

Lesson 1: An Introduction to Ezra

Why Study Ezra & Esther?

Apart from being books of the Bible (which is certainly reason enough to study them), Ezra and Esther are fascinating historical accounts of one of the most interesting periods of time in man's history. As the handout indicates, during the 300-year period from Nabopolassar until Alexander's conquest of the Persians, we see a string of Babylonian kings and then Persian kings surrounded elsewhere in the world by such figures as Buddha, Confucius, Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle. With all that was going on in the world, who would have thought that the most important events by far involved a few hundred thousand former captives located in a backwater Persian province? But things are not always what they seem. God's plan was at work, and God does not need the might or wisdom of man to accomplish his plans!

Why should we study all of this history? The theme of the Bible is the redemption of man through Jesus Christ and his gospel, but that theme is not just a philosophical idea that is disconnected from daily life. Instead, it is developed within the history of mankind – and much of that history centers on the history of one people, Israel.

Over half of the Bible consists of historical narration in which the inspired writers repeatedly emphasize God's role in that history. Thus, to understand Ezra and Esther, we must understand their historical context. The study of this history will also provide some modern lessons because the Bible teaches us that the way God works with his people in one historical context, such as the Persian Empire, can help us understand how he works in other contexts.

The Persian Empire

At the beginning of the book of Daniel, Babylon had conquered Israel and carried Daniel and his friends into captivity. By the end of that book, Babylon is gone, and the Medes and the Persians are in control. Daniel had prophesied about four earthly kingdoms—Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome—that would be followed by the eternal kingdom, the church. Our studies in Ezra and Esther will center on the second earthly kingdom in that list: Medo-Persia. All of the events in Ezra and Esther (and also in Nehemiah) took place during the time of the Persian Empire.

The Book of Kings describes the fall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar in 587 B.C. Jerusalem was destroyed, many of the Jews were killed, and most of the others were carried off to Babylon. After Nebuchadnezzar's death in 562 B.C., the empire declined rapidly. Amel-marduk (the Evil-merodach who released Jehoiachin in 2 Kings 25:27-30), Nebuchadnezzar's son, reigned for only two years; then his brother-in-law, Nergal-shar-usur, reigned for four years. He left a son whom rebels removed; and Nabonidus and his son Belshazzar became the last kings of Babylon (556-539).

Nabonidus was not very popular in Babylon, especially among the priests of Marduk. He and his mother were devotees of the moon god, Sin, whose religious center was in Haran. Therefore he neglected the Babylonian religious ceremonies centered on the worship of Marduk. Nabonidus spent much of his time in the desert area southeast of Edom and left the affairs of Babylon in the hands of Belshazzar, as we see in Daniel. The internal dissension resulting from Nabonidus's poor leadership made the empire ripe for conquest.

Both the Medes and the Persians were Aryan (Indo-European) tribes who moved south from Russia. First they settled in the northwestern part of Iran but later migrated farther south. The Medes occupied the western part of Iran south of the Caspian Sea, while the Persians moved farther to the southeast to part of Iran just north of the Persian Gulf.

The Persian kings were called the "Achaemenids" (a-KEY-muh-nids) after the founder of the dynasty, Achaemenes, who was followed by Teispes (Cispis). We have record of two branches of Teispes' family. One son, Cyrus I, ruled from 640 to 600; and his son, Cambyses I, ruled from 600 to 559. Cambyses was the father of Cyrus the Great. After the reign of Cambyses II, Darius the Great took over the throne. But he was from the other branch of the Achaemenian family, through Teispes' other son, Ariaramnes.

Until the time of Cyrus the Great, the Persians were vassals of the Medes. The Babylonian king Nabonidus rejoiced when Cyrus rebelled against Astyages, the last king of the Median empire, and even helped him at first. By 550 Cyrus had defeated Astyages and taken over the whole Median Empire. The nobles of both Media and Persia gave him their support and named him king of the Medes and Persians.

Babylon had reason to fear the growing empire to the north. Cyrus quickly marched across Upper Mesopotamia, conquering Armenia, Cappadocia, and Cilicia; then he defeated Croesus, king of Lydia, in

547, gaining control over the Greek cities in Asia Minor. He then conquered more territory in the east into what is now Afghanistan; so the Persian Empire reached from there to the western shores of Asia Minor. It was only a matter of time before Cyrus would take over Babylon.



In 539 Cyrus ordered Gobryas, one of his officials, to attack Babylon, and the city was quickly taken. Herodotus (pictured above) tells us that the Persians were able to enter Babylon by diverting the Euphrates River, which ran through the city, into an artificial lake, thus lowering the water level enough for the soldiers to enter the city and take the Babylonians by surprise. Daniel described how Belshazzar fell from power suddenly one night while he was banqueting. Xenophon corroborated this; he said the Persians attacked the city during a festival when “all Babylon was accustomed to drink and revel all night long.” Herodotus wrote: “The Babylonians themselves say that owing to the great size of the city the outskirts were captured without the people in the center knowing anything about it; there was a festival going on, and even while the city was falling they continued to dance and enjoy themselves, until hard facts brought them to their senses.”



We know much about Cyrus from the famous Cyrus Cylinder – a clay barrel with a long inscription in cuneiform writing honoring Cyrus. It is mainly concerned with Cyrus’s conquest of Babylon and apparently was written to influence public opinion in his favor and legitimize his rule over Babylon. It is a long inscription that first tells of the misdeeds of Nabonidus and Belshazzar. Then Cyrus continues:

Marduk ... scanned and looked through all the countries, searching for a righteous ruler willing to lead him in the annual procession. Then he pronounced the name of Cyrus, king of Anshan, and declared him ... to become the ruler of all the world.

The cylinder also tells us how Cyrus treated the gods of the people he conquered:

I returned to these sacred cities on the other side of the Tigris, the sanctuaries of which have been ruins for a long time, the images which used to live therein and established for them permanent sanctuaries. I also gathered all their former inhabitants and returned to them their habitations. Furthermore, I resettled upon the command of Marduk, the great lord, all the gods of Sumer and Akkad whom Nabonidus has brought into Babylon to the anger of the lord of the gods, unharmed, in their former chapels, the places which make them happy.

As we will see, the resettlements in Jerusalem came from a similar pronouncement that we will read about in Ezra. One key difference is that, rather than an image, Cyrus returned to the Jerusalem temple the precious vessels Nebuchadnezzar had taken.

The Persian Empire now included all of Babylon and Syria-Palestine. Although not mentioned in the Bible, Cyrus's son Cambyses conquered Egypt in 525 B.C., making the Persian Empire greater than its predecessors.

In 522 Cambyses received bad news from Persia: someone impersonating his brother Smerdis had taken over the Persian government. (Some argue that this was the actual Smerdis.) Cambyses had earlier ordered his brother murdered so this would not happen. Cambyses hurried to return to Persia. But according to Herodotus, on his way through Syria, "as he was springing into the saddle, the cap fell off the sheath of his sword, exposing the blade, which pierced his thigh." Whether the story is true (another is that he committed suicide), Cambyses evidently was wounded, gangrene set in, and three weeks later he died.

Meanwhile at Susa the usurpers were killed by a group of seven conspirators. Finally, Darius, one of the conspirators, was named king. This was Darius the Great from the other branch of the Achaemenian family mentioned earlier. Under him the Persian Empire reached its greatest power and most efficient organization.



Darius left many inscriptions telling about his exploits. The longest and most famous is the Behistun Inscription (shown above) carved on a huge rock formation on the principal road that led from Mesopotamia to the Iranian plateau. The inscription was carved on a cliff, 225 feet above the plain. It also includes reliefs of Darius, some officials, and some subjects.

During Darius I's reign, the construction of the temple in Jerusalem was resumed and completed (Ezra 5-6). As we will see in Ezra 4-5, the Jews' work on the temple had been halted because of the opposition of their neighbors. Cambyses apparently had supported the opposition (and isn't it interesting that he died unexpectedly while "springing into the saddle"!)

In Ezra 6 the Jews informed Darius that Cyrus himself had authorized the building of the temple. Darius searched the archives, found that it was true, so he again authorized the construction and commanded the opposition to cease.

At the same time, in 520 B.C., God raised up the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, who told the people that they should renew the work on the temple. The people responded, God removed the opposition, and the temple was dedicated in 515 (Ezra 6:16-18).

During Darius's reign, the Greek settlements in Asia Minor rebelled against the Persian Empire. They were brought under control, but Darius then attempted to take the Greek mainland. He was defeated at the famous Battle of Marathon in 490 B.C.

Xerxes I (Ahasuerus) had served as viceroy over Babylon for twelve years under his father's rule. His great ambition as king of Persia was to conquer Greece. After quelling revolts in Egypt and Babylon, he began his Greek campaign in the spring of 480 B.C. After initial successes, conquering the northern part of the Greek mainland and burning the acropolis in Athens, Xerxes' forces suffered a naval defeat at Salamis, which led to his withdrawal from Greece. The events of the Book of Esther took place during his reign. Some suggest that the plot by palace officials to assassinate Xerxes, which Mordecai uncovered, may have been a result of Xerxes' humiliating defeat in Greece.

Although Mordecai had saved Xerxes from one palace plot, his reign of twenty years was terminated by another such plot. The captain of his bodyguard plotted to take over the throne and assassinated him in August of 465. Xerxes' oldest son was then murdered by his younger brother, Artaxerxes I, who became the next king of Persia.

The final century of the Persian Empire before its fall to Alexander the Great in 331 B.C. was characterized by revolts and economic decline. Increasing taxation and the greed of government officials were factors in the growing impoverishment of the people. According to R. N. Frye, "The traditional explanation of the fall of the empire as the result of abuses of their positions by those in power, the decadence and corruption at court and among the aristocracy, combined with a

fall in the standards of living of the common folk, can be further documented by Babylonian tablets.”

The New Policy of the Persian Kings

Before Babylon fell to Cyrus in 539 B.C., many of the Babylonians looked upon Cyrus as a liberator. They were not happy with the way Nabonidus had neglected their religion. The Jews were also optimistic about the potential political change because of how Cyrus was known to treat his subjected peoples.

The Assyrians had been very cruel. They had harshly suppressed the peoples they conquered; many times they had moved entire populations from one land to another and then replaced them with other conquered peoples. This was the case when they conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C.

The Babylonians, although somewhat less cruel, followed much the same policy. Thus when Jerusalem was destroyed in 587 B.C., many of the Jews were taken captive to Babylon. When the Persians took control, however, Cyrus encouraged the peoples he conquered to develop their own culture and continue their own religion. He and some of his successors even helped support the local priests in conquered nations. After conquering Babylon, he restored the place of Marduk as their principal god and allowed captive peoples to return to their homelands.

Organization and Policy of the Persian Empire

The political organization of the Persian Empire was different from that of Assyria and Babylon. It reached its greatest development during the reign of Darius I. The whole empire was divided into twenty satrapies. Each one was governed by a Persian commissioner or satrap, usually from the Persian noble families. These satraps were virtual kings over their satrapies. They levied taxes and provided troops for the king. The satrapies were further divided into provinces, which were supervised by a governor, usually a descendant of the local nobility. Thus in Judah we read of Jews such as Zerubbabel and Nehemiah who served as governors.

