

## Lesson 4

# The Jews Under Persian Rule (1)

539-420 B.C.

## Introduction

After Cyrus' decree allowing the Jews to return to their homeland, the first wave of those returned set out after a time of planning and raising the funds necessary. Rebuilding and starting an entire community from scratch was a formidable task. Once the Jews arrived in their homeland, they faced significant challenges. How were they to deal with finding the necessary resources for providing for their community and how were they to navigate the suspicion and hostility from those who already lived in the land? Only by the help of God did they succeed and under the leadership of Zerubbabel, they resettled Jerusalem and prepared to build the temple.

Not long after the Jews arrived in Jerusalem Cyrus died (530 B.C.). His son, Cambyses replaced him. Cambyses (sometimes identified as Cambyses II to distinguish him from his paternal grandfather), dwelt mostly in obscurity until becoming king.

The year 522 B.C. gave rise to great crisis in the Persian empire. Victorious over Egypt, Cambyses was thrown off his horse and died, leaving no successor. What happens next is disputed. The younger brother of Cambyses, Bardiya, may have taken gained power, but is said to have been assassinated by Gaumata, a Median priest. Gaumata set himself up as king and took on a large following. This sent the empire into chaos with at least 16 different independence movements were launched over the next two years. Darius, who claimed to be a cousin of Cambyses, was with him on the way home from Egypt. Darius returned to central Asia and successfully put down Gaumata's rebellion and became king over the empire. The first two years of his reign were spent successfully putting down the various movements for independence. He claimed to have defeated 9 kings in 19 battles.

It is during this time that Zerubbabel began to build the temple in Jerusalem, Ezra 3.6, 8; Haggai 1.13-15. Not only were there significant religious reasons to do so, but this also was a bold political move by Zerubbabel to reestablish the Davidic line of leadership. But his actions would have immediately raised the suspicion among the Persians. Were his actions to be determined as a move for independence? An act of rebellion? Ezra 5.3-4 records the story when those from Persia arrived and questioned the construction of the temple, perceiving it as act of insurrection. Zerubbabel responded by appealing to Cyrus' decree, made 18 years earlier, Ezra 5.13-15. The Persians decided to launch an investigation and verify what Zerubbabel said, 5.17. How long this took is unknown, but it would have taken months, at least, probably longer. While there are several things that could have happened to Zerubbabel during this time, it seems that he was removed from leadership by the Persians throwing the rebuilding project into chaos and delay. Leadership in the community passes to Joshua the high priest, Zechariah 3.8.

The Persians searched in Babylon and eventually found Cyrus' decree and authorization for the Jerusalem temple, Ezra 6.1-2. Now Darius had to endorse the project, Ezra 6.3-12, as to go against it

would have undermined his own legitimacy. Zerubbabel was allowed to return to Jerusalem and finish the project, doing so in February/March of 515 B.C.

What transpired over the coming years would have lasting effects for the rest of the intertestamental period.

## **From Zerubbabel to Ezra**

Darius was a great military strategist and competent administrator. He organized the empire into 23 satrapies, administered by satraps and others who were directly answerable to him.

King Darius established an extensive network of spies and informants, referred to as the "eyes and ears of the king." He also created an efficient postal system allowing quick communication across the vast Persian Empire. Additionally, Darius introduced a monetary system using coins called *darics*, which helped regulate trade and unite the empire's economy. This also enabled systematic taxation and increased government revenue. Under Darius's dynamic leadership, the Persian Empire stabilized and expanded further. It was clear the Persians were there to stay.

### ***Autonomy and Local Identity***

The satrapy system divided the empire into autonomous provinces. This built a sense of identity within subject communities, continuing Cyrus's policy of allowing deported peoples to return home. However, through the satraps, it was the Persian king who guaranteed these local identities. This stimulated loyalty to him among the diverse cultural groups. While giving subject populations stake in the empire, this "colonial multiculturalism" also curtailed any notions of independence.

