

Ezra 4:20

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

There have been mighty kings also over Jerusalem, which have ruled over all countries beyond the river; and toll, tribute, and custom, was paid unto them.

Analysis

There have been mighty kings also over Jerusalem, which have ruled over all countries beyond the river; and toll, tribute, and custom, was paid unto them. This verse acknowledges Jerusalem's historical glory under David and Solomon, when Israel exercised regional dominance. The phrase 'mighty kings' (malachin taqqifin, מַלְכֵין תִּקְיִין) recognizes genuine power. 'Ruled over all countries beyond the river' likely refers to Davidic-Solomonic control over Syria and surrounding regions (2 Samuel 8, 1 Kings 4:21-24). The mention of 'toll, tribute, and custom' confirms Jerusalem once received taxes from subject peoples, reversing current dynamics.

Artaxerxes' acknowledgment of Jerusalem's past imperial status, while historically accurate, ironically served opponents' propaganda. By highlighting Jerusalem's former power, the king seemed to confirm that the city possessed imperial ambitions and capability to threaten Persian interests. This historical memory, meant to inform, instead prejudiced the present situation. The opponents' strategy succeeded in making Jerusalem's glorious past a liability rather than asset.

Theologically, this demonstrates how even positive aspects of history can be weaponized by opposition. David and Solomon's reign represented God's blessing and covenant faithfulness, yet this blessing became evidence for suspicion. Similarly, the church's historical achievements can provoke opposition when

interpreted as threatening rather than beneficial. Past success doesn't guarantee present favor from worldly powers.

Historical Context

Under David and Solomon (c. 1010-931 BC), Israel did indeed exercise regional hegemony. David's conquests established Israelite control over Edom, Moab, Ammon, and Aramean territories (2 Samuel 8:1-14). Solomon inherited and maintained this empire, receiving tribute from subject peoples (1 Kings 4:21). This period represented Israel's political zenith before the kingdom divided and eventually fell to Assyria and Babylon.

For Artaxerxes, ruling five centuries after Solomon, this historical information would have come from Babylonian archives and possibly biblical documents. The persistence of this historical memory demonstrates how regional peoples preserved knowledge of Israel's former glory. That Gentile archives documented Israelite imperial success testifies to its historical reality, not merely religious legend.

The opponents cleverly used this history to suggest Jerusalem possessed both ambition and precedent for regional dominance. By reminding Artaxerxes that Jerusalem once extracted tribute from territories now under Persian control, they insinuated that restoration would revive imperial ambitions. This argument ignored that five centuries, multiple deportations, and complete destruction had eliminated any possibility of such revival.

Related Passages

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

1 John 4:8 — God is love

Study Questions

1. How can positive historical achievements become liabilities when opponents reinterpret them as threats?
2. What does this verse teach about how different parties interpret the same historical facts through different ideological lenses?
3. How should believers present their history when both achievements and failures can be used against them?

Interlinear Text

וְשֵׁ לִיט יִן	יֵר וְשָׁלָם	עַל	הוּא	תְּקִיף יִן	וּמֶלֶךְ יִן
which have ruled	Jerusalem	also over	There have been	mighty	kings
H7990	H3390	H5922	H1934	H8624	H4430
מִתִּיָּב	וְהָלָךְ	כָּל וְ	וּמִדָּה	נָהָר הַ	עַבְרָה
was paid	and custom	tribute	and toll	the river	countries beyond
H3052	H1983	H1093	H4061	H5103	H5675
לְהִין:					
					H0

Additional Cross-References

Genesis 15:18 (Parallel theme): In the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates:

1 Kings 4:21 (Kingdom): And Solomon reigned over all kingdoms from the river unto the land of the Philistines, and unto the border of Egypt: they brought presents, and served Solomon all the days of his life.

Psalms 72:8 (Parallel theme): He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth.

1 Chronicles 18:3 (Kingdom): And David smote Hadarezer king of Zobah unto Hamath, as he went to stablsh his dominion by the river Euphrates.

