

# THE FIRST CONFRONTATION WITH THE SAMARITANS (EZRA 4)

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## AN OFFER REBUFFED

The first six chapters of the Book of Ezra detail the return of the Judeans from the Babylonian Exile and their construction of the Second Temple. Their adversaries were the Samaritans, displaced foreigners who had been living in the Land of Israel since they were brought there by the Assyrians to replace the exiled ten tribes (II Kgs. 17:24). The Samaritans became the controlling presence in the land once Solomon's Temple was destroyed and the Judeans were exiled. When the Judeans were permitted by Cyrus to return, the Samaritans *weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and harried them while they were building, and hired counsellors against them, to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia* (Ezra 4:4-5). In this article we will examine the first encounter recorded between the Samaritans and the returning Judeans, paying attention to textual clues in the narrative that hint at the issues underpinning the tension between these two groups.<sup>1</sup>

Ezra relates the short discussion that took place between the Samaritans and the returning Judeans:

*Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the children of the captivity were building a temple unto the Lord, the God of Israel; then they drew near to Zerubbabel, and to the heads of fathers' houses, and said unto them: 'Let us build with you; for we seek your God, as ye do; and we do sacrifice unto Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us up hither.' But Zerubbabel, and Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of fathers' houses of Israel, said unto them: 'Ye have nothing to do with us to build a house unto our God; but we ourselves together will build unto the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia hath commanded us' (Ezra 4:1-3).*

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## THE ROLE OF JESHUA

The first unusual element in this narrative is that whereas the Samaritans approach *Zerubbabel, and the heads of fathers' houses* (Ezra 4:2) with their offer, it is *Zerubbabel, and Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of fathers' houses* (Ezra 4:3) who respond. Jeshua served as high priest at the time (Ezra 3:8-9). What significance is there in the fact that although the Samaritans did not address their request to him, Jeshua also responded?<sup>2</sup> Zerubbabel was the political leader of the Judeans and the heads of the houses were similarly tribal leaders. None of them held a position of religious authority. The Samaritans approach them because they do not view their request as a religious one; they consider themselves Israelites by virtue of the fact that they, too, worship the God of Israel. From their perspective, they are authentic Israelites; they live in the Land of Israel and worship the God of Israel. All they seek is permission to join in building the Temple. For this they approach the leader, Zerubbabel. However, the response of the Judeans is a religious ruling that the Samaritans are not considered to be Israelites at all, no matter how they view themselves. Although the Israelites respond in political terms, declaring that only they have building permission from Cyrus (Ezra 4:3),<sup>3</sup> this is actually not a political question but a religious one, and therefore Jeshua is one of the responders.

## WE OURSELVES TOGETHER

A second unusual element is the phrase *we ourselves together will build* (Ezra 4:3). Together with whom? The Judeans are clearly excluding the Samaritans from any part in the Temple's construction, so what does "together" refer to? This exact phrase [*anahnu yahad*] occurs nowhere else in the Bible, but a very similar one [*va-anahnu yahdav*] appears in I Kings 3:18. There it means "we alone", which is how many English translations render the phrase here. In his Bible commentary, Ibn Ezra explains that *anahnu yahad* is "an allusion to the whole assembly of Israel [*kol kehal Yisrael*]"; in other words, the Judeans were saying: "We alone are the totality of the Israelites, and the Samaritans are not part of this group."

In the opening verse of this chapter, the Samaritans approach *Judah and Benjamin* with their request to participate in the construction of the Temple.

The returning Judeans are sometimes described as *Benei Yisrael*, Israelites (Ezra 3:1), and sometimes as Judah and Benjamin (Ezra 10:9). Here, identifying them as Judah and Benjamin may imply that the Samaritans thought the returning Israelites only represented a small fraction of *Benei Yisrael*, and without the Samaritans they were incomplete.<sup>4</sup> Note that when the Judeans respond to the Samaritans they are described as *the heads of fathers' houses of Israel* (Ezra 4:3), further implying that they represent the totality of the Israelites.