### ***A Leadership Shift***

Elevating the high priest Joshua to lead the Jerusalem community granted Judean priests more political power than ever before, at the Davidic royal family's expense. With Zerubbabel absent, Joshua filled a leadership void, and the priesthood got a taste of civic authority they would savor for a long time. In daily life, however, the priests soon eclipsed the Davidic family in practical importance, initiating a process that over centuries would see the temple emptied of its Davidic symbolism and viewed as a purely cultic institution run by the priestly caste under foreign authority. Davidic hope began fading in some Jerusalem circles and slowly became mere lip service to a once glorious past.

Zerubbabel's remarkable survival ensured hopes for restoring a Davidic kingdom did not fully die out. However, his appeasement of Darius and Joshua's promotion considerably weakened the Davidic line's authority. After Zerubbabel, they began losing their grip on community power. As far as we know, none of Zerubbabel's sons held office, likely a deliberate Persian restriction. A later governor, Elnathan, married or was the son of Zerubbabel's daughter Shelomith. Either way, this showed power shifting from the primary Davidic line, despite their enduring significance, as their names continued for generations though none seem to have led. Hopes of restoring a Davidic kingdom thus became less realistic over time.

### ***After Zerubbabel***

Information on the Jewish people during this time is sparse. We have a few details in Ezra and Nehemiah, as well as Zechariah. A listing of Judah's governors is possible, but determining the precise dates of their time in power is not. Elnathan was either the husband (or son) of Shelomith, the daughter of Zerubbabel, so there is some agreement that he succeeded Zerubbabel in office.<sup>12</sup> Other governors may have been Uriah and Hananah, serving during the first part of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C..

The listings of high priests before Ezra can be determined from Nehemiah 12.10. Joshua, son of Jehozadak was a contemporary with Zerubbabel and rose to prominence as a civil leader. He was succeeded by his son, Joiakim. Some date him to around 500-450 B.C.. He would have been a contemporary of Esther. Josephus says he died during the feast of tabernacles before Nehemiah came to the land. He also says Joiakim was a contemporary of Ezra.<sup>3</sup> After Joiakim, his son Eliashib succeeded him. A contemporary of Nehemiah, he is mentioned in Nehemiah 3.20-21. It appears he had a large home which would have indicated relative wealth and high social standing. His family was deeply connected with the non-Jews in the area, who appeared to have influence over him. Nehemiah 13.4, 7 shows how he provided room in the temple for Tobiah the Ammonite during Nehemiah's absence.

Later, Eliashib's son, Joiada became high priest before Nehemiah's second time in Jerusalem (429 B.C., Nehemiah 13.28). He was very friendly to the mixed nations around Judea. Josephus identifies him as Judas.<sup>4</sup> Joiada's son married the daughter of Sanballat, the arch-conspirator mentioned in Nehemiah 13.28. He was driven out by Nehemiah.

## The Samaritans

### *Origins*

Jewish and Samaritan sources disagree on the origin of the Samaritans. The Jews did not consider them as legitimate Jews. Josephus and many rabbi's from the Second Temple Period considered them to be descendants of the Cutheans.<sup>5</sup> Describing the repopulation of Israel after the Assyrian victory, 2 Kings 17.24 says:

Then the king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim and settled them in place of the Israelites in the cities of Samaria. The settlers took possession of Samaria and lived in its cities.

The Samaritans, however, saw themselves as descendants of the tribes of Ephriam and Manesseh, and traced their origin to the time of Eli.<sup>6</sup> This could be since historians believe the Assyrians deported mostly the elite of Israel and left most of the native population in the land. It is also thought that the conquered people the Assyrians brought in may have taken on the culture of the native people. The ones they brought in were thought to be in the elite classes from where they came. This is suggested by archaeological findings that reveal only a subtle cultural shift between the Assyrian and Persian periods in the region of Samaria. Most of the archaeological sites reveal continued settlement in the area.

### *Religious Differences*

Religiously, the primary religious difference between the Jews and the Gentiles centered over the place of worship. They looked to Mt. Gerizim in Shechem as the designated place of worship. This was the area where the patriarchs sacrificed and where Israel made the first sacrifice upon entering Canaan.