Palestine belonged to the satrapy “Beyond the River,” which means the region west of the Euphrates. According to Herodotus this was the fifth satrapy. It included Syria, Phoenicia, and Palestine to the border of Egypt as well as Cyprus.

The Jews in the Period of Exile

The Babylonian siege of Jerusalem in 597 B.C. and the first deportation, which included the exile of King Jehoiachin, are generally considered the beginning of the Babylonian captivity.

Although those captured in battle probably were taken to Babylon as slaves, and many of the exiles were poor, the situation of most Jews in Babylon appears to have been good. Only King Jehoiachin and his family, captured in 597 B.C., were confined; and they were released in 562 B.C. The rest of the Jews were free to settle in communities and to engage in normal agriculture or trade.

It should come as no surprise, then, considering conditions in Judah and Babylon, that when the Persians allowed the Jews to return under Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel and again in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, many preferred to remain in Mesopotamia.

During the captivity the Jews lived among a foreign population and were naturally influenced by that environment. The most important influence was the Aramaic language. During the captivity, Aramaic became their principal spoken language. Babylonian influence is also seen in names such as Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel.

The prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel greatly influenced the Jewish captives in Babylon. Before the fall of Jerusalem, few in Israel heeded these prophecies; but when the predictions about Jerusalem's destruction came true, the Jews realized that Jeremiah and Ezekiel were truly prophets sent by God. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel predicted the fall and destruction of Jerusalem as punishment for the Jews' unfaithfulness to God, but they also included messages of hope for the continued purpose of God for his people Israel. This included a return from captivity and the promise of the Messiah. Although Jeremiah's ministry appeared to be a complete failure during his lifetime, his messages became one of the principal reasons for the survival of the Jewish faith.

Ezekiel's preaching also influenced the Jews in Babylon. Three themes appear throughout his book: worship at the temple, the land of Israel, and the Lord's people. This influence took lasting root because these truths are also important in Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezekiel also emphasized the preservation of holiness and taught that purity and justice are the essential marks of God's people. These same themes are seen in Ezra and Nehemiah's concern for the holiness and separation. The messages of both Jeremiah and Ezekiel kept alive the Jews' hope of returning to their own land.

After carrying away captive the best of the population in Judah, the Babylonians did not bring other peoples into Judah as the Assyrians had done in the north after the fall of Samaria. Thus a population vacuum was created in Judah. Archaeological excavations indicate that Judah was sparsely populated in this period. Except for the Negev and along the northern frontier, virtually all the fortified towns in Judah had been destroyed.

Since the time of Joseph, Jews had frequently looked upon Egypt as a place of refuge, although they were repeatedly admonished by the prophets not to attempt to find security there. It is likely that some migrated there following the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C. The Bible tells of a group who left Judah for Egypt after the fall of Jerusalem, taking Jeremiah with them (2 Kings 25:25-26; Jer. 41:16-18).



This is supported by the Elephantine papyri, our primary evidence of Jews in Egypt in the Persian period. This collection of fifth century B.C. papyri was from a Jewish military colony on the island of Elephantine in the Nile. The site was a frontier outpost on Egypt's southern border occupied by Jewish mercenaries and their families. It was apparently founded sometime in the sixth century, perhaps soon after the destruction of Jerusalem. The papyri, consisting of legal documents and letters, date from the fifth century B.C. and reveal much about the political situation and about Jewish laws and customs there.

The Returns to Jerusalem

Ezra 1-2 describes the happy time in 538 B.C. when the first Jewish exiles were permitted to return to Judah. This was a day that was to have profound significance for the whole subsequent history of God's people. Nevertheless, the group that returned under Sheshbazzar was small. According to Ezra 2:64-65 the number of those returning was 49,897. Later we know about five thousand returned with Ezra (Ezra 8:1-14), and other groups of Jews probably also arrived from Babylonia from time to time.

In Ezra and Nehemiah we read of neighboring enemies of the Jews. Judah was surrounded by other provinces, all part of the fifth satrapy mentioned earlier. Samaria was the province on the north where Sanballat was governor. Ammon-Gilead was the province on the east where Tobiah was governor. Arabia-Idumea was on the south where Geshem was governor. On the west was the province of Ashdod.

Little information is available about subsequent groups of Jews who returned to Judah. More must have come, for at the beginning of the Hellenistic period (331 B.C.) the Jewish community was well established. On the other hand, many Jews stayed in Babylon, and for centuries Babylon remained a center for Jewish studies.

Historical Questions

The Chronology of Ezra and Nehemiah

In Ezra and Nehemiah it appears that Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in 458 B.C., the seventh year of King Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:7-8), and Nehemiah arrived thirteen years later in 445 B.C., the twentieth year of Artaxerxes (Neh. 2:1). However, while the traditional date of Nehemiah's arrival has generally been maintained, during the past century many scholars have argued that dating Ezra's arrival *after* Nehemiah's makes more sense of the historical data.

Several apparent historical anomalies have been noted that lead to this conclusion. For example, if Ezra came to Jerusalem to teach God's Law in Israel (Ezra 7:10), why did he wait thirteen years for a public reading of the Law (Neh. 8)? And in view of Ezra's reforms (Ezra 9-10), why did Nehemiah find the situation so deteriorated only a few years later (Neh. 1:3; 5:1-5; 13:1-31)?

The traditional date for Ezra's coming to Jerusalem is based on understanding Ezra 7:7-8 as referring to Artaxerxes I. Some have

argued that the king referred to is actually Artaxerxes II, thus dating Ezra's arrival in 398 B.C., allowing no overlap between Nehemiah's ministry and that of Ezra. Others argue that the "the seventh year" in Ezra 7:7-8 should read "the thirty-seventh year," which was 428 B.C. This allows some overlap of the ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah but avoids a long interval between Ezra's arrival and his reading of the Law.

Those who maintain the traditional dates, however, have the better argument. As one commentator has noted, "the traditional view makes the most sense of the relationship between Ezra's reforms and those of Nehemiah ... Ezra's juridical role makes more sense as an action that preceded the more directly administrative role of Nehemiah." We will maintain the traditional dating of 458 B.C. for Ezra's return and 445 B.C. for Nehemiah's return.

The Identity of Sheshbazzar

The relation between Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel is not clear. In Ezra 3:8 we read that Zerubbabel and others began the work of building the house of God, and in Hag 1:1 he is called governor of Judah. In Ezra 5:14, however, Sheshbazzar is called governor, and v. 16 says, "This Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem."

Some suggest that Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel were the same person. However, it is preferable to consider them two distinct persons. One commentator suggests there are two possible ways to see their relationship: (1) Sheshbazzar was governor at the beginning, then Zerubbabel became governor and completed the temple; or (2) Sheshbazzar was responsible to the Persian government, officially regarded "by the outside world" as the temple builder, though Zerubbabel really built it.

The most logical conclusion and the one that best explains the biblical data is that Sheshbazzar was the leader and governor when the first group of captives came (Ezra 1:8; 5:14). He disappears from our view quickly, and his nephew Zerubbabel, who accompanied Sheshbazzar to Judah and led in the building project, continued as governor (Ezra 3:2; Neh. 12:1; Hag 1:1).

The Theology of Ezra-Nehemiah

The Continuity of God's Plan and People

One of the chief objectives of Ezra and Nehemiah was to show the Jews that they were the continuation of the chosen Jewish nation prior to the exile. One way that this continuity is emphasized is by allusions to the exodus, with the idea being that the returnees had experienced a new exodus. As soon as the new temple was completed, they celebrated the Passover (Ezra 6:19-22). Later, after reading the Law, they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles (Neh. 8).

God's providential care is repeatedly emphasized to show that God's redemptive plan was continuing to work through the Jewish people. It was God who was responsible for the decree of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1). He also secured the permission for construction to continue (Ezra 5:5; 6:14; 6:22) and for Ezra and his group to come to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:27). He even protected them on the way (Ezra 8:22). It was God who secured Nehemiah's appointment as governor (Neh. 2:8) and guided in all the details of the construction of the wall (Neh. 4:14; 4:20). God frustrated the plans of the Jews' enemies and preserved the Jewish people.

Ezra and Nehemiah emphasize that God can use even foreign rulers to fulfill his purposes for the Jewish community. This is noted in the Edict of Cyrus (Ezra 1:6), in Artaxerxes' letter to Ezra (7:11-27), and in many details of Nehemiah's assignment (Neh. 1-6). God's sovereignty encompasses the entire world, all nations, to assure the continuation of his redemptive plan through the Jewish people.

This continuation of the people of God also meant the continuation of the covenant. This little community of returned Jewish exiles was receiving the blessings of God's covenant with Abraham and with Israel at Sinai. The prayers of Ezra 9:6-15; Neh. 1:5-11; and Neh. 9:5-37 demonstrate their deep consciousness of the covenant. "You are the LORD God, who chose Abram . . . and you made a covenant with him. . . . You have kept your promise" (Neh. 9:7-8). Ezra and Nehemiah recognized and confessed that the people broke the covenant and for that reason suffered the captivity. But they appealed to God's covenant mercy and promises for the reestablishment of the covenant community.

In fact, this new situation under foreign rule meant that the Jewish people became again more strictly a covenant community and not a nation as in the monarchy. The community's identity did not now depend on its political institutions and identity as a nation but on its

special covenant relation to God. In God's providence this was a step in the preparation for the New Testament transition to the church under the new covenant in which all believers are one in Christ and where physical, ethnic, political, and geographic distinctions are overcome.

Separation

The emphasis on continuity with the covenant people of God led to a strong emphasis on separation from any form of defilement with the surrounding people. The Jews who returned were a tiny island in a great sea of peoples and religious traditions. It was important that the covenant community remain pure in doctrine, customs, and ethical norms.

Ezra's and Nehemiah's actions may seem harsh, but those actions show us how important it was in God's plan that this covenant community continue. As one commentator noted, "Against the backdrop of the Exile, a judgment that had taken place precisely because the covenant nation had abandoned this principle of exclusivity, it is most evident why Ezra and Nehemiah give evidence of such interest in the purity of the post-exile remnant."

This was a crucial point in the history of the Jewish people. Unchecked assimilation would have meant the end of their role in God's plan. Some blame Ezra and Nehemiah for the "legalism gone to seed" that we find in the Jewish community in the time of Jesus, and it is true that later, especially after the life-and-death conflict with Hellenism in the Maccabean period, some of these emphases were exaggerated. Some of the Jews accepted Hellenism and virtually abandoned their Jewish faith, "but it was such conservative and exclusivistic groups that preserved Judaism and led the way toward Christianity."

Scripture

Ezra and Nehemiah affirm the centrality of the Law of God in the life of his people. They teach that Scripture reveals God's will. The revival started with those who "trembled at the words of the God of Israel" (Ezra 9:4; 10:3). Ezra's prayer in Ezra 9 and that of the people in Neh. 9 both show a profound understanding of God and his ways as revealed in the Books of Moses. Ezra and Nehemiah call the people back to "the Law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given" (Ezra 7:6). It constantly says the people acted "in accordance with what is written" (Ezra 3:2-4; 6:18; Neh. 8:14-15). More than anywhere else in Scripture, these books show the power of God at work through written texts. As Artaxerxes wrote to Ezra (7:25), the

Bible is “the wisdom of your God, which you possess [lit., which is in your hand].”

