

### EZRA

#### Lesson 8, Chapter 5

If ever there was proof that history is cyclical and that God-patterns repeat themselves endlessly, then we ought to readily see the fascinating similarities between the challenges that the Jews of Ezra's day faced trying to re-establish their unique Torah-based Hebrew culture in their own historic homeland after years of being barred from it, with what the Jews of modern Israel face today. As we read Ezra (and shortly the prophet Haggai and next week Zechariah), we can't help but see that 2500 years later the names may have changed, but the place, Jerusalem, remains the same, the social, political and religious issues remain the same and in many cases the ethnic groups involved even remain the same.

We see that then as now that there was great political opposition to the Jews rebuilding their Temple, re-establishing Jerusalem as their capital, and repopulating the land that were coming from a number of sources. The agendas from each of these opposition groups were varying and so their reasons for objecting to the return of the Jews were different, but of course all were self-serving. However there was one common point: by opposing God's people they were in one way or another all enemies of God's plan of redemption even if they weren't conscious of it. And that is always a perilous stance to take if even done in ignorance. Let's briefly sum up where we stand at this point in the Book of Ezra.

A group we shall call the Samaritans began to oppose the Jews the minute the first wave of them returned to Judah from their Babylonian exile. The Jews came peacefully, but at the same time their intentions ran afoul of what the current inhabitants, and the leadership of the nearby villages and towns, had in mind. The Jews returned to 1) rebuild the Temple, 2) reconstitute the Priesthood and reinstitute a Torah based society, 3) rebuild the walls of Jerusalem into a fortress complex, 4) reclaim lost land and property, and 5) repopulate Judah with Jews.

Those who lived in or near to Judah at the time of the Jews' return were a mixed batch consisting of the descendants of Jews who had somehow avoided deportation during the days of Nebuchadnezzar; as well as gentile foreigners who had moved in; and it also included remnants of the 10 northern tribes most of whom had intermarried with gentiles. This last group was the result of the Assyrian exile of the 10 northern tribes that had occurred some 130 years before the Babylonian exile of the Jews of Judah and almost 200 years before their release and return. And it was really this group that was probably the most antagonistic to the returning Jews because they still felt a kinship to the Jews and thus an entitlement to use the Temple and altar and to be part of the religious institution of the Jews since so many had come from Hebrew ancestors.

That is why in Ezra 4:2 the Samaritans could say to Zerubbabel: ***"Let us build along with you; for we seek your God, just as you do; and we have been sacrificing to him since the time of Esar-Hadon king of Ashur, who brought us here."***

The king of Ashur is the same thing as the king of Assyria. And when the Samaritans say these words to Zerubbabel, they are factually correct. They were brought here ("here" meaning the area of Samaria, capital of the 10 northern tribes) by the king of Assyria. That is, the segment of them who were gentiles were forcibly imported to the former Israelite tribal districts in the north to replace the Ephraim-Israelites of the 10 tribes who had been forcibly deported and scattered to the furthest reaches of Asia and northern Africa. Yet the Scriptures are clear that for a multitude of reasons, some small fragments of the 10 tribes managed to stay, but most of them seem to have intermarried with these gentile immigrants during the past 2 centuries.

What we have to understand is that going back to a time before David, the northern 10 tribes had turned to idolatry. Jeroboam was the king who first insisted on setting up a new center of worship and sacrifice, and an alternate Priesthood and religious system, away from Jerusalem. But even worse, he ordered that a Golden Calf was to become the physical image and representation of Yehoveh, God of Israel, and that the 10 northern tribes were obliged to worship it. Since the 10 tribes insisted that they were still worshipping Yehoveh (depicted as a Golden Calf) they argued that they remained just as much Hebrew and in God's favor, and just as pious and in the right in their religious observances as the Jews of Judah who stuck mostly to the Torah. Obviously the Jews of Judah didn't agree with this reasoning, and so a deep religious schism arose between the northern and southern tribes that was never remedied. Even when David and Solomon ruled a united Israel of all 12 tribes, their rule was tenuous and frail over the 10 northern tribal districts. Thus almost immediately upon King Solomon's death, a civil war broke out as the 10 northern tribes wanted to secede from the 12

tribe union and to regain self-rule. Not for 3000 years has the 10 tribes of the north reconciled with the 2 southern tribes called Judah.