Sometime during Eli's time as high priest, the place to worship was moved from Shechem to Shiloh. This, according to the Samaritans, began the "Era of Disfavor," which would last until the coming of the Savior.<sup>7</sup> The Samaritan version of the Pentateuch declared God's people should worship Him in Shechem, making the worship in Jerusalem illegitimate. They also had hope in a messiah, using Deuteronomy 18.18 as the foundation. This helps us better understand the reaction of the Samaritans to Jesus in John 4.

Another major difference between the Jews and Samaritans was that they relied exclusively upon the Pentateuch and thereby rejected the authority of the prophets and other sacred writings the Jews endorsed. They also did not observe Purim or Hanukkah. Mostly, the rest of their religious practices were like the Jews. Besides these, one of the greatest issues between the two groups was their lack of exclusive devotion to Yahweh. They worshipped Him, but also worshipped other gods as well.

### ***During Nehemiah's Time***

With this history in mind, it is easy to understand why the Samaritans were not excited when the Jews returned from captivity and began to rebuild the temple and the walls of Jerusalem. The primary issue is described in Ezra 4.7-23 and Nehemiah 2.10 as Nehemiah worked to build the city wall. Sanballat I, mentioned throughout Nehemiah, was appointed as a governor in Samaria. He was also a key figure in Samaritan religious circles. Tasked by the king of Persia, In 447 B.C., he began construction of a temple on the summit of Mt. Gerizim. It is said that the debate over where the restored temple should be located went all the way back to the time of the exile as the Samaritans claim Zerubbabel and Sanballat feuded over it.

### **On Sanballat**

The historical figure known by the name "Sin (the moon-god) gives life," prominently mentioned in Aramaic documents, was recognized as the "governor of Samaria." His origins likely trace back to one of the settler families brought to Samaria by the Assyrians during the periods of Assyrian or Babylonian captivity. This individual gained notoriety in the biblical narrative, specifically in the Book of Nehemiah, where he is referred to as "the Horonite." This description has led some scholars to associate him with Horonaim, a location in Moab, suggesting possible ties or origins from that region.

Over time, he emerged as a significant adversary to Nehemiah, playing a pivotal role as his arch-enemy in the historical and religious accounts of that era. Notably, papyri evidence indicates that he maintained a position of power in Samaria as late as 408 BC. During this time, he shared his governance responsibilities with his two sons, Delaiah and Shelemiah, indicating a dynastic continuation of his authority.

This lineage of leadership extended into the 4th century B.C. with Sanballat II, who is believed to have been the grandson of Sanballat I. Additionally, historical narratives suggest the existence of a Sanballat III in the years leading up to the era of Alexander the Great. This figure is crucial in understanding the accounts of Josephus, particularly in *Antiquities* 11.306-12, where the founding of the Samaritan temple is discussed. This connection provides valuable insights into the political and religious dynamics of the time.

## ***Why The Conflict Was So Intense***

The conflict surrounding the Samaritan temple extended beyond a simple battle for religious dominance. It represented a deeper contention over Israel's core identity, the essence of true religion, and the role of the Davidic lineage. Central to this debate were questions about God's covenant with David, the nature of Israel as a territory, and the validity and authority of prophetic teachings. Affirmative answers to these inquiries solidified Jerusalem as the sole legitimate location for worship, with its temple serving as a tangible representation of the Davidic tradition. Consequently, no other religious site was deemed acceptable.

The temple at Mount Gerizim, lacking any connection to the line of David, led the Samaritans to dismiss the prophetic traditions. For them, the Torah was the sole authoritative text, enriched only by certain traditions regarding Joshua, Moses' successor. The Samaritans did not adopt a second canon of "the Prophets" in their religious doctrine. In contrast, in Judah, this second collection of texts became integral to Jewish theological beliefs, existing alongside the Pentateuch and building the anticipation of a future messiah to resurrect Israel.

Although Samaritan traditions eventually evolved to include the concept of a future messiah (as referenced in John 4:25, this figure was not envisioned as royal or Davidic. Instead, inspired by the Torah's prophecy of God sending a prophet akin to Moses, Deuteronomy 18:15, the Samaritans viewed their messiah as a divine teacher and revealer of truths, rather than as a liberator or monarch, as indicated in John 1:21, 25; 6:14; 7:40.