In the past, King Hezekiah had invited surviving northern Israelites to participate in the celebration of Passover after the Temple was cleansed of idolatry (II Chron. 30:1). Northerners later contributed to repairing the Temple under King Josiah (II Chron. 34:9) and attended Passover celebrations in the Temple along with people of the southern kingdom (II Chron. 35:18). The Samaritans now wished to participate, just as the northern Israelites had done in former times.<sup>5</sup> The Judeans replied that they were in fact complete, "ourselves together," and had no need of the Samaritans to form one nation. That the returning Judeans felt that they represented the whole Israelite nation can be seen when, during the Temple's dedication, they made twelve sin offerings *for all Israel . . . according to the number of the tribes of Israel* (Ezra 6:17).

#### THE ADVERSARIES OF JUDAH

In the very first verse of this narrative, the Samaritans are described as *adversaries of Judah and Benjamin* (Ezra 4:1), despite their claim to be just like the Israelites, *we seek your God, as ye do* (Ezra 4:2). The phrase *tzarei Yehudah, the adversaries of Judah*, recalls the term used many times to describe wicked Haman in the Book of Esther: *tzorer ha-Yehudim (the Jews' enemy)* (Esth. 3:10; 8:1; 9:10, 24). Haman incarnates a baseless hatred of the Jewish people, and the use of a similar term here indicates that the same kind of entrenched antipathy should be understood to characterize the Samaritans. They did not start hating the Judeans for being excluded from the Second Temple's construction; it was rather, when they first approached the Judeans and even before offering to help, that the Samaritans were already their enemies. This reflects the idea (in TB *Arakhin* 5b) that the Samaritan overtures to the returning exiles were in fact designed to somehow prevent the rebuilding of the Temple. As Rashi there explains, the offer to participate was merely a ruse to

slow down the work of construction until these adversaries could convince the Persian king to prohibit the whole undertaking.

#### WE DO SACRIFICE UNTO HIM

The most striking textual element in this confrontation is the *keri u-khetiv* regarding the Hebrew word *lo* in the Samaritan claim *for we seek your God, as ye do; and we do sacrifice unto Him* [lo] (Ezra 4:2). This translation follows the spelling of the word, the *ketiv*, as *lamed-vav*. The Samaritans clearly believed that they worshiped the Israelite God, and this is what they were saying to the returning exiles. However, the *keri* reading changes the word to *lamed-alef*, meaning "not." That radically alters the sense of their words to "we do not sacrifice"! This textual emendation, incorporated in the words of the Samaritans, serves to undercut their claim for future readers of the Bible. The Samaritans may think that they worship God like true Israelites, but in fact they do not!<sup>6</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

The short dialogue between the returning exiles and the Samaritans is loaded with subtle cues as to the underlying issues that divided these two groups. Are the Samaritans considered part of the Israelite nation? Do they practice authentic Judaism? What criteria determine who is a true Israelite? Ralbag, in his commentary to Ezra 4:3, notes that the negative response given to the Samaritans became the proof text for denying non-Israelite participation in the Temple throughout the years of its operation. While voluntary offerings from gentiles were accepted, a gentile could not bring a donation or offering that was compulsory for Jews, such as the half-shekel or sin offerings (Mishnah, *Shekalim* 1:4). The Mishnah quotes Ezra 4:3, *Ye have nothing to do with us to build a house unto our God*, as proof that a gentile could not consider himself an obligated Israelite. The same verse is cited in TB *Arakhin* 5b to limit the kinds of Temple donations that might be accepted from gentiles. This brief exchange, only three verses long, encapsulates issues at the heart of Jewish identity, which defined the Jewish attitude toward Samaritans at that time, and toward gentiles in later eras.

#### NOTES

1. See H. G. M. Williamson, *Word Biblical Commentary – Vol. 16: Ezra Nehemiah* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1985) p. 49, where he notes the "hidden motives not apparent from their recorded statement."
2. As opposed to the Hebrew text, the Greek translation of Ezra includes Jeshua in Ezra 4:1.
3. Loring W. Batten, *International Critical Commentary: The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1980) p. 128.
4. Hayyim Dov Rabinowitz, *Da'at Soferim: Haggai-Nehemyah* (Jerusalem: 1976) p. 47.
5. Jacob M. Myers, *The Anchor Bible – Ezra Nehemiah* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1965) p. 35.
6. Rabinowitz, op. cit., p. 48.



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