Worship

Worship is also central in Ezra and Nehemiah. When the first group of exiles returned from Babylon, they first built an altar to sacrifice to God; only afterwards did they build the temple. Still later they built the walls. Worship was their top priority.

The temple was vital to the Jewish people because it was a symbol of God’s presence and a reminder that they were to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). One of the purposes of these books was to show how God led and provided for the rebuilding of the temple. When the temple was completed, the people celebrated with a large dedication service, where they “offered a hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred male lambs and, as a sin offering for all Israel twelve male goats” (Ezra 6:17). Soon afterward they celebrated the Passover. Then when the city wall was complete another great celebration was held (Neh. 12:27-13:3). The need to protect the purity of their worship was one of the motives for their emphasis on separation.

Prayer

The importance of prayer is taken for granted throughout Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra’s extensive prayer in Ezra 9 and that of the people in Neh. 9 show their belief that God hears and answers prayer. They praised God, confessed sins, depended on God’s promises, and made requests.

Furthermore, the work of Ezra and Nehemiah was immersed in prayer. Before starting out on the journey to Jerusalem, Ezra proclaimed a fast “so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey” (Ezra 8:21). Nehemiah fasted and prayed “for some days” (Neh. 1:4) before attempting to ask the king’s permission to return to Jerusalem. Nehemiah constantly mentions short prayers that he made in moments of crisis (e.g., Neh. 2:4-5). He presents us with an admirable example of combining prayer with action. Several times he asked God to “remember” him (Neh. 5:19; 13:14,22,31). The whole book can teach us a great deal about trusting God in prayer.

Restoration

The people returned with a purpose—to restore the temple. Although it would not possess the splendor it once enjoyed (3:12), both the people and God would be pleased (Hag. 1:4-9). But it was not enough

to restore just the physical, outward forms; hearts must also be restored. Restoring a building is a great undertaking, but restoring the heart is the most difficult task of all. There would be little advantage in having a wall to defend against enemies if the people inside the wall had corrupt hearts. Purity of heart must always be given primary consideration in the restoration process (Mat. 15:18-20).

Faith

The books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther provide many examples of what faith can accomplish. Through faith the temple was rebuilt. Although there were obstacles, eventually God granted them success.

“Today there are many problems in the Lord’s church. Commitment to truth seems to have diminished among those in whom it once appeared to be strong. Many are saddened at the apostasy of some churches and brethren and the wishy-washy attitude of others. Historically God’s people have endured such challenges and discouragement. The way out is through faith. God is not unaware of the problems or those who often feel alone in upholding His ways. If faithful churches and brethren focus only on the problems, it will result in shrinkage and more loss. In addition to meeting the challenges that false brethren pose, we must continue preaching the Gospel to all the world, restoring the pattern, and trusting in God’s providence. As those of Nehemiah’s day, we need to use one hand to hold a sword (to defend against error) and use the other hand to build the wall of the church (each new convert being a living stone). God will grant success.”

Lesson 2: Ezra 1 – 2:20

The first six chapters of Ezra describe the first return from exile and the reconstruction of the temple. The greater part of this book tells the story of the pioneers who returned from exile a whole lifetime before that of the author. Ezra does not make an appearance until Chapter 7, which occurs about 80 years after the events in the first chapter and about 60 years after the completion of the temple in Chapter 6. The events in the book of Esther occur between Chapters 6 and 7 in the book of Ezra.

We cannot overstate the importance of this return of God's people from exile. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel had explained the reason behind their punishment and exile and both had urged the people to repent, warning them of what would happen if they failed to do so. But both had also prophesied a message of hope—the promise of a return to their homeland. These prophecies of hope kept Israel's faith alive during the years of exile.

Although many Jews in Babylon were comfortable there and did not want to return to Judah, many others prayed for and desired to return. They wanted to worship God as they once had—in their own temple and according to their own law. It is the story of these people that we find in the book of Ezra. This book tells us about a *second* exodus from captivity—one of the most important events in the history of God's plan of redemption.

Ezra 1

Verse 1

1 In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing:

At this point, many commentaries begin to tell us about Ezra's "theological interpretation of events." That is, they tell us how Ezra and the Jews interpreted the events around them in terms of their theology. The underlying thought behind such comments is usually that, while Ezra may have viewed the events that way, the events actually had another explanation. For example, while verse 1 says that God caused Cyrus to make this proclamation, that was just how Ezra saw it, but in reality Cyrus was acting on his own. This view, of

course, must be rejected. If God's word tells us that God caused Cyrus to issue this proclamation, then that is not just how Ezra viewed what happened – that is what happened.

And to those who argue otherwise, I would pose a question. Why did Cyrus issue such a decree? In fact, as we know, he issued other such decrees for other captive peoples. Why? What caused him to take an approach to captives so different from what had come before? Or should we ask who caused him to do so? Ezra 1:1 answers that question. And is that really so hard to believe? Remember that God referred to Cyrus by name long before he was born!

What we see here is the providence of God working on behalf of his people – and that is a central theme of Ezra. God preserved the covenant people during the exile, and God fulfilled his promise and brought his people back to their homeland—and he did these things using the rulers and nations of the world as tools. “Behind this opening verse lies the affirmation that all the might of the ancient world was in subjection to God, and put at the disposal of his people for their salvation.”

Verse 1 makes it very clear that what Cyrus did was not just a coincidence. Instead, God caused Cyrus to act in a way that fulfilled specific promises. Jeremiah (25:11-12; 29:10) had foretold that the Babylonian captivity would last 70 years and then God would fulfill his gracious promise to bring them back to this place.

The Hebrew word translated “stirred up” in verse 1 is a crucial link to the numerous prophecies in the Bible about this event. It is the same Hebrew word that we find in Jeremiah 51 and Isaiah 41 & 45.

- (Jeremiah 51:1) Thus says the LORD: “Behold, I will **stir up** the spirit of a destroyer against Babylon.”
- (Jeremiah 51:11) “Sharpen the arrows! Take up the shields! The LORD has **stirred up** the spirit of the kings of the Medes, because his purpose concerning Babylon is to destroy it, for that is the vengeance of the LORD, the vengeance for his temple.”
- (Isaiah 41:2) Who **stirred up** one from the east whom victory meets at every step? He gives up nations before him, so that he tramples kings underfoot; he makes them like dust with his sword, like driven stubble with his bow.

- (Isaiah 41:25) I **stirred up** one from the north, and he has come, from the rising of the sun, and he shall call upon my name; he shall trample on rulers as on mortar, as the potter treads clay.
- (Isaiah 45:13) "I have **stirred him up** in righteousness, and I will make all his ways level; he shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward," says the LORD of hosts.

And here are the most remarkable prophecies of all:

- (Isaiah 44:28) Who says of **Cyrus**, 'He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose'; saying of Jerusalem, 'She shall be built,' and of the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid.'
- (Isaiah 45:1) Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to **Cyrus**, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed.

You will not find more detailed prophecies anywhere else in the Bible. God called Cyrus by name before he was born and foretold exactly what he would do – build my city and set my exiles free! And that is exactly what he did!

As we mentioned, Jeremiah foretold that the Babylonian captivity would last 70 years. What were the beginning and ending points for that 70 year period?

- Let's start with what they are *not*. If we start the captivity with the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 and end it with the first return in 538, then we have a period of only 50 years, which cannot possibly be right.
- If instead we take the same starting point but take the end of captivity as the year when the temple was completed (515), then we have a period of 73 years.
- Another possibility is that the period begins with Babylon's defeat of Assyria in 610 and ends with the first return in 538, which again gives a period of 73 years. (Some argue that Jeremiah 29:10 refers to the period of Babylonian rule, which would support a starting point of 610 BC.)

- Finally, if we start with the first captives (which included Daniel) in 605 and end with the first return in 538, then we get a period of 68 years. This final option seems most likely to me.

Should we be concerned that we don't have an option that gives us *exactly* 70 years? Not at all.

- First, they all round to 70 years, and we know many of the numbers in these books are rounded.
- Second, what does *exactly* 70 years mean anyway? Down to the month, to the day, to the second? Would 70 years 364 days be a fulfillment, while 70 years 365 days would not? There would be no end to such a requirement.
- Third, God may have shortened the 70 year period to 68 years in his mercy. If so, it would not be the last time—(Matthew 24:22) “And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short.”
- Fourth, dating these events is not an exact science. We could easily be off by a few years on some of them.

As an aside, the famous prophecy of *70 weeks* in Daniel 9 is discussed at length on our website, along with what relation, if any, those 70 *figurative* weeks have to these 70 *literal* years.

The proclamation in verse 1 was given in the first year of Cyrus, which the context confirms must be the first year of his reign over the Jews in Babylon, which most date in the spring of 538 following his defeat of Babylon in the fall of 539. This famous edict of Cyrus in verses 2-4 also appears in Ezra 6:3-5 and 2 Chronicles 36:22-23.

The final phrase “to put it in writing” in verse 1 is significant. The word translated “writing” refers to writings or inscriptions that were intended for the public eye. This edict was not just announced orally, but was also displayed publicly in writing. It is not hard to imagine the Jewish captives crowding around to read it! Also, the fact that it was in writing will turn out to be crucial to the later events in this book.

Verses 2-4

2 "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. 3 Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem. 4 And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem."

The first thing we notice about this decree is the apparent piety of Cyrus. It sounds as if he is a true believer in the God of Israel, but was he? It is very unlikely – although it is certainly possible, particularly if he was shown the prophecies of Isaiah giving his name long before he was born. Josephus tells us that Cyrus was shown those prophecies and that he was eager to fulfill them. Some historians cast doubt on that notion, but doesn't it seem very likely that the Jews would have *rushed* to show the new king his own name recorded in their Scriptures—and tell him what God said he would do?

Another explanation for Cyrus' apparent piety is that the Jews had a hand in writing the proclamation. In other such decrees we know that Cyrus used the language of the people who were involved, likely as a diplomatic courtesy. He likely commissioned native scribes to compose the decrees. Also, we sometimes forget that other ancient peoples were *not* monotheists, and, as a polytheist, Cyrus would be glad to have any and all gods on his side. (See the similar decree on the famous Cyrus Cylinder discovered in 1879 and shown on the handout for today's lesson.)

Later we will discuss the Aramaic version of the decree found in Ezra 6:3-5. It is often said to be the same decree found here, but there are some differences. The most likely explanation for the differences is that we have two decrees, with the one here being the royal proclamation announced throughout the kingdom and the one in Ezra 6 being a message to the royal treasurer regarding the expenses for building the temple.

The "let him go up" in verse 3 should be understood as permission or encouragement but not as a command. The Jews were not being ejected from the country; they were free to decide. And for most it was likely not an easy decision but rather one that would result in hardship and suffering, beginning with the 4 month journey it would

take for the return. But it was easier because they had a purpose: “to rebuild the house of the Lord.”

Some commentators note that, to a Jew, the word “survivor” in verse 4 would have immediately brought to mind the word “remnant,” which we saw throughout the writings of Isaiah.