So, these mixed-breed Samaritans who came to Zerubbabel came with 2 strikes against them (as far as the Jews were concerned) when they showed up. The Levite Priests and the Jewish leadership fully understood that what the Samaritans meant by their supposedly worshipping the same god as the Jews worship was double-talk and nonsense. The worship of the Samaritans was so twisted and polluted with paganism, that there was no way for Zerubbabel to accept that they were all worshipping the same God. He was absolutely correct in his assessment.

Not only do we have a similar challenge today in Israel among the many distinct sects of Jews, it is also present in Christianity. It would take a full day's lecture only to scratch the surface of the widely varying religious beliefs of various segments of the Jewish population of modern Israel. But suffice it to say that Talmudic (Rabbinical) Judaism (the Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox) is broken up into several differing sects, and then there are non-Rabbinical forms of Judaism (such as the Karaites) that stick to the Biblical Torah and do not accept the Talmud. There are Jews who are atheists but who follow some Jewish traditions and customs; and there are Reform Jews who claim they are "spiritual", but yet don't believe in the divine authority of the Torah or the Bible, nor do they believe in any particular God but rather follow a kind of manufactured Jewish religious philosophy. And finally the Conservative Jews who are more religious than the Reform Jews, but much less so than the Orthodox, and who accept the God of Israel as their God, accept some teachings of the Rabbis but not others. There are even the deeply divided Messianic Jews who accept a mixture of Judaism, the Bible and Christ as Messiah. And there are variations on all of these.

And yet Christianity comes in far more forms and flavors than Judaism does, with some denominations believing that Christ was no more than a marvelous humanitarian and pacifist religious philosopher on the order of Gandhi. Others deify Jesus's human mother Mary. Most Christians accept the newer half of God's Word as relevant and the older half as irrelevant. There are those who believe that quite literally the young God of the NT has replaced the old God of the OT. And we have another large denomination who believes that there is a 3<sup>rd</sup> testament that is kind of a book of corrections of the first two, so it trumps both the Old and New Testaments. And this is but the tip of the iceberg. The splits and fractious nature of tradition and doctrine-based Christianity makes unity impossible as things stand today. Thus Christians tend to feel about these varying denominations much as Zerubbabel frankly stated to the Samaritans: "You and we have nothing in common...."

Therefore the few weeks of relative peace and calm that the Jews received when returning home were quickly replaced with a cold war of sorts. From physical threats to the bribery of local politicians, from economic subterfuge to complaining to the revolving door of Persian Kings, the Samaritans stopped at nothing to frustrate the Jews' plans for rebuilding the Temple and reconstituting the Torah-based lifestyle they longed for. Ezra chapter 4, which covers around 120 years of history, shows that both sides were dug in for the long haul. The Samaritans were determined that the Jews should NEVER complete their Temple (at least not without their OK and co-operation) and thus fundamentally change the current Samaritan dominated social climate of Judah, and the Jews were equally determined that someday a new Temple and a renewed Jewish society would happen and that they'd do it without outside involvement.

I'll remind you that in Chapter 4 we established that the timeline and sequence of events can be a little difficult to follow until we notice that it is divided into 3 sections. The first section is verses 1 – 5, and it deals with the time period from Persian King Cyrus (who emancipated the Jews) to King Darius who came 3 kings after Cyrus. And the matter at hand in that timeframe is the rebuilding of the Temple. The second section is verses 6 – 23 and this section deals with the timeframe of the reigns of Xerxes (who followed Darius) and his successor and son Artaxerxes. But the matter at hand in this section is no longer about the Temple; it's about rebuilding the crucial defensive walls of Jerusalem. And then the final section is verse 24, and it returns us to the matter of rebuilding the Temple and to the time frame of Cyrus to Darius.

