem** with devastating success. Having begun

the work of rebuilding **the Temple**, **the Jews** turned away from the task altogether – until, that is, **Ezra** appeared on the scene. It would take twenty-one years before the task would be completed. **Then the people of the land, or the Samaritans, began discouraging the people of Judah and making them afraid to build (Ezra 4:4).** Through a campaign of physical and psychological intimidation and threats, the reconstruction work came to a standstill. Those **Jews** were not soldiers in any conventional sense. **They** had spent **their** lives in submission to Babylon and were not equipped to deal with the kind of guerrilla warfare that they were subjected to. Perhaps the campaign of intimidation was largely verbal, pointing out the difficulty of the task and the futility of building something that, according to some of **them**, would never be as glorious as Solomon's **Temple (Ezra 3:12)**.

If the first part of the strategy occurred in **Jerusalem**, the second seemed to have taken place by hired men in the halls of power in Persia. A campaign was started to dislodge **the Jews'** favorable status with **their** Persian overlords. **They bribed advisors in order to thwart their plans all the days of King Cyrus of Persia and King Darius** (see **Bc – King Darius Endorses the Rebuilding of the Temple**). Personal **discouragement** drained away the spirit of the work at hand, diminished the effort of building, which led to apathy and inactivity **(Ezra 4:5)**. It was a strategy that evidently worked: **Thus the work on the House of God in Jerusalem ceased. It remained at a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia (Ezra 4:24).** What a breathtaking statement. The work of **God** was halted.

Discouragement is like a deadly virus. It saps energy, cripples motivation, and turns people inward. Are you discouraged by the slow progress of Kingdom work? Does it appear to you as though for every step forward you make in your walk with **Christ**, you find yourself taking two steps back? If so, here is a three pronged strategy for dealing with discouragement – strategies that we will see **Ezra** and **Nehemiah** employ later in our studies.

First, we must realize that our walk with **Messiah**, and the ministry that goes along with it, consists of trials and difficulties of all kinds and that no gains are to be made without them. This sounds depressing, but it is the constant theme of Scripture. Knowing that we have an enemy in the Adversary, who will stop at nothing to destroy us, should be the motivation we need to ensure that we are equipped with **the full armor of God (Ephesians 6:10-17)**, and ready when the battle begins.

Second, we must learn from the mistake that **the righteous of the TaNaKh**

made. They allowed **themselves** to become victims of discouragement. **They** lost sight of the goal, and more importantly, lost sight of **Ha'Shem**. Whenever you take your eye off **the Lord**, discouragement is sure to follow. The answer to **their** struggles did not lie in **themselves**. **They** needed to believe that **ADONAI** had brought them back from Babylon and resettled them in the Land. What is not seen in this chapter is any indication of prayer to the **God** of heaven to intervene. And without prayer we can expect nothing from **His** hand. The eventual slide into indifference and apathy that resulted in the next twenty-one years was the inevitable consequence. **The LORD** gave them what **they** asked for . . . to be left alone!

Third, the exiles failed to exercise faith. Faith will keep us going when everyone around us is shouting, "Stop!" Faith will keep us hanging onto **God** despite discouragements that we feel, real and imaginary. Faith takes hold of the reality of the opposition and brings it before **ADONAI**, only to see the reality that **He** is stronger than the might of the fiercest enemy. That is the faith we need to keep hanging on when times are tough and enemies abound.[70]