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The Resumption of Work Under King Darius Ezra 4: 17-24

The resumption of work under King Darius DIG: What is the three-pronged appeal of Rehum's letter? What is this plaintiff more concerned about: City building code violations? Political issues? Advancing his own cause? Revenging himself and his people of Isra'el? Something else? What effect did this letter have on Artaxerxes? On the Jews? What does the chronicler conclude? What happens in the second year of King Darius' rule (Ezra 4:24; Haggai 1:1-5; Zechariah 1:1-17)?

REFLECT: On the one hand, when one party says they alone are the true worshipers of God, and all others are a mixed breed (or mongrels), then what might one expect in return? How else do you account for the opposition mounted against ancient Isra'el, and Isra'el today? On the other hand, why was Isra'el right to insist on religious exclusivity and spiritual purity? Today, why and when is it valid to make the case that faith in Yeshua Messiah is the only way to the Father and true salvation?

445 BC During the ministry of Nehemiah (**to see link click Bt – The Third Return**).
Compiled by the Chronicler from the Ezra and Nehemiah memoirs (see **Ac – Ezra-Nehemiah from a Jewish Perspective: The Nehemiah Memoirs**)**.**

Ezra 4:8 to 6:18 is written in Aramaic, the language that the Persians used in official documents (much like the Roman Empire used Greek).

In describing the events in the books of **Ezra** and **Nehemiah**, **the Chronicler**, with the advantage of hindsight, looks back on the historical landscape and refers to the opposition placed in the way of **the Jews**. When discussing the problems of building **the Temple** in **Ezra 4:1-5**, it reminded **him** of similar problems with the rebuilding of **the walls** of **Jerusalem** about ninety years later, and so **Ezra 4:6-23** has been

inserted, almost parenthetically, before the narrative of the building of **the Temple** can once again be taken up in **Ezra 4:24** (see below). So, here we temporarily flash-forward to 445 BC and **the Third Return** of **Nehemiah**.

The king Artakh'shasta replied to **the letter** sent by **Rehum the commander** and **Shimshai the priest** (**to see link click Av – Letters to Ahasuerus and Artakh'shasta**), and **the king** appears to have taken the bait entirely. **He** was evidently more troubled by the thought of lost revenue **(Ezra 4:21-22)**, and has perhaps been even more impressed by the potential of **Judah's** rebellion than either **Rehum** and **Shimshai** could have hoped for or historically was even possible.

The heading of **king Artakh'shasta's letter** read: **To Rehum the commander, Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their associates who dwell in Samaria and the others in Trans-Euphrates. The Trans-Euphrates** included Egypt – a constant thorn in the side of Eastern empires for centuries – the form of the **Jerusalem** threat may well be couched in terms of a suggested political marriage of convenience between Egypt and **Jerusalem**. **The king** was urged to research **Jerusalem's** history to find similar acts of rebellion in the past. In actuality, Judah was militarily weak and could no more organize a military coup than fly to the moon! It was the suggestion alleging a wider alliance including Egypt that disturbed **the** Persian **king's** equanimity. The paid officials of Persia, **Rehum** and **Shimshai**, were ordered to immediately spread word that **the rebuilding must stop immediately**.[79]

The author no doubt had a copy of **the letters** before **him**, for the form and expression follow exactly what we know of official royal **letters** of this time. The reply also shows the surprising efficiency of administration communication in the Persian Empire. **Letters** could travel between Samaria and the Persian court in about a week.

The actual text of **the king's letter** started with: **Shalom!**

The letter that you sent to us has been translated and read in my presence. Because **the king** did not understand Aramaic, **the letter** was translated for **him**. **At my order a search was made and it was found that this city has from earliest times revolted against kings and that rebellion and sedition continually occur in it** (see the commentary on **Isaiah Go – Hezekiah and the Assyrians**)**. Mighty kings**, like those of Assyria, Babylon and

Persia, **have ruled over Jerusalem governing all the Trans-Euphrates, and tribute, taxes, and duty were paid to them (Ezra 4:17-20).**

So now, issue a decree to stop these men – this city is not to be rebuilt until I issue a decree. He was cautious. **He** left **himself** the option to make another decision in the light of new circumstances. Nevertheless, **he** warned **Rehum** and **Shimshai** to **be careful not to be negligent in this matter.** Because of the long distance the king made sure that his order was carried out. **Why should damage increase to the detriment of the kings (Ezra 4:21-22)?** This was the same **king** who later (in 445 BC) changed this **decree** and allowed **Nehemiah** to return and rebuild **the walls** of **Jerusalem**. However, the immediate result was a **forced** cessation of the building activity because the enemies used **force** to back up a legal document from **the** Persian **king**.[80]

The enemies lost no time in complying with the decree of **Artakh'shasta. Then, as soon as the copy of the letter from the king was read in the presence of Rehum, Shimshai the scribe and their associates, they hurried off to the Jews in Jerusalem and by force and power compelled them to stop (Ezra 4:23).** If some work had been done on the reconstruction of **the walls**, **they** may have destroyed **it** at that time. This could have been the situation reported to **Nehemiah** in **Nehemiah 1:3, "The wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates have been burned with fire."**

It is one of the ironies of **Jewish** history that the fears aroused in **Artakh'shasta** by **Rehum's letter** were instrumental in **his** decision to send **Nehemiah** to **Jerusalem** (see **Bw – The Response of King Artakh'shasta**). More specifically, **the adversaries** condemned **themselves** out of **their** own mouths. In making **their** extreme accusations against **the Jews** (see **Av – Letters to Ahasuerus and Artakh'shasta**), those **enemies** of **God** proved that **they** had no true heritage in **Isra'el**. **Nehemiah,** however, was known for **his** loyalty to Persia; therefore, the effects of **his** commission ended up being exactly opposite of those who shared the concerns of **Rehum** and **Shimshai**, who seem to have forgotten the proverb: **The heart of man plans his course, but ADONAI directs his steps (Proverbs 16:9).** Little did **Artakh'shasta** realize **his** own role in the re-establishment of **the people** from whom, in time, a true **King** would appear.[81]

As the lines of **Ezra 4** draw to a close in **verse 23**, we now flash-back to **the First Return** and the narrative of rebuilding **the Temple** is once again taken up.