Now as we ready to enter Ezra Chapter 5, we continue in the era of King Darius of Persia, and the issue is rebuilding the Temple. However today we're not going to read much of Ezra 5; only the first two verses. And they read as follows:

<sup>CJB</sup> **Ezra 5:1** *The prophets Hagai and Z'kharyah the son of 'Iddo prophesied to the Judeans in Yerushalayim and Y'hudah; they prophesied to them in the name of the God of Isra'el.*

<sup>2</sup> **Then Z'rubavel the son of Sh'alti'el and Yeshua the son of Yotzadak began rebuilding the house of God in Yerushalayim; with them were the prophets of God, helping them.**

So we learn that the prophets Haggai and Zechariah were prophesying at this time and they were directly involved with trying to kick-start the Temple rebuilding project, which currently lay dormant due to the Jews' fear of further antagonizing the Samaritans. The prophets' encouragement worked and the Temple reconstruction started up again despite all the opposition and threats of the Samaritans. Let's be clear; at this point the Jews still had the full support and force of King Darius as they had had with the 3 kings who preceded him. So it was not for lack of royal permission, or for clear direction from God, it was for other reasons that the Jews were not rebuilding the Temple and the prophets Haggai and Zechariah address those reasons head-on.

Thus we are going to take an extensive detour and spend some time in the Bible books of Haggai and Zechariah. The lessons and applications to take from them are many and important. It is my firm conviction that there is no reasonable means to properly study Ezra and Nehemiah without incorporating Haggai and Zechariah because the books of these 2 prophets supply so much of the needed spiritual context (God's viewpoint), which at times offers a very different perspective from the earthly context (the Jews' viewpoint). Therefore open your Bibles to Haggai chapter 1. We're going to read all of the Book of Haggai (that is only 2 chapters long) at once.

### **READ HAGGAI CHAPTERS 1 AND 2**

Notice that the opening verse says that the first word from God that Haggai received to give to the Jews was in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of King Darius. Thus we get a good solid stake in the ground for the timing of Ezra chapter 5, since the immediate result of Haggai and Zechariah's messages to Zerubbabel and the other Jews was that they began work on the Temple again. This means that work re-started again in earnest in about 520 or 521 B.C., or around 35 years AFTER the Jews were freed by King Cyrus of Persia and the first group of Jewish exiles arrived back in Judah. So for 35 years the Jews had been successfully frustrated by the Samaritans in their effort to rebuild the Temple. And this frustration did not involve any of the kings of Persia backing away from their commitment to the Jews to encourage them to rebuild. I cannot emphasize this strongly enough: essentially what we're going to find especially in the book of the prophet Haggai is God's view of the real reason the Temple work had laid dormant for so long.

Verse 2 quotes the reason the Jewish people give for not rebuilding the Temple (that is, this is earthly human viewpoint): <sup>2</sup> ***"Here is what ADONAI-Tzva'ot says: 'This people is saying that now isn't the time- the time hasn't yet arrived for ADONAI's house to be rebuilt.'"***

What we have here is long term procrastination and paralysis. Nothing could be more human than for people who face strong opposition to something (especially when it is something that God has ordained for us to do) than to declare that this opposition must be a sign from God that it's not yet time to act. So they sit on their hands and wait; for what, exactly, is never clear. It is not only Christians who often think that if God has ordered something that He will make the pathway easy and fast; as in Ezra's era and today Jews, too, often think that we just need to wait and pray until all the obstacles in front of us are removed before we should move forward. That said, it would be unreasonable to deny that sometimes it is possible that the opposition has such complete control over the situation that indeed the task cannot be carried out no matter how unlimited our efforts might be. However the other side of the coin is that more often than not, the task CAN be carried out; it's only that to attempt it in the present circumstances involves danger, risk, discomfort, or the possibility that we'll become very unpopular with those whose opinions matter most to us.

For the Jews who have returned to Judah, they are saying that "now isn't the time" and that is mainly because the Samaritans are making their lives so difficult. The Samaritans are threatening the Jews (in some undefined ways) not to take unilateral action to rebuild their Temple. No doubt these threats vary from refusing to trade with them, to not selling them supplies, to daily harassment, and all the way to threatening physical harm. Thus the Jews were afraid as we learned back in Ezra chapter 4.