Others, however, note that the word “survivor” in verse 4 is a little ambiguous. One commentary suggests that the Hebrew word is better understood as “those who remained” rather than those who returned to Judah. Thus, verse 4 would then be an encouragement to those that remain to provide assistance to those who were about to return. Verse 4 provides additional evidence that the returning Jews had a hand in writing the proclamation because it is not clear why Cyrus would make such a suggestion absent encouragement.

Verse 5

5 Then rose up the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem.

Verse 5 tells us that those who returned were those “whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem.” The Hebrew word used here is the same that was used in verse 1 to describe how God stirred up Cyrus to issue his proclamation. God was accomplishing his plan of redemption using his own people and using foreign rulers.

Once again we see the goal of the return – to rebuild the temple and restore proper worship. And we see here something we will see throughout the book, a parallel between this exodus from Babylon and the original exodus out of Egypt. A large part of the book of Exodus (Chapters 25-40) is concerned with the construction of the tabernacle and the establishment of worship. Ezra is largely concerned with the restoration of those same things.

A central message of the Bible is that men must worship God in the manner that God has prescribed. We see that in Genesis; we see that in Exodus; we see that in Ezra; we see that in the prophets; and we see that in the New Testament. When men forget that message, a restoration is required – and we saw such a restoration in recent centuries as some left the denominations to restore proper worship and restore the church. We will see many parallels in our studies between these two restorations.

In verse 5 we see yet another theme that will appear again and again throughout this book – the continuity between the post-exile community and the pre-exile community. It was important for the people to understand their connection with those who had occupied the land prior to the exile. Those who returned are grouped under four genealogical headings: Judah, Benjamin, priests, and Levites. We learn elsewhere in the Bible that the various returns to Jerusalem also included some from the ten so-called lost tribes of the Northern Kingdom (1 Chronicles 9:3 and 2 Chronicles 11:16).

Another theme we see in verse 5 is that while God's work requires decision and faith, it also requires planning and preparation and demands a specific goal. The idea of a return to Jerusalem was wonderful, but absent planning, preparation, and goals it would have accomplished nothing. Here the immediate, realizable goal was the construction of the temple. There is, of course, a lesson there for us. God's people should never just wing it. We must be a prepared people and a goal-oriented people. We have a mission to accomplish, and that mission will not be accomplished absent our planning and preparation. *Failing to plan is planning to fail!* As our society becomes increasingly casual, I fear that attitude is making its way into the church. The people of God must never be casual when it comes to our mission. We are engaged in a serious business, and we must take it seriously, and we must let the world know that we take it seriously. If not, how can we ever expect them to take it seriously?

Verse 6

6 And all who were about them aided them with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, with beasts, and with costly wares, besides all that was freely offered.
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Verse 6 seems to have in mind more than just the Jewish neighbors of those who returned, and, if so, we see yet another parallel between the first and second exodus. Those who left Egypt also took with them supplies from their neighbors.

- (Exodus 3:21-22) And I will give this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and when you go, you shall not go empty, 22 but each woman shall ask of her neighbor, and any woman who lives in her house, for silver and gold jewelry, and for clothing. You shall put them on your sons and on your daughters. So you shall plunder the Egyptians.

- (Exodus 11:2) Speak now in the hearing of the people, that they ask, every man of his neighbor and every woman of her neighbor, for silver and gold jewelry.
- (Psalm 105:37) Then he brought out Israel with silver and gold, and there was none among his tribes who stumbled.

So, in addition to Cyrus and God's own people, God was stirring up those who remained to provide assistance to those who were returning. God was using everyone to accomplish his plans, whether they knew it or not. And this is another parallel with the first exodus as we recall how God used Pharaoh and the Egyptians to accomplish his plans.

Verse 7

7 Cyrus the king also brought out the vessels of the house of the LORD that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods.

It is significant that verse 7 tells us that Cyrus brought out the vessels. When a king captured a nation, he would take that nation's idols and cult objects to his own capital to symbolize the victory of his gods over the gods of those he had conquered. Nebuchadnezzar had carried the temple articles away to Babylon in 587. (2 Kings 24:12-13) That Cyrus returned these objects to the Jews shows how serious he was in respecting their religion and customs. The decree in Ezra 6 specifically mentions that these objects were to be returned to the temple in Jerusalem.

Verses 8-11

8 Cyrus king of Persia brought these out in the charge of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. 9 And this was the number of them: 30 basins of gold, 1,000 basins of silver, 29 censers, 10 30 bowls of gold, 410 bowls of silver, and 1,000 other vessels; 11 all the vessels of gold and of silver were 5,400. All these did Sheshbazzar bring up, when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem.

Both the name "Mithredath" and his title "the treasurer" are Persian words; the name refers to Mithras the sun god. Sheshbazzar was a Jew with a Babylonian name, likely referring to the Babylonian sun god, Shamash. Although Sheshbazzar quickly disappeared from the scene, he led the first group of returnees back to Jerusalem.

Verse 8 shows us how carefully the temple objects were treated – the treasurer “counted them out” to Sheshbazzar. This is quite unlike their treatment by the Babylonians—you will recall that Belshazzar had the audacity to drink from the temple vessels in Daniel 5:23.

Some early commentaries argue that Sheshbazzar (the leader here) is really the same person as Zerubbabel (the leader in the next chapter). They argue that Sheshbazzar was the Chaldean or court name for Zerubbabel. Although that is a possibility, I lean toward the view that we have two people rather than one. What then happened to Sheshbazzar? We can’t say for sure, but he may simply have died soon after the return.

Commentaries differ on the meaning and uses of the various items listed in verses 9 and 10. The gold dishes may have been the vessels used to collect the blood of slaughtered animals. The word translated “censers” in the ESV is uncertain and may have been the knife used in the ritual slaughter of the animals.

The mathematicians among us may have noticed that the numbers of items in verses 9 and 10 do not add up to the total in verse 11. It is likely that verses 9 and 10 just list the most important items, whereas verse 11 gives the total of all items.

Yet again in these verses we see the theme of continuity. Those who returned were connected with those who had been taken. They were connected by families, and they were connected by the items they carried back with them.

We should pause here and ask the same question that Indiana Jones once asked—what happened to the ark of the covenant? Most believe it was likely destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. Ethiopians, however, say that the Queen of Sheba’s son stole the ark from Solomon, and they claim it rests today in their cathedral at Aksum. My opinion is that God took it back before it could be destroyed by the Babylonians. Some point to Revelation 11:19 as support for that position—“Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple” (although, of course, that is figurative).

That short phrase at the end of verse 11—“when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem”—is one of the most important events in the history of the world. It certainly would not have been seen as such at the time (perhaps not even by those who were returning), but men are poor judges of the momentous. We tend to amplify that which is trivial and denigrate that which is

important. We must always strive to see things as God sees them, and, when we do, we will see that the great news events of our own day are not that great at all. The truly momentous events are taking place right here among us as we work in the kingdom of Christ.

Ezra 2

One of the books in my library is entitled, “How to Enjoy the Boring Parts of the Bible.” It might seem sacrilegious to some to suggest that parts of the Bible are boring, but most would likely agree that Ezra 2 is not one of the most exciting chapters of the Bible. But, as one commentator noted, as uninviting as this chapter may seem, it is a monument to God’s care and to Israel’s vitality. If this chapter or any other chapter seems boring to us, then we just haven’t studied it enough. We need to look more deeply into God’s word, and when we do, we will find that there are great and marvelous lessons to be learned from every verse in Bible.

Why was this chapter with its lengthy list of names included? What value did it have for its initial readers? What value does it have for us?

We have already seen that continuity is a major theme in Ezra, and continuity is a major reason for the presence of this list. Ezra and his readers were very concerned about the continuity between themselves and the Jews who lived in Judah prior to the exile. They needed to know that God’s covenants and promises still applied to them, and they needed to be secure in their own position in the plan of God.

It was also important that they preserve their purity as a people, and that is another theme that we will see in this book.

Another possible reason for the list was to legitimize land rights after the return from exile. Yes—the Jews had left their homeland. Yes—others had moved in while they were gone. Yes—the Jews wanted their land back when they returned. And, yes—history has a way of repeating itself! But there is a crucial difference between the return of the Jews to their homeland under Ezra and the return of the Jews to their homeland under Harry Truman – the former was part of God’s plan to bring Jesus into this world, whereas the latter was not.

Some of the names are listed by ancestral families while others are listed by geographical location. Why the difference? Some suggest that the latter were the poorer people who did not have land in their name. Others suggest that the former group were those who could

trace their lineage back to a known Jewish ancestor, while the others could only identify their former city—which is supported by the observation that these geographical locations appear to be places where the families lived prior to rather than after the exile.

Significantly there are no references to towns in the Negev south of Judah. The Edomites had moved into that area after Nebuchadnezzar overran Jerusalem. (See Obadiah.)

I think we can see one more reason this list is included in Ezra 2 by looking at Mark 14. In Mark 14:9, Jesus, speaking about the woman with the alabaster flask, said, “truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.” Although Mark did not give us her name, she is being honored here today 2000 years later for the act of kindness and love that she demonstrated. Ezra 2 is filled with such people. Why did they leave their homes to return to a place of suffering and hardship? Because they loved God and longed to worship him as he desired to be worshipped. And for that they are honored by God. And when you read their names and descriptions, think about their example.

“To God each individual and family is significant. Thus the group of returnees is not simply lumped together, but valuable space in Scripture is given to otherwise unknown families and individuals. The group of exiles was not large, but it was vital to God’s plan. ... [They are] the heroes of this drama. Through them God’s purposes in Israel were continued.”

It is through this group and their descendants that we have the Scriptures, which they carefully preserved, and it is through this group and their descendants that Jesus came into this world. Even though they were practically unnoticed in the world at that time, they were the center of God’s plan of redemption.

The church today often suffers from a “minority complex.” We sometimes feel as if we are of little significance in our modern world. But we need to see ourselves as God sees us – we are the center of his attention. We are the means by which he is fulfilling his plan in this world. We should remember that God’s people have been a majority in this world only two times: just after creation and just after the flood.

Verses 1-2a

1 Now these were the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of those exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried captive to Babylonia. They returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town. 2a They came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, and Baanah.

The word “province” in verse 1 probably refers to Judah rather than to Babylon. Also, this list likely includes different groups that returned from Babylon at different times. That would help explain why Zerubbabel is listed here while Sheshbazzar is the leader in Chapter 1. We do not know what happened to Sheshbazzar or how soon Zerubbabel became the governor (Haggai 1:1).

That each returned to his own town emphasizes the continuity with the pre-exile community. The returning exiles were claiming their territorial inheritance and reaffirming their roots in and rights to the land.

Several of the leaders’ names in verse 2 are familiar. Jeshua was the high priest, and is referred to as Joshua in Haggai and Zechariah. (According to Haggai 1:1 he was the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, which would make him the grandson of Seraiah, the high priest before the exile in 2 Kings 25:18.)

Jeshua, the High Priest, and Zerubbabel, the grandson of a king, play a major role in the prophecies of Zechariah. So close was their partnership, that Zechariah used it as a foretaste of the perfect regime that was to come, when priesthood and royalty would be perfectly united in Jesus Christ—the man whose names is the Branch. And as the book of Hebrews tells us, that combination in a single person could happen only under a new covenant because kings came from the tribe of Judah while priests came from the tribe of Levi. So, to those today who believe that the old covenant was never intended to pass away, I would ask them to read Zechariah. Either the old covenant passed away or Zechariah’s prophecies failed – those are our only options.

The Nehemiah listed in verse 2 is not the Nehemiah who returned in 445 BC, and the Mordecai listed here is almost certainly not the Mordecai from the book of Esther. Seraiah was also the name of Ezra’s father (7:1), and Bigvai is a Persian name that also occurs in the Elephantine Papyri as the governor of Judah following Nehemiah.

But, again, considering the time and place, the most likely explanation is that we have different people with the same names.

There is a similar list of names in Nehemiah 7:7, but that list contains one additional name, Nahamani, which some suggest may have been lost in the process of copying. I tend to agree with that suggestion because with that additional name we have yet another indication of the continuity between the exiles and the pre-exile community in that with the addition of that name, the list includes 12 leaders.

Verses 2b-20

2b The number of the men of the people of Israel: 3 the sons of Parosh, 2,172. 4 The sons of Shephatiah, 372. 5 The sons of Arah, 775. 6 The sons of Pahath-moab, namely the sons of Jeshua and Joab, 2,812. 7 The sons of Elam, 1,254. 8 The sons of Zattu, 945. 9 The sons of Zaccai, 760. 10 The sons of Bani, 642. 11 The sons of Bebai, 623. 12 The sons of Azgad, 1,222. 13 The sons of Adonikam, 666. 14 The sons of Bigvai, 2,056. 15 The sons of Adin, 454. 16 The sons of Ater, namely of Hezekiah, 98. 17 The sons of Bezai, 323. 18 The sons of Jorah, 112. 19 The sons of Hashum, 223. 20 The sons of Gibbar, 95.

Verses 3-20 are the names of the clans that returned. The end of verse 2 describes them as the men of the people of Israel. The Bible usually reserves “Israel” for the entire nation of twelve tribes or for the Northern Kingdom that fell to Assyria. Why is “Israel” used here? It is used here as another indication that this group was the heir to God’s covenants to the nation as a whole.

“In a political world in which Israel as a power is no more than a memory, God is awakening something infinitely more significant, because it is spiritual.”

The names in this list are nearly identical to those in Nehemiah 7, but there is more variation in the numbers between the two lists. One commentator suggests this may be due to what he describes as “the notorious difficulty in copying Hebrew numbers.” Vertical strokes were used for units, horizontal strokes were used for tens, and the initial letter in the Hebrew word *meah* was used for hundreds. Single strokes could easily be overlooked or miscopied.

Several of these clan names occur elsewhere. Eleven of the names are also found in Ezra 8 among those who accompanied Ezra to Jerusalem. Fourteen are listed in Nehemiah 10 as signing the agreement of separation.

Since “Pahath-moab” in verse 6 literally means “governor of Moab,” he may have been a governor in Moab prior to the exile. (Compare 1 Chronicles 4:22.)

Lesson 3: Ezra 2:21 – 4:6

Why Study Ezra?

It is easy to become discouraged when we look at the sad state of many congregations of the Lord's church. Women are assuming leadership roles; musical instruments are entering the worship service; elders are disappearing; baptism is being watered down. But Ezra has a message for us, and it is message of purity, proper worship, continuity, and restoration. The message of Ezra is a message we need to hear. It is a message for the faithful remnant.

Verses 21-35

21 The sons of Bethlehem, 123. 22 The men of Netophah, 56. 23 The men of Anathoth, 128. 24 The sons of Azmaveth, 42. 25 The sons of Kiriath-arim, Chephirah, and Beeroth, 743. 26 The sons of Ramah and Geba, 621. 27 The men of Michmas, 122. 28 The men of Bethel and Ai, 223. 29 The sons of Nebo, 52. 30 The sons of Magbish, 156. 31 The sons of the other Elam, 1,254. 32 The sons of Harim, 320. 33 The sons of Lod, Hadid, and Ono, 725. 34 The sons of Jericho, 345. 35 The sons of Senaah, 3,630.

Verses 21-35 describe people by their geography as opposed to their clan, and we previously discussed some possible reasons for that distinction. Because Nehemiah's list has "Gibeon" in place of "Gibbar," in verse 20, some surmise that the geographical list actually begins in verse 20.

Some of the descriptions begin with "the *sons* of" while others begin with "the *men* of." The NIV obliterates this distinction, and, while it is true that the phrases appear to be synonymous here, it should make you wonder what else the NIV is obliterating. (If there is ambiguity in the original text, a good translation carries that ambiguity over into the English version—a bad translation does not.)

By listing people both by clan and by geographical location, God is confirming their connection to those who occupied the land prior to the exile. This was not just some new group with which God decided to start over, but rather this group was very closely connected to those who had been taken captive. These people were *returning* – and that word makes no sense unless they are connected to those who were taken away.

Verses 36-39

36 The priests: the sons of Jedaiah, of the house of Jeshua, 973. 37 The sons of Immer, 1,052. 38 The sons of Pashhur, 1,247. 39 The sons of Harim, 1,017.

Having listed the laymen, the author now lists the temple ministers in verses 36-58. The first four of these verses lists the priests, which appear to have made up about 10% of the returnees.

David had organized the priests into 24 family groups in 1 Chronicles 24, but only four of those 24 groups are represented here. These four groups are also the only ones listed several generations later when Ezra returned (Ezra 10:18-22).

Notice that the house of Jeshua is mentioned in verse 36. Some point to this verse as evidence that the author was getting these figures from a much later list (at which point Jeshua, they say, had 973 descendants). But all the verse says is that the *house* of Jeshua had 973 people; that is, it is the clan or family size rather than the number of descendants. Also, we could be seeing another Jeshua here; it was a very common name, and in fact we do see another Jeshua in the very next verse.

Verses 40-42

40 The Levites: the sons of Jeshua and Kadmiel, of the sons of Hodaviah, 74. 41 The singers: the sons of Asaph, 128. 42 The sons of the gatekeepers: the sons of Shallum, the sons of Ater, the sons of Talmon, the sons of Akkub, the sons of Hatita, and the sons of Shobai, in all 139.

Verses 40-42 list the Levites, the singers, and the gatekeepers. Each of these groups is listed to emphasize the continuity of those who returned with those who were carried away. Jeshua the Levite in verse 40 is not the same Jeshua from verse 2 who was the High Priest – again, it was a common name.

The Levites were members of the tribe of Levi who were not also descendants of Aaron. They were prohibited from offering sacrifices on the altar. Because they had no land inheritance, they lived in 48 Levitical cities and were supported by tithes. They were butchers, doorkeepers, singers, scribes, teachers, and sometimes even temple beggars.

The first thing we notice about the Levites listed here is that their number was small compared to the number of priests. Later, Ezra would have only 38 Levites travel back with him. (Ezra 8:15-20) This

may have been because the Levites would have had no inheritance to return to. (Although Ezra 7:24 tells us they were also exempt from taxes.) Other possibilities are that fewer Levites were deported because they were from the poorer class, or the Levites may have returned to secular occupations during the exile.

The extremely small number of Levites is very strong evidence *against* the common modernist view that the law was actually written or rewritten during this time, as opposed to during the time of Moses. In the law (Numbers 18:21, 26), it is assumed that the Levites would greatly outnumber the priests because, for example, the Levites received the tithes and passed only a tenth (a tithe of the tithe) to the priests. Plus, under the Law, the Levites lived in 48 Levitical cities—whereas here we hardly have 48 Levites! Had the law been rewritten during this time as some argue, it would never have reached us in the form that we now have it. “Nothing proves more clearly how mistaken is the view that in post-exilic times, the Torah was still being added to and revised.”

Nehemiah combines the singers with the Levites. According to 1 Chronicles 15:16-24, David had organized the singers into 24 groups to correspond to the 24 groups of priests. The work and the organization of the gatekeepers are described in 1 Chronicles 9:17-29.

Verses 43-54

43 The temple servants: the sons of Ziha, the sons of Hasupha, the sons of Tabbaath, 44 the sons of Keros, the sons of Siaha, the sons of Padon, 45 the sons of Lebanah, the sons of Hagabah, the sons of Akkub, 46 the sons of Hagab, the sons of Shamlai, the sons of Hanan, 47 the sons of Giddel, the sons of Gahar, the sons of Reaiah, 48 the sons of Rezin, the sons of Nekoda, the sons of Gazzam, 49 the sons of Uzza, the sons of Paseah, the sons of Besai, 50 the sons of Asnah, the sons of Meunim, the sons of Nephisim, 51 the sons of Bakbuk, the sons of Hakupha, the sons of Harhur, 52 the sons of Bazluth, the sons of Mehida, the sons of Harsha, 53 the sons of Barkos, the sons of Sisera, the sons of Temah, 54 the sons of Nezhiah, and the sons of Hatipha.

Verses 43-54 list the temple servants, which comes from a Hebrew word that literally means “the given” or “the dedicated ones.” Ezra 8:20 tells us that they attended the Levites, which most likely means they assisted the Levites in performing the more mundane duties.

The many foreign names in this list indicate that this group probably consisted of people of non-Israelite descent. Numbers 31:47 tells us that some war captives were given to serve the Levites. Ezekiel 44:6-9

tells us that Israel was not always careful about using foreigners as temple servants and may have even allowed them to serve as priests. Exodus 12:48 and Numbers 15:14-16 tell us that foreigners were welcome, but they had to follow the law. ("One law and one rule shall be for you and for the stranger who sojourns with you.")

Verses 55-58

55 The sons of Solomon's servants: the sons of Sotai, the sons of Hassophereth, the sons of Peruda, 56 the sons of Jaalah, the sons of Darkon, the sons of Giddel, 57 the sons of Shephatiah, the sons of Hattil, the sons of Pochereth-hazzebaim, and the sons of Ami. 58 All the temple servants and the sons of Solomon's servants were 392.

Verses 55-57 list the descendants of Solomon's servants. This group is closely related to the temple servants because they are both included in the single total given in verse 58. There were only 392 of these servants from all 45 of the families or clans, which means there were on average fewer than 9 per clan.

These servants of Solomon may have come from the native population that Solomon used for work on the temple. The name "Hassophereth" means "the scribe" and the name "Pochereth-hazzebaim" means "the gazelle keeper," and these may have been the names of guilds. If so, these servants may have been more involved with secular tasks than the temple servants. (But Ezra 7:24 seems to refer to this group as "other servants of this house of God," so we can't be certain about what they did.)

Verses 59-63

59 The following were those who came up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addan, and Immer, though they could not prove their fathers' houses or their descent, whether they belonged to Israel: 60 the sons of Delaiah, the sons of Tobiah, and the sons of Nekoda, 61 Also, of the sons of the priests: the sons of Habaiah, the sons of Hakkoz, and the sons of Barzillai (who had taken a wife from the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and was called by their name). 62 These sought their registration among those enrolled in the genealogies, but they were not found there, and so they were excluded from the priesthood as unclean. 63 The governor told them that they were not to partake of the most holy food, until there should be a priest to consult Urim and Thummim.

Verses 59-63 describe those who had lost their family records. The context here suggests that the towns in verse 59 are most likely the Babylonian towns from which these exiles had come. Apparently

some had lost their family records during the exile, or possibly some of these people were proselytes. Nehemiah 7:5 speaks of “the book of the genealogy,” and for whatever reason these people were not in it. They were not sent back, but were likely given the status of circumcised foreigners, at least temporarily.

The priests among this group were excluded from the priesthood as unclean. Numbers 16:40 warned that “no outsider, who is not of the descendants of Aaron, should draw near to burn incense before the Lord,” and so these men were excluded.

Interesting names in this entire list from Chapter 2 as to etymology include Hakupha in verse 51, which means “humpbacked,” Hagabah in verse 45, which means “locust,” Parosh in verse 3, which means “flea,” and Hassophereth in verse 55, which means “the woman scribe” (and there has to be an interesting story behind that one!).

Barzillai in verse 61 is also interesting, and is in fact unique in Scripture in having taken the name of his father-in-law. The elder Barzillai appears to be the same person in 2 Samuel 17:27 and 19:32 who helped David when he fled from Absalom. It is interesting that the priest who married his daughter took his name, and some surmise it was so he could inherit land (in violation of Numbers 18:20), which could explain the trouble his descendants were experiencing here.

The descendants of Hakkoz (in verse 61) were later reinstated if Meremoth, the priest in Ezra 8:33, is the same Meremoth described in Nehemiah 3:4 as the son of Hakkoz. The word “governor” in verse 63 is a Persian word and likely refers to Sheshbazzar.

The Urim and Thummin in verse 63 were sacred lots of some sort that were used to discern the will of God. The words Urim and Thummin are spelled with the first letter and the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The Septuagint translates them as “lights and perfections.” We see them elsewhere in Scripture:

- (1 Samuel 14:41) Therefore Saul said, “O Lord God of Israel, why have you not answered your servant this day? If this guilt is in me or in Jonathan my son, O Lord, God of Israel, give Urim. But if this guilt is in your people Israel, give Thummim.”
- (Numbers 27:21) And he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the Lord.

- (Exodus 28:30) And in the breastpiece of judgment you shall put the Urim and the Thummim, and they shall be on Aaron's heart, when he goes in before the Lord.

Apparently they were small objects carried by the High Priest in his garments and used to answer questions that required a yes or no response. Such also occurred in the New Testament in Acts 1:26 when Matthias was chosen over Justus by the casting of lots. Josephus says that the Urim and Thummin provided answers by a miraculous shining of the jewels on the High Priest's breastplate.

The phrase "until there should be a priest" in verse 63 could refer to the unavailability of a priest qualified to use the Urim and Thummin.

Verses 64-70

64 The whole assembly together was 42,360, 65 besides their male and female servants, of whom there were 7,337, and they had 200 male and female singers. 66 Their horses were 736, their mules were 245, 67 their camels were 435, and their donkeys were 6,720. 68 Some of the heads of families, when they came to the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem, made freewill offerings for the house of God, to erect it on its site. 69 According to their ability they gave to the treasury of the work 61,000 darics of gold, 5,000 minas of silver, and 100 priests' garments. 70 Now the priests, the Levites, some of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants lived in their towns, and all the rest of Israel in their towns.

The numbers in the list add up to 29,818, which is 12,542 fewer than the total of 42,360 given in verse 64. Nehemiah 7 provides that same total, although the sum in his list is 31,089 (which is 11,271 fewer). As we discussed, the differences in the individual numbers might be explainable as rounding or copyist errors, but what about the larger total? Some suggest it included the women (but that would be a surprisingly small number of women), while others suggest it includes families from tribes other than Judah and Benjamin. Most likely, some families were simply omitted from the itemized list, but were included in the total (which we also saw with the temple items).

Why are we told in verses 65-66 about how many servants and horses and donkeys they had? That information tells us about the economic condition of the people, and it indicates there were some wealthy people among them. The very large number of slaves (about one to every six freeman) combined with the gold and silver in verse 69 points to great wealth by some, but not by all. The rich had horses

while the poor had donkeys, and the donkeys outnumber the horses 9 to 1.

When Haggai prophesied about 20 years later, the economic situation appears to have worsened considerably. A run of bad harvests and high prices combined with enemy intervention had left them with nothing but their expensive paneled homes to remind them of their former prosperity—and to remind them of their neglect of God's house. (Haggai 1:4)

Verse 63 provides a hint of what was to come when it says that "some of the heads of families ... made freewill offerings." Some gave, but others it appears did not. Haggai 1:7-11 links the worsened economic condition to the people's neglect of the temple: it was "because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house." (Haggai 1:9)

This entire chapter is a prelude to the great events of rebuilding the temple and restoring proper worship that were to come. It was a great joy for these people to be involved in the plan of God, as we see in Psalm 126 (which many think refers to this period of time):

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then they said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them." The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad. Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negeb! Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy! He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.

Ezra 3

Verse 1

1 When the seventh month came, and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem.

The events in the first six verses of Chapter 3 appear to have taken place in 538, the same year that Cyrus issued his decree and the Jews first returned under Sheshbazzar. The seventh month was Tishri (September–October). It was also in the seventh month that

Solomon gathered the people together to dedicate the first temple (1 Kings 8:2).

The seventh month was the most important month in the Jewish calendar. On the first day they would have celebrated the New Year and the Feast of Trumpets. On the tenth day was the Day of Atonement. From the fifteenth until the twenty-first day they would have celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles.

Verse 1 tells us that the people gathered “as one man.” They had a common bond and a common purpose, and they understood that a united worship was vital in dealing with dangers from outside. I’m sure I don’t need to point out the lessons for us in that description.

Verse 2

2 Then arose Jeshua the son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel with his kinsmen, and they built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God.

Two major leaders stand out in the first half of Ezra, and we see them both (again) in verse 2: Jeshua and Zerubbabel. Jeshua was the High Priest as well as the grandson of the High Priest prior to the exile, and Zerubbabel was the grandson of Jehoiachin, the King prior to the exile.

Verse 2 says that Zerubbabel was the son of Shealtiel, King Jehoiachin’s eldest son, but 1 Chronicles 3:19 lists him as the son of Pedaiah, another son of Jehoiachin. Why the difference? The most likely explanation was that there was a levirate marriage (Deut. 25:5-10) between Pedaiah and the widow of Shealtiel. (A Levirate marriage is a type of marriage in which the brother of a deceased man is obligated to marry his brother’s widow.)

Again, we wonder what happened to Sheshbazzar, the leader of the people on their return in Chapter 1? As we discussed earlier, some surmise that Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel are two names for the same person. Others suggest that Zerubbabel may have been a subordinate leader under Sheshbazzar. Meyers suggests that Sheshbazzar may have been an elderly figurehead, with Zerubbabel being in charge of the day-to-day affairs. In 5:16, we will be told that “Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God that is in Jerusalem.”

Many times the hardest part of a project is just getting it started. Someone needs to step up and take the initiative, and that is why

having good leadership is so important. Zerubbabel and Jeshua got things moving, and, as we discussed, their combined leadership as Priest and King was so effective that Zechariah used it to describe the perfect King and High Priest who was to come.

The first thing the people did was build an altar. David had also built an altar before there was a temple (2 Samuel 24:25). Ezra 4:2 and Jeremiah 41:5 indicate that there may have already been an altar there, which the Jews would have then taken down in order to put up their own. If so, that may explain some of the hostility that we are about to see. But hostile or not, the people were right to take down the defiled altar and build a new one “as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God.” A central theme of this book is that man must worship God as God desires (rather than as man desires), and we see that happening here in verse 2.

Verses 3-6

3 They set the altar in its place, for fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands, and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening. 4 And they kept the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the rule, as each day required, 5 and after that the regular burnt offerings, the offerings at the new moon and at all the appointed feasts of the LORD, and the offerings of everyone who made a freewill offering to the LORD. 6 From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD. But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid.

Verse 3 tells us that “fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands.” Yes, they were afraid, and they had reason to be. They were in a strange place surrounded by hostile people. Courage is not the lack of fear; courage is the will to act in spite of fear. And these people were courageous with a courage that came from their reliance on God.

Their example is an example for us. No matter who or what surrounds us, God’s people should never be a timid people. I am sometimes reminded of one of my favorite G.K. Chesterton quotes: “We are on the road to producing a race of man too mentally modest to believe in the multiplication table.” And, of course, remember what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 16:13 – “Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong.”

The “peoples of the lands” likely included the surrounding peoples (Ashdod, Samaria, Ammon, Moab, and Edom), those of foreign

descent now living in Judah, and Jews who had remained behind and who had not maintained their faith but rather had compromised with the world. Also, included were those mentioned in 4:2 who had been settled there by the Assyrians. Each of these groups would have been hostile to what was now taking place. In fact, Ezra has much to say about how we should live in a hostile environment. (If we don't find the world a hostile place, then perhaps we are too much like the world. We are told to expect persecution if we lead a Godly life. 1 Timothy 3:12)

As we see so often in the Old Testament, building an altar was a significant act that often marked a renewed dedication to following God. Verse 3 tells us that they set the altar in its place – which means they put in the same position it occupied prior to the exile.

We also see that the daily sacrifices were restored. And how did they know what to do. They did “as it is written,” and they did “according to the rule.” Turning back to God’s word is the only possible path to restoration of proper worship and service to God.

Notice how careful they were to follow every detail. They set in the altar *in its place*. They performed the sacrifices *by number according to the rule*. There is a lesson there for us. Details are important, and we neglect them at our peril. If we don't care about the “little” things, then that apathy very soon carries over to the “big” things—which perhaps should tell us that those “little” things are not really that little! When it comes to making sure our worship is pleasing to God, there are no little matters. God cares about the details, and so must we.

The Feast of Tabernacles or Feast of Booths in the fall was one the three most important Jewish celebrations, with the other two being Passover in the spring and Pentecost in the summer. During that feast, the people lived for seven days in booths or tents to remind them of God’s protection of their ancestors in the wilderness – although they had just experienced such protection themselves as they traveled back from Babylon. It will be at this same feast that Ezra will read the law to the people much later in Nehemiah 8:14-18.

The heart that loves God desires to worship him in a way that pleases him, and these people had that heart. We see that heart in the freewill offerings that were brought in verse 5.

The point of verse 6 is that even though the sacrificial system had been reinstituted, there was much that remained to be done. A

partial restoration is not a restoration at all; it is more of a reformation. And while a reformation may accomplish some needed reforms, those reforms are not enough unless they proceed toward a complete restoration of proper worship. Ezra is not describing a *reformation* movement; Ezra is describing a *restoration* movement. There is a huge difference between the two.

Verse 7

7 So they gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and the Tyrians to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the grant that they had from Cyrus king of Persia.

Verse 7 is one of the most important verses in Ezra, which might seem like an odd statement when you read verse 7. But verse 7 tells us something very important about this group of former exiles – they sincerely wanted to give God their very best.

Even though their group was small and relatively poor, they set very high standards when it came to doing God's work. They hired talented masons and carpenters, and they ordered the finest materials. In short, they were not wallowing in mediocrity, which I fear is becoming increasingly common in our modern world when it comes to doing God's work.

These people were a focused people and a dedicated people; they were not a laid-back people or a casual people when it came to doing God's work. Their desire was to give God their very best in everything they did. Is that our desire also? Or do we perhaps have another agenda? There is an easy test – we just need to ask ourselves, “is this the best we can do?” If the answer is consistently “No, not by a long shot” or “I hope not,” then it would seem we must have other priorities. Giving God your best does not happen by accident, but rather it must be your driving goal – or it won't happen. Again, their example is an example for us.

Solomon had also used cedar trees from Lebanon in constructing the first temple, but he had paid for that timber himself. Here the timber was paid for by the grant from Cyrus. God's people had fallen from their former glory because of their disobedience.

What we see in verse 7 is a beautiful parallel link, not only with the first temple, but also with the church that was to come. Isaiah 60:11-13 describes the church in similar terms:

Your gates shall be open continually; day and night they shall not be shut, **that people may bring to you the wealth of the nations**, with their kings led in procession. ... **The glory of Lebanon shall come to you**, the cypress, the plane, and the pine, to beautify the place of my sanctuary, and I will make the place of my feet glorious.

Verses 8-9

8 Now in the second year after their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak made a beginning, together with the rest of their kinsmen, the priests and the Levites and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity. They appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to supervise the work of the house of the LORD. 9 And Jeshua with his sons and his brothers, and Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, together supervised the workmen in the house of God, along with the sons of Henadad and the Levites, their sons and brothers.

We are now in the second month of the second year, and verse 8 tells us that Zerubbabel and Jeshua “made a beginning.”

Solomon also began building his temple in the second month (1 Kings 6:1). This was the month after Passover, or April-May on our calendar, and it was the beginning of the dry season, which made it the ideal time to start building. Even so, as will see, they did little more than repair the foundation until nearly 20 years later during the time of Haggai and Zechariah in 520 BC, at which time they made another beginning (5:2).

What caused the delay? Maybe we can blame it on the Levites. Verses 8-9 tell us that Zerubbabel and Jeshua delegated the work to them. Maybe the Levites dropped the ball. The job was delegated to them, and nothing happened for 20 years. (I could insert a “deacon” joke here!) We will see what actually happened when we get to Chapter 4.

Verses 10-13

10 And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the directions of David king of Israel. 11 And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, “For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.” And all the people shouted

with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. 12 But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, 13 so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.

Verses 10-13 show the reaction of the people when the new foundation was laid – they praised God, they sang, they gave thanks, they shouted, and they wept.

Verse 11 quotes Psalm 100:5 – “For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.” Jeremiah prophesied about this very event in Jeremiah 33:10-11.

Thus says the Lord: In this place of which you say, ‘It is a waste without man or beast,’ in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without man or inhabitant or beast, there shall be heard again 11 the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the Lord: “Give thanks to the Lord of hosts, for the Lord is good, for his steadfast love endures forever!” For I will restore the fortunes of the land as at first, says the Lord.”

Their hearts were full of praise and thanksgiving even though construction had just started. “True faith praises God even before the answer has materialized.”

Verses 12-13 are touching. The older priests, Levites, and family heads who remembered Solomon’s temple (“the first house”) wept, presumably because of the difference between that grand edifice and the much simpler version that would now be constructed. They likely had feelings both of longing and regret. Haggai and Zechariah preached about this same sorrowful attitude:

- (Haggai 2:3) Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes?

- (Zechariah 4:10) For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice, and shall see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel.

Yes, there was sadness, but joy was mixed in with that sadness. Verse 13 says that “the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.” Who do you think was listening to all of that joyful shouting? The next verse tells us.

Ezra 4

From Ezra 4 until the end of Nehemiah there is nothing but conflict.

We might hope that we can avoid conflict in the service of God, but, if we did, we would be the first. From this point on, nothing that these people attempted to do for God would go unchallenged, and the same occurs today. Many just do nothing in an attempt to avoid conflict (and we will see that same attitude in Ezra), but all that strategy does is create conflict with God. **We cannot avoid conflict, and no one who makes that his driving goal does very much in the service of God.**

Verses 1-3

1 Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the LORD, the God of Israel, 2 they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers' houses and said to them, “Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria who brought us here.” 3 But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of fathers' houses in Israel said to them, “You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the LORD, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us.”

The adversaries in verse 1 are the same peoples we encountered in 3:3. Those from Samaria would have included people brought by the Assyrians from elsewhere in their empire. We know that Sargon II of Assyria repopulated the Northern Kingdom, and Esarhaddon in verse 2 must have continued that same policy, including moving some into Syria-Palestine. A further resettlement by Ashurbanipal is mentioned in 4:10.

As we discussed, one of the themes of Ezra is the importance of maintaining purity, and we find that theme here. These neighbors (already called adversaries) approach the Israelites and tell them, “Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do.” How often today do we hear that same ecumenical plea!

And how did the Jews respond? “Sure! Come on in! Let’s all just agree to disagree! Grab a guitar and we can all sing Kum Ba Yah! Let’s celebrate Jesus together!” No, that is not what they said at all. What they said in verse 3 was, “You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the LORD, the God of Israel.” They knew very well that these people, despite their claims, did not worship God as the Jews did. How did they know that? They had eyes! They could read God’s word, and they could observe how their neighbors worshiped – and *what* they worshipped. 2 Kings 17:33-41 tell us how they worshipped—yes, they feared God, but they also “did according to their former manner” and “served their carved images.” And that is not something God wanted his people to “agree to disagree” about!

They took the hard way. The easy way would have been to accept them and their false worship. Who knows? That might have ended the adversity with their neighbors—but it would have created adversity with God. In fact, that hard stand almost certainly *increased* the adversity with the surrounding peoples, but there was no other place for God’s people to stand. It may have been a hard way, but for God’s people it was an easy decision.

Verses 4-5

4 Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build 5 and bribed counselors against them to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.

Now the knives have come out and the opposition begins in earnest. In just a moment, Ezra will look back over the history from his time to this time and illustrate other examples of opposition that occurred during that about 80 year timeframe.

The counselors in verse 5 were likely Persian officials bribed to obstruct the building in every possible way. The phrase “frustrate their purpose” literally means “making weak the hands.” This pressure against the Jews would continue for about 16 years (until 520 BC), and as verse 24 will show us, it was wholly effective, at least at first.

The mention of Darius in verse 5 and again in verse 24 marks the intervening verses as an excursus. The author does not return to the opposition of verses 4-5 until Chapter 5. The remaining verses in Chapter 4 discuss later oppositions to the building of the walls under the reign of Ahasuerus (Xerxes I) and the reign of Artaxerxes I.

How do we know this? For starters, the text mentions those two kings: Ahasuerus in verse 6 and Artaxerxes in verse 7. As noted on the handout for Lesson 1, some argue that verse 6 really refers to Cambyses II and verse 7 really refers to Smerdis (the person under Darius' foot in the Behistun Inscription on the Lesson 3 handout). Josephus rearranged the account, placing Cambyses before Xerxes and replacing Xerxes with Artaxerxes. But none of that makes much sense to me. Rather, it seems clear that the author is simply jumping ahead a bit in the chronology to make his point.

And what was that point? Ezra had just shown how the Jews rejected the offer for help from their neighbors. In the remainder of Chapter 4 he provides further justification for that decision.

“Without a foretaste of history to reveal the full seriousness of the opposition, we would not properly appreciate the achievements recorded in the next two chapters nor the dangers hidden in the mixed marriages that Ezra would set himself to stamp out.”

Verse 6

6 And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.

Ahasuerus (or Xerxes I) was the Persian who reigned from 486 until 465, following the reign of Darius I. Ahasuerus was also the husband of Queen Esther. All verse 6 tells us is that the opposition and letter writing continued through the reign of this king. Most likely they simply received no response, or at least no action, to this letter.

Ahasuerus is the Hebrew form of the Persian name Khshayarsha, for which the Greek form is Xerxes. While the Hebrews would carefully match letter for letter in coming up with the Hebrew version of a Persian name, the Greeks followed a different procedure. When Greeks couldn't pronounce a foreign name, they just came up with a new name that was more Greek sounding. By that process, perhaps I should just start referring to Ashurbanipal as Bob!

Lesson 4: Ezra 4:7 – 6:22

Verse 7 is part of a parenthetical section that began in verse 6 and that will continue through verse 23. The mentions of Darius in verse 5 and in verse 24 mark the boundaries of the excursion. As we discussed, the reason for this brief look at the intervening history between the days of Zerubbabel and the days of Ezra is so that the reader will understand the depth of animosity that was directed to the Jews by their neighbors.

Verses 7-8

7 In the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam and Mithredath and Tabeel and the rest of their associates wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia. The letter was written in Aramaic and translated. 8 Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king as follows:

Artaxerxes was the Persian king who followed Xerxes I and reigned from 464 until 424. He became king by murdering his older brother. It was during his reign that Ezra returned in 458 and Nehemiah returned in 445. Again, we are told that the opposition continued into this king's reign, but here we are given more detail, including a copy of an actual letter sent to the king by the opponents.

A major concern during the first half of Artaxerxes' reign was the Egyptian revolt that began in 460 and that was supported by the Greeks. That revolt in nearby Egypt would have caused the king to listen very seriously to these charges of sedition in Palestine.

In Chapter 2 we saw the wall of honor. Here we see a wall of dishonor, as the Bible records the names of the opponents: Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, Rehum, and Shimshai.

From verse 8 until 6:18, the text is in Aramaic. Why the switch? Most likely it was because Ezra's source documents, the letters and the replies, were written in Aramaic. Since the Jews became bilingual during the exile, Ezra simply also recorded his comments on the letters in Aramaic to avoid switching back and forth.

Verses 9-10

9 Rehum the commander, Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their associates, the judges, the governors, the officials, the Persians, the men of Erech, the Babylonians, the men of Susa, that is, the Elamites, 10 and the rest of the nations whom the

great and noble Osnappar deported and settled in the cities of Samaria and in the rest of the province Beyond the River.

Verses 9-10 probably came from the official summary of the letter that would have been located on the outside of the papyrus scroll.

The “noble Osnappar” in verse 10 is King Ashurbanipal, who ruled Assyria from 669 until 633. We don’t have any other record of his settling other people in Israel, but we know it was the Assyrian custom to do so.

Verses 11-16

11 (This is a copy of the letter that they sent.) “To Artaxerxes the king: Your servants, the men of the province Beyond the River, send greeting. And now 12 be it known to the king that the Jews who came up from you to us have gone to Jerusalem. They are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city. They are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations. 13 Now be it known to the king that if this city is rebuilt and the walls finished, they will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and the royal revenue will be impaired. 14 Now because we eat the salt of the palace and it is not fitting for us to witness the king’s dishonor, therefore we send and inform the king, 15 in order that search may be made in the book of the records of your fathers. You will find in the book of the records and learn that this city is a rebellious city, hurtful to kings and provinces, and that sedition was stirred up in it from of old. That was why this city was laid waste. 16 We make known to the king that if this city is rebuilt and its walls finished, you will then have no possession in the province Beyond the River.”

The text of the letter appears in verses 11-16. At this point, we should probably pause and consider an important reminder about inspiration. Yes, the Bible is the inspired word of God, but not every statement in the Bible is true. For example, the statement by Satan to Eve in Genesis 3:4 (“You will not surely die”) was not a true statement. (It directly contradicted what God said in Genesis 2:17.) While inspiration tells us that Satan made that statement in Genesis 3:4, the statement itself is false. Likewise here, inspiration tells us that these verses accurately record the contents of this letter, but as for the statements in the letter, we know that it contains false accusations and false statements. (For starts, King Ashurbanipal in verse 10 was neither great nor noble.) The contents of this letter are not inspired statements from God. All that inspiration tells us about this letter is that Ezra accurately reported it (just as Moses accurately recorded the words of Satan in Genesis 3). “The whole letter is inflammatory and a gross exaggeration and cannot be used to

determine Jewish activity other than the fact that some building was underway.” (This error is quite common. Many people, for example, pull verses out of Job to prove various points without remembering what God said about many of those verses in Job 42:7 – “My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.”) We need to keep this point in mind as we read the letters in these chapters.

The phrase “from you” in verse 12 suggests that the Jews under discussion here were the ones who first came from the king himself, which would be Ezra’s group who returned in 458. (Since Nehemiah had a specific mandate to rebuild the city, it could not refer to his group.) In Nehemiah 1:3, Nehemiah received news that the wall was broken down and the gates burned. That may have been the wall started here, and its destruction may have been the result of Artaxerxes’ reply in verses 18-22.

The foundations in verse 12 are not the foundations of the temple. By the reign of Artaxerxes, the new temple had been standing for half a century. Instead, verse 12 is talking about the foundations of the city.

Three different words for taxes are used in verse 13. (Some things never change!) They refer to a monetary tax, a payment in kind (oil, grain, etc.), and a duty tax. After his costly campaign against the Greeks, Artaxerxes could not afford to overlook any revenue. The opposition played on the king’s fears that he might lose revenue or perhaps even lose the whole western province (verse 16). Of course, there is no mention of their true motives, which were *not* to help the king collect taxes or keep his kingdom intact!

The phrase “we are under obligation to the palace” in verse 14 is literally “we have eaten the salt of the palace,” which is how the ESV renders it. Salt was often used to seal covenants, and thus came to symbolize loyalty. “Eating the salt of” was an idiom for “being in the service of” or “receiving a salary from.” Our word “salary” comes from the Latin *salarium*, which means “salt money.”

The Persian kings considered themselves the successors of the Babylonian kings, which is why the Babylonian kings are referred to as their fathers or predecessors in verse 15.

Verses 17-22

17 The king sent an answer: “To Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe and the rest of their associates who live in Samaria and in the rest of the province Beyond the River, greeting. And now 18 the letter that you sent to us has been

plainly read before me. 19 And I made a decree, and search has been made, and it has been found that this city from of old has risen against kings, and that rebellion and sedition have been made in it. 20 And mighty kings have been over Jerusalem, who ruled over the whole province Beyond the River, to whom tribute, custom, and toll were paid. 21 Therefore make a decree that these men be made to cease, and that this city be not rebuilt, until a decree is made by me. 22 And take care not to be slack in this matter. Why should damage grow to the hurt of the king?"

Verses 17-22 give us the king's reply to the letter in verses 11-16. He apparently believes the threats against his reign are genuine, and he orders that the rebuilding be stopped. (Letters took about a week to travel back and forth between Samaria and Persia.)

This order raises the question of contradictory orders—how could this be the same king who later sends Nehemiah back to rebuild the walls. The answer is in verse 21—the king said that the city would not be rebuilt “until a decree is made by me.” “Without that providential addition, Nehemiah would have had a difficult time gaining the king's approval for his plans to rebuild.” Esther 8:8 and Daniel 6:8 tell us that “an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked.” The situation that moved Nehemiah to pray and act may have been the events described here.

Verse 23

23 Then, when the copy of King Artaxerxes' letter was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their associates, they went in haste to the Jews at Jerusalem and by force and power made them cease.

In verse 22, the king ordered the Jewish adversaries “take care not to be slack in this matter” of stopping the rebuilding. That is one order he certainly did not need to worry about being followed! Verse 23 tells us that they showed no slackness at all in obeying the king's command—they went in haste to do so. (But isn't that always the way with troublemakers!)

By force and power they caused the rebuilding to end. They likely also destroyed the work that had already been done, which may be the destruction reported in Nehemiah 1:3—“the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates have been burned with fire.” Notice that the king had told them only to halt the rebuilding—he had not given them permission to destroy what had already been rebuilt.

Verse 24

24 Then the work on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped, and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

The word “then” at the beginning of verse 24 sounds as if this verse is describing what happened after verse 23, but that can’t be the case since Darius in verse 24 reigned *before* Artaxerxes. Instead, as we discussed earlier, verses 6-23 should have parenthesis or brackets around them. That parenthetical statement was inserted to show the real attitude of those who offered their help in verse 2 and to show the depth of their adversity against the Jews. Verse 24 is picking up from verse 5 (which also mentions Darius).

Thus, the work that started under King Cyrus has now ceased due to the opposition of the Jews’ neighbors. That work would remain halted through the remainder of Cyrus’ reign and through the reigns of Cambyses II and Smerdis. It would not begin again until the second year of Darius the Great’s reign, which would be in 520—the same year that Haggai and Zechariah began to preach about the people’s neglect of the temple project. It would be completed five year later in 515.

Ezra 5

Verses 1-2

1 Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them. 2 Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and the prophets of God were with them, supporting them.

There is a jump in time between Ezra 4 and Ezra 5. Work on the temple had been stopped for about 16 years. How do we know that? We get the dates for these events, not from verses 1-2, but from the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah. Haggai 1:1, for example, begins with a specific date: “In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, in the first day of the month.” The second year of Darius the king is 520 BC.

It seems that the people had used the opposition as an excuse to do nothing for God’s house, and instead had turned their focus to their own houses. They had given in to the fear we saw in 3:3 and to the

discouragement we saw in 4:4-5. We find from Haggai and Zechariah that they had set aside spiritual concerns in favor of physical concerns. (This is just another example of the timeless messages of the Old Testament prophets. Yes, the prophets spoke to a specific people about specific problems, but their messages are as relevant today as they were when they were delivered.)

What was the cure for that fear? What was the cure for that discouragement? Simple – the bold proclamation of the word of God. Haggai and Zechariah declared God’s word to the people, and, as we will see, it awoke them from their stupor. If we face fear and discouragement today, the solution is the same – the bold proclamation of God’s word.

Zerubbabel and Jeshua in verse 2 are the same two leaders we have seen before. They are mentioned many times in Haggai and Zechariah, and, as we have discussed, Zechariah used them as a figure of the perfect priest/king who was to come.

Haggai and Zechariah show that Zerubbabel was an important leader and refer to him as “governor of Judah.” Thus, it seems strange that he disappears from Ezra’s narrative and is not even mentioned in Ezra’s description of the completion of the temple. Some have conjectured that Zerubbabel was involved in a rebellion and was removed by the Persians. Some even suggest that Zechariah’s prophecies about the coming priest-king may have caused some to push him forward as the messiah in such a rebellion. But that is all just conjecture, and neither Haggai nor Zechariah speaks against the Persian government. A more likely answer is that Zerubbabel died before the temple was completed, but we don’t know for sure.

Verses 3-5

3 At the same time Tattenai the governor of the province Beyond the River and Shethar-bozenai and their associates came to them and spoke to them thus: “Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?” 4 They also asked them this: “What are the names of the men who are building this building?” 5 But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until the report should reach Darius and then an answer be returned by letter concerning it.

The first two years of Darius’ reign were stormy ones due to numerous revolts. Thus, it is natural that the authorities in the area would arrive to question the Jews about their building project and report their findings back to the king. Although their questions were

logical (what are your names, and who gave you permission to do this?), their awareness of the project probably came from a report by the Jews' troublemaking neighbors.

The "eye of their God" refers to God's providential care over his people. He knew what was happening, and he cared about what was happening. Persian kings had spies who were called the King's Eye or the King's Ear. God's system of intelligence was much more efficient than Darius' system! God's network was omniscient, and the same is true today. God knows what is happening to his people.

The whole transaction of sending the report to Darius, searching the records, and sending back a reply would have taken four or five months. The governor could have easily stopped the work, but he did not. Why? Verse 5 tells us – it was the providence of God.

And how did the people respond? They continued to work even though they must have known that it all might be torn down again. They had faith that God would continue to open doors for them, and unlike the previous 16 year period of idleness, they now had Haggai and Zechariah to stir them up and move them forward. God opened a door for them, and they walked through it – yet another lesson for us!

Verses 6-10

6 This is a copy of the letter that Tattenai the governor of the province Beyond the River and Shethar-bozenai and his associates, the governors who were in the province Beyond the River, sent to Darius the king. 7 They sent him a report, in which was written as follows: "To Darius the king, all peace. 8 Be it known to the king that we went to the province of Judah, to the house of the great God. It is being built with huge stones, and timber is laid in the walls. This work goes on diligently and prospers in their hands. 9 Then we asked those elders and spoke to them thus: 'Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?' 10 We also asked them their names, for your information, that we might write down the names of their leaders.

Verses 6-10 contain the first part of the letter that the governor sent to Darius. What we find here is a report that is well organized and official – a remarkable historical document even apart from its religious significance. It presents (1) an account of their inspection of the work, (2) a record of the questions they asked the Jews, (3) a lengthy account of the Jews' answer (in verses 11-16), and (4) a request that Darius check the records concerning Cyrus' decree (verse 17).

To some it seems odd that the Persian officials would use the phrase “the great God” in verse 8. But we have already seen that the Persians liked to use the religious language of their subject peoples. Also, the phrase can be translated “the great house of God.”

The “huge stones” in verse 8 might be translated as “smooth stones” or “polished stones,” although they may also been huge. There was something about the seriousness of this project that aroused the Persian’s suspicions, and it may have been the size of the foundation stones.

As we have said, the questions (repeated in verses 9-10) were legitimate questions, and apparently the Jews were courteous in their responses. In fact, their response, which we will see next, may have played a role in the governor’s positive attitude toward them. Yes, it was the providence of God, but yes – God helps those who help themselves.

Verses 11-17

11 And this was their reply to us: ‘We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the house that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished. 12 But because our fathers had angered the God of heaven, he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house and carried away the people to Babylonia. 13 However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, Cyrus the king made a decree that this house of God should be rebuilt. 14 And the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple that was in Jerusalem and brought into the temple of Babylon, these Cyrus the king took out of the temple of Babylon, and they were delivered to one whose name was Sheshbazzar, whom he had made governor; 15 and he said to him, “Take these vessels, go and put them in the temple that is in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be rebuilt on its site.” 16 Then this Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and from that time until now it has been in building, and it is not yet finished.’ 17 Therefore, if it seems good to the king, let search be made in the royal archives there in Babylon, to see whether a decree was