## ***How the Jews Saw Themselves***

In contrast, the Jews who came from Babylon saw themselves as the true remnant of Israel, having experienced the judgment of exile. With them they carried the earlier practices and traditions of the Jews and sought to preserve it for the time of return. Many of these Jews were descendants of the highest levels of Jewish society (royal descendants, government officials, priests, and landholders). They believed the Samaritans practiced a superficial Judaism out of practicality and self-preservation, after having received instruction by an Israelite priest when they were attacked by lions sent by God, 2 Kings 17:25-26. Josephus says:

And when they see the Jews in prosperity, they pretend that they are changed, and allied to them, and call them kinsmen, as though they were derived from Joseph, and had by that means an original alliance with them: but when they see them falling into a low condition, they say they are no way related to them, and that the Jews have no right to expect any kindness or marks of kindred from them, but they declare that they are sojourners, that come from other countries.<sup>8</sup>

As the Persian period continued, relations between the Jews and the Samaritans worsened. The Persians didn't mind, as it decreased the probability of any widespread rebellion in Palestine.

## **Under Nehemiah**

Nehemiah was the son of Hacaliah, Nehemiah 1.1, and had several brothers living in Jerusalem, Nehemiah 1.2; 4.23; 5.10, 14; 7.2. How Nehemiah became the cupbearer to Artaxerxes I, Nehemiah

1.11), is unknown. He lived in Susa, one of the Persian royal capitals. His close relationship with the Persian king, allowed him an opportunity to petition the king to serve as governor of Judah, after hearing a report of Jerusalem's decline. Once he returned his first order of business, was to rebuild the walls and gates surrounding the city of Jerusalem. He accomplished this in 52 days, Nehemiah 6.15. The construction project was completed under great duress, with a constant threat of violence and resistance from Sanballat, Tobiah, governor of Ammon, and Geshem the Arab, Nehemiah 2.10, 19.

12 years after completing the rebuilding of the walls, Nehemiah returned to Susa, Nehemiah 13.6-7. For reasons unknown, it appears that it was intended that his relocation be permanent. After his departure, many of his policies were undone. In 429 B.C., he was allowed to return. He punished the Judean men who married foreign wives during his absence. He made sure the nation practiced the Sabbath and initiated more reforms. The date of Nehemiah's death is unknown, but most place it sometime in the 420's. The next governor of Judah, Bagohi, is dated around 410 B.C.

## Conclusion

From the initial return to their homeland authorized by Cyrus to the ambitious leadership of Zerubbabel, and the eventual succession of high priest Joshua, we see faith, determination, and resilience. The Jews, having been exiled, returned to a land surrounded by suspicion and hostility. Yet, it was through their unwavering faith and reliance on divine help that they laid the foundations of their community anew and undertook the colossal task of rebuilding the temple. The death of Cyrus and the succession of Cambyses brought about a change in imperial policies, but the Jews remained steadfast in their endeavors.

The rise of Darius and the political turmoil within the Persian Empire presented both a challenge and an opportunity for the Jewish people. Zerubbabel's political acumen in appealing to the decree of Cyrus ensured the continuation of the temple's construction, even amid the empire's suspicion of rebellion. It was a time of great anxiety but also one where the Jewish community's skill in statecraft and negotiation shone brightly.

Darius's administrative reforms, the establishment of satrapies, and the introduction of a standardized monetary system, while consolidating Persian power, also gave rise to a strengthened sense of local identity and autonomy among the Jews. This delicate balance between subjugation and self-determination defined much of the Jewish experience during this era. The leadership shift from royal lineage to priestly authority marked a significant transition in Jewish society. The elevation of high priest Joshua represented a shift in power dynamics, from the Davidic lineage to a priestly caste that would have longstanding implications for the religious and civic life of the Jewish people.

In the broader context of the intertestamental period, the actions taken by these Jewish leaders and the policies of the Persian rulers laid the groundwork for the cultural and religious landscape that would define the region for centuries to come.