### **Ezra 4:4 CJB**

***<sup>4</sup> Then the people of the land began discouraging the people of Y'hudah, in order to make them afraid to build.***

And while no doubt fear drove the Jews to stop building for 35 years, there were other factors as well. And as it turns out, the bulk of the Jews simply lost interest in the building project and

turned to satisfying their own needs and wants. So in Haggai verse 4 the Lord, through His prophet Haggai, lays a damning accusation upon them:

<sup>CJB</sup> **Haggai 1:4** *"So is now the time for you to be living in your own paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?"*

This house means God's house. I can only imagine the shocked faces and puzzled looks of "who, me?" on those Jews who heard Haggai's scathing oracle from Yehoveh. For one thing it had been long time since a prophet of God had come to the Jews; it had been about 70 years since Daniel, Jeremiah and Ezekiel had issued both warnings and proclamations of hope and restoration. Haggai was the first prophet to arise since the Jews' release from their Babylonian captivity. But it is important to recognize that this accusation is aimed more at the clan leaders and the wealthy than it is the common folks or the Levites and Priests. Paneled houses are referring to luxury homes that have wood paneling on the interior for ornamentation. This is enormously expensive as wood generally had to be imported all the way from the forests of Lebanon. And as we discussed a couple of lessons ago, while there were those zealous and pious Jews who returned with the lofty and high-minded goal of restoring the Priesthood, the Temple and a Torah-based worship and lifestyle, there were others who came back to Judah (the heads of their father's clans) whose primary goal was to reclaim their family land holdings that they had been forced to abandon as much as 70 years earlier. Those folks hid their true intentions under a veil of spirituality; but what they wanted was not a renewed relationship with God, but rather a renewed personal prosperity.

As Solomon so wisely and pragmatically pointed out: there is nothing new under the sun. A spiritualized rationalizing and insincerity has always been part of mankind's ways. In our day we have within the Church a creeping and dangerous virus that is called the Prosperity Doctrine. The idea is that God's purpose for all His faithful followers is that our earthly dreams of wealth and material possessions are to be met. Do you want a new Mercedes? God wants it for you too. Do you want a raise at work? God wants it for you too. Is your dream to retire early and have lots of money to spend traveling to exotic places? God intends to give it to you, because He loves you. So why don't you have all these things now? You don't have enough faith. And often that lack of faith is expressed by you not giving enough to your Church.

The bottom line is that the Prosperity Doctrine essentially makes our walk with the Lord all

about obtaining personal wealth. Of course it is disguised in an aura of spirituality because we show up at Church regularly, we donate our time and money, and we have a good grasp of Christian lingo that we use daily and apply to everything we're involved in. This is what the Lord is accusing the Jewish leaders of in the Book of Haggai. They may indeed want a rebuilt Temple, but far more they want wealth and personal comfort.

Here's the irony of it all: the more we see Believers insisting on the attainment of personal wealth as the sign of their faithfulness to God (and thus God's reward in return), the more Believers that we see never achieving their dreams and so living unhappy and un-victorious lives, or walking away from their faith disheartened and disillusioned with the Lord. And if we pay close attention to God's word, and especially here in Haggai we find that in whatever age or under whatever label the Prosperity Doctrine might go, the Lord does the opposite of what we hope for when our hope is centered on personal wealth. The Lord often takes away and frustrates us instead; He holds back blessing and victory. When the Lord sees that our goal in a relationship with Him is self-centered and not God-centered.....well.....get ready for a bumpy ride.

So let's re-read just a couple of verses of Haggai chapter 1 that exposes the falsehood of the Prosperity Doctrine and also reminds us that Yehoveh knows us for who we are, and not just the pretty Christian veneer that we don for public consumption.

### **Haggai 1:5-8 CJB**

**<sup>5</sup> Therefore here is what ADONAI-Tzva'ot says: 'Think about your life!**

**<sup>6</sup> You sow much but bring in little; you eat but aren't satisfied; you drink but never have enough; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and he who works for a living earns wages that are put in a bag full of holes.'"**

**<sup>7</sup> "Here is what ADONAI-Tzva'ot says: 'Think about your life!**



**<sup>8</sup> Go up into the hills, get wood, and rebuild the house. I will be pleased with that, and then I will be glorified,' says ADONAI.**

“Think about your life”, says the Lord. In other words, pull your head out of the sand and look around you and take notice of what is happening. Consider your circumstances. Separate your desires and your actions from what the results are. Compare God’s principles with what you are striving for. It’s not that you are lazy and dormant, rather it is that you are all motion but have little to show for it. Indeed you are out furiously sowing and planting, but the harvest is meager. You have enough to eat but somehow food doesn’t satisfy. You have plenty to drink (this is referring to wine), but you can never seem to drink enough to feel good about yourself or find joy in life. And finally, the more you make the less you seem to have; no matter how many hours a day you labor, you just can’t get ahead. Frustrating, is it not? It makes you want to give up. You have no peace; you have no well being; you have no **shalom**. And why is that? Because shalom is a gift from God, and like salvation it cannot be obtained with human efforts; and especially Believers can’t attain **shalom** if their innermost motivations aren’t in line with God’s will and His laws and commandments.

So in verse 7 the Lord reiterates: “Think about your life!” Let me put that in modern terms: Look at what you’re doing to yourself! Now get to work on what I want you to do, and put aside **your** overriding desire for your own dreams, your personal prosperity, and when that happens THEN I will be pleased and I will be glorified. Not to beat a dead horse, but my brethren, our seeking of personal wealth in God’s name does NOT glorify Him! It glorifies us! Doing what He asks of us, no matter the personal cost, risk or discomfort is what glorifies Him. This in no way means that the blessing of personal wealth and abundance is wrong, evil, or ill deserved. But it is awfully easy to delude ourselves into believing that all we want is what the Lord wants; but in reality we manipulate everything to try to achieve our own goals and desires of personal satisfaction.

And then we get to the crux of the matter as Haggai’s oracle hits home in verses 9 – 11. The Lord says that BECAUSE you have not built My house (the Temple), but instead you have concentrated on your personal desires and concerns (your own houses), I have CAUSED you all this frustration and that is why so little has come from your efforts. You plant fields, but the rains don’t come, so you don’t get much in return from your crops. You work hard but your olive groves give up precious little oil, your flocks and herds aren’t increasing the way they ought to, and generally nothing your own hands produce turns out very well.

I want to remind you that God is dealing with His redeemed people, not with pagans or unbelievers. God is purposefully withholding grace; He is punishing His people's wrong motives. There is no Biblical claim that they don't believe in Him, or that they have lost faith in Him. But they have gone astray and no amount of lame excuses and promises is going to change God's mind; only proper behavior guided by proper motivations will unleash God's blessings.

There is something else we need to learn from this. God's **Beit**, His house, is important to Him. The Jews started out really well upon their return when they were full of enthusiasm and hope. They immediately rebuilt their demolished altar and began reinstating whatever Torah ordained festivals, appointed times, and sacrifices were possible within their limited circumstances. The rebuilt altar stood directly in front of the sad ruins of their Temple; a constant reminder of the tragedy that unfaithfulness to the Lord produces. Nonetheless they did all they could and made do with what they had, however imperfect the final result.

Beginning at Mt. Sinai the Lord determined that a sign of the people's zealousness and faithfulness towards Him would be demonstrated visibly and tangibly by means of a Tabernacle, and later a Temple, which would be the center point of the life of every Hebrew. It was at the Temple that God and His people would have fellowship. Thus when the Temple was destroyed, so was God's fellowship with His people destroyed.....at least temporarily. The end of the exile marked an opportunity for a restored fellowship, and the rebuilding of the Temple would be a pledge by the returning Jews to reconstitute the covenant relationship with their God and to do a better job of being faithful to the covenant terms. Until that Temple was completed, the fellowship between God and the Jews would not be completed. So let modern Believers never think that the rebuilding the Temple of Ezra was something that drove the Jews but it really reflected just a kind of flawed and wrong minded attempt to patch things up with the Lord; God commanded and demanded that His house be rebuilt quickly upon their return to Judah. To rebuild the Temple was an act of obedience, not one of self gratification. And in Haggai the Lord has become impatient with the delay due to the cooled zealousness of the returning exiles to proceed with reconstructing His House.

Despite so many errant mainstream denominational doctrines to the contrary, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Temple, Ezekiel's Temple that is coming in the near future is also God ordained and is 100% needed to fully restore fellowship with the Lord. It is anything but a sinful desire of mankind's minds or merely an allegorical or spiritualized reflection of the Church. Rather the new Temple is going to be Messiah's palace and throne room. Sacrifices will occur there, and from there Yeshua

will rule with an iron rod (meaning strictly and without tolerance for disobedience). The Priesthood will be operable once again, and the Law of Moses will be fully restored and all aspects of it will be able to be obeyed (unlike the circumstances of our day when so many laws can't be fully observed no matter how much some of us might want it to be otherwise).

I want to put this issue of the Temple in another way: essentially the Kingdom of God on earth was suspended from its destruction until the Temple was rebuilt and put back into operation by the returnees from the Babylonian exile. And in our time, until the 3<sup>rd</sup> Temple is constructed and Messiah returns to rule from it, the Kingdom of God will not reach its fullest extent and purpose. The construction of Ezekiel's Temple and the return of Messiah are not coincidental; the Temple must exist and must precede Christ. At the current moment the Kingdom of God is a kingdom that is coming, and yet it is already here in the sense that it is present within Yeshua's worshippers in the form of the Holy Spirit. But with the certain advent of the coming 3<sup>rd</sup> Temple, and then the return of Yeshua, then every element of the Kingdom of God will be manifested, and indeed the Kingdom of God will be worldwide and in full glory, without limitation.

To their credit Zerubbabel, Yeshua, and the rest of the Jewish people listened to Haggai and acted upon God's oracle. Verse 12 explains that the Jews now moved in the fear of the presence of Adonai. That is, their fear of the Lord was now greater than their fear of the Samaritans. But the Lord added one more critical and comforting piece of information: "I am with you". The Lord's 70 year abandonment of the Jews was over.

So on the 24<sup>th</sup> day of the 6<sup>th</sup> month in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of King Darius, the Jews courageously ignored the politics and the threats of the Samaritans and the local politicians and they once again started to build. I want to close today with this challenge to my dear friends in Israel: do what Zerubbabel and the Jews of the Babylonian exile finally did. Ignore the threats, ignore the politics, and build the Temple. There is nothing except those politics and threats that are stopping them. They have the money; they have the Temple furnishings; they have the Menorah; they have trained Priests. They have the building materials. They have the cornerstone. What they lack at the moment is the courage and fortitude to do what is right in God's eyes and to stop appeasing their enemies as well as their so-called friends, and pleasing themselves.

What they want is for the world to accept them before they act. What they want is for the USA or the EU or the UN to throw their weight behind the building of a new Temple. They have possessed the Temple Mount since 1967; almost a half century. They gave away control of the Temple Mount to the Muslims as a political accommodation to the West. But for the sake of appeasement and politics, and for not making their lives more difficult, the zeal to build the Temple has slowly devolved into little more than lip service.

And just like in the oracle of God through Haggai to Zerubbabel, modern Israelis need to “think about your lives”. They need to stand up, and take a good look at how things are panning for them in their current trajectory. Israel has given up land, and paid dearly in blood for it. But what have they gained? They have given up a measure of sovereignty by trying to please the USA and Europe, and all that’s happened is that now they’re being asked to give up even more. No matter how hard they try to please the world, they end up as the bad guys and on the losing end. Perhaps it’s time they trust God and do what they should have done 50 years ago: build His House, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Temple, Ezekiel’s Temple; and by doing so restore fellowship with the God of Israel.

We’ll continue with the prophets Haggai and Zechariah next week.