

'Starting again'

Returning to life after lockdown

"Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing? But now be strong ..." (Haggai 2.3f)

As the lockdown restrictions are gradually eased and we return bit by bit to the rhythms of congregational life, the return of the exiles from Babylon provides an instructive, parallel narrative.

The return from Babylon was both gradual and difficult: it's narrated in the two books Ezra and Nehemiah (which were originally one book), and the ministry of Haggai and Zechariah had an integral part to play in the challenges facing the people back then.

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7. Enemies

".. to work against them and to frustrate their plans .."

Ezra 4.1-24

This chapter has a *thematic* rather than a strictly chronological concern: it covers the whole period from the reign of Cyrus (538–530) to the reign of Artaxerxes (464-423BC) and sets out various ways in which the rebuilding of the temple and city was opposed over the years.

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1. **Read Ezra 4.1-24.** The whole chapter is explained by its final verse: it describes some of the reasons why 'the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill.'

What different forms did the opposition to the work take?

Have there been times when the building of God's temple in your life came to a standstill? What caused that?

2. Read Ezra 4.1-3. An offer made by some of the existing residents of the land to help the returned exiles in their work of building the temple, was emphatically refused by the leaders.

Why were they so adamant in refusing this help?

What lessons might we profitably learn from this?

3. Read Ezra 4.4-5. It became clear that, for the 'neighbours' who had offered their help, their involvement in the work was more important than God's advancement through the work.

What matters more to you – the progress of God's work, or your part in any such progress?

What discourages you in regard to your commitment to the work of God?

In what ways (if any) are you prone to discourage others, even unwittingly?

4. **Read Ezra 4.6-23.** The opposition described here took place decades later during the reigns of Xerxes (Ahasuerus) and Artaxerxes when the walls of Jerusalem were being rebuilt.

Why did the enemies of the people of God have recourse to this strategy?

What parallels can you see between the experience of the returned exiles back then and our own situation as believers today?

How do we best get the balance right between the command of **Rom.13.1** and the affirmation of **Acts 5.29**?