## For Class Interaction and Discussion

### *Lesson Outline*

#### 1. Introduction:

- The return of Jews to their homeland following Cyrus' decree.
- The challenges faced in rebuilding the community and temple in Jerusalem.
- Leadership under Zerubbabel and the political landscape under Persian rule.

#### 2. From Zerubbabel to Ezra:

- The administrative and military achievements of King Darius.
- The shift in autonomy and local identity under Persian rule.
- The changing dynamics of leadership in Jerusalem.

#### 3. The Samaritans:

- Origins and religious differences between Jews and Samaritans.
- The intense conflict over the location and legitimacy of places of worship.

#### 4. Why the Conflict Was So Intense:

- The clash over Israel's identity, religious traditions, and the Davidic lineage.
- The contrasting beliefs of Samaritans and Jews regarding messianic expectations.

#### 5. How the Jews Saw Themselves:

- The self-perception of Jews returning from Babylon.
- The deteriorating relations between Jews and Samaritans during the Persian period.

### *Thought Questions for Discussion*

1. What were the primary challenges faced by the Jews upon their return to Jerusalem?
2. How did Zerubbabel's leadership influence the rebuilding of the temple and Jerusalem?
3. Discuss the role of King Darius in stabilizing and expanding the Persian Empire.
4. How did the Persian satrapy system affect the local identities and autonomy of subject communities?

5. In what ways did the leadership in Jerusalem shift from the Davidic line to the priestly caste?
6. Compare and contrast the religious beliefs and practices of Jews and Samaritans.
7. Why was the location of the temple a significant point of conflict between Jews and Samaritans?
8. Discuss the implications of the Samaritan belief in a messiah and how it differed from Jewish expectations.
9. How did the Jews who returned from Babylon view themselves in relation to the Samaritans?
10. Explain the impact of Persian rule on the relationship between Jews and Samaritans.

### ***Group Activities:***

1. **Debate:** Divide the class into two groups representing Jews and Samaritans. Have them debate on the legitimacy of their respective temples and religious practices.
2. **Timeline Creation:** Work in groups to create a timeline of events from Cyrus' decree to the rebuilding of the temple under Zerubbabel, including key political changes.
3. **Character Study:** Assign different biblical and historical figures (e.g., Zerubbabel, Darius, Sanballat) to groups for in-depth study and presentation.

### ***Final Encouraging Word:***

Remember, despite the challenges and conflicts of their time, the faith and resilience of those who rebuilt Jerusalem and its temple were remarkable. Their dedication and trust in God amid adversity is a powerful example for us today. Let's be inspired by their commitment to preserving their identity and faith and strive to apply the same dedication in our own lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Athas, George. *Bridging the Testaments: The History and Theology of God's People in the Second Temple Period*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2023, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> Meyers says Elnathan served about 20 years, 510-490 B.C. See Meyers, Carol L., and Eric M. Meyers. *Haggai, Zechariah 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Vol. 25B of *Anchor Yale Bible*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008, p. 14.



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<sup>3</sup> Antiquities 11.121. Josephus, Flavius, and William Whiston. *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987, p. 294.

<sup>4</sup> Antiquities 11.296.

<sup>5</sup> Josephus *Antiquities* 9:288-91: “But now the Cutheans, who removed into Samaria (for that is the name they have been called by to this time, because they were brought out of the country called Cuthah, which is a country of Persia, and there is a river of the same name in it), each of them, according to their nations, which were in number five, brought their own gods into Samaria, and by worshiping them, as was the custom of their own countries, they provoked Almighty God to be angry and displeased at them. . . (They) are called in the Hebrew tongue Cutheans; but in the Greek Samaritans.” *Ibid.*, p. 265.

<sup>6</sup> Barry, John D., David Bomar, Derek R. Brown, Rachel Klippenstein, Douglas Mangum, Carrie Sinclair Wolcott, Lazarus Wentz, Elliot Ritzema, and Wendy Widder, eds. *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Anderson, Robert T. “Samaritans.” *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday, 1992, Vol. 5, p. 941.

<sup>8</sup> Antiquities 9:291, p. 265.