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



Then 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 (see **Bc – King Darius Endorses the Rebuilding of the Temple**). Here **the Chronicler** picks up the thread of **Ezra 4:5** which was dropped for the long parenthesis of **4:6-23**. The time was again that of **Zerubbabel**, finishing with the same phrase as in **Ezra 4:5**, **the reign of Darius king of Persia** (see **Dani'el Ag – Cyrus and Darius**) **(Ezra 4:24)**; but now we are told what the earlier statement stopped short of saying: first, that the work of building **the Temple** was not only hindered but halted, and secondly, in what year of **Darius king of Persia** the deadlock was broken (see **Ba – The Completion of the Temple**).[82]

It was as if **the Chronicler**, looking back on **Jewish** history, was saying to **his** first audience, "You see the trouble you are facing right now? Well, it has been like this for the past hundred years. Time and time again, your forefathers experienced trial after trail. It has never been easy for the people of **God**." There are **four lessons**, then, that we can learn from over a century of **Jewish** opposition.

First, you can almost hear **Paul**, reporting back to the church in Antioch after his first missionary journey, saying: **It is through many persecutions that we must enter the Kingdom of God (Acts 14:22b).** The health and wealth doctrine so popular today is a far cry from the teaching of our **Lord** when **He** said: **Foxes have dens and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head (Matthew 8:20).** We can't compare our lives to the supposed blessings that other believers have known. Most of us experience trials and

suffering. Knowing this should prevent us from distorting our expectations or getting frustrated when they are not fulfilled.

Second, like the first readers of **Ezra-Nehemiah**, we need to learn that relatively long periods of time may pass without the benefit of divine intervention in either good leadership or spiritual renewal. **Chapter 4** covers a period from the time of **Zerubbabel** and **Jeshua**, leaders in the rebuilding of the Temple (537-515 BC), to the rise of **Ezra** the reformer some sixty years later (458 BC), to the emergence of **Nehemiah** over a decade later (445 BC). Intervals of time (in some cases generations) pass by in which relatively happens that we might call spectacular; no great leadership or no outpourings of spiritual revival. Just as is true of **God's** work in the lives of individuals, so it is in the work of the body of **Christ** – growth is hardly ever uniform and uninterrupted. Instead we see periods of spiritual dryness and lethargy. Such times it is easy to exaggerate the blessings of the past and grow cynical toward the present. We may not be living in times when extraordinary things are happening, days when the likes of Martin Luther, John Calvin, George Whitfield, or Jonathan Edwards were ministering, but we are not to despise the time in which **the Lord** has placed us.

Third, a period of trials can make us lose sight of **Ha'Shem**. By the time of **Nehemiah's** arrival in 445 BC the people had long abandoned the project of rebuilding **the City** and, in the process, lost sight of the reason **God** had allowed them to return to **the Promised Land** in the first place. Trails had discouraged **them** about the promises of **ADONAI** and **their** own resources looked woefully small to undertake such a task. Sixty years had passed since the first Passover and Feast of Sukkot were celebrated, yet things had not significantly changed. The returnees were spiritually bankrupt, having the form but not the power of faith. **They** had lost sight of **YHVH**, as the absence of any reference to prayer makes all too clear. This is a lesson we can learn from today.

Fourth, and this is a very difficult lesson, trials can sometimes be the result of sin. It is important to note that upon hearing the state of **Jerusalem**, **Nehemiah** made a confession of not only **his** own sins but also those of **his** fellow **Jews (Nehemiah 1:6-7)**. This is a delicate matter, for not every trial is the result of sin, as the story of **Job** teaches us. Yet the Bible does teach that sometimes suffering is divine chastisement for wrongdoing on our part (see the commentary on **Hebrews Cz – God Disciplines His Children**). The problem with discipline is that it can lead to weariness and bitterness: **See to it that no bitter root springs up and causes trouble, and by it many are defiled (Hebrews 12:15).** It can also cause hands

to droop and the knees to grow weak and feeble. This, or so it seems, is what occurred following **Ezra's** visit to **Jerusalem**. Often times, spiritual depression is the likely response to painful and difficult trials. Yes, trails can be depressing, but without faith in **Messiah** they cannot help us see what the author of **Hebrews** is keen to emphasize – that trials can be evidence of our adoption **(Ephesians 1:4-5; John 1:12; Galatians 3:26-29)**. Without this perspective, trials merely condemn. They lack that quality that drives us to see our need to cry to **God** for help. They discourage us without showing the way out of despair. This is why the author of **Hebrews** encourages weary believers bowed down under the weight of trials to **run with endurance the race set before us, focusing on Yeshua, the initiator and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:1b-2a).** Trials, then, are God's school in which we are trained in the ways of righteousness.

The point that **Ezra-Nehemiah** stresses is this: Learn from your trials! Learn to see them as the instruments that call you back to **ADONAI**. Learn to see them as **God's** burs placed in your bed to keep you watchful and awake. Learn to view them as part of the promise of your gracious **Lord** in this world, making you long for the world to come (see the commentary on **Revelation Fu – The New Jerusalem had a Great, High Wall with Twelve Gates**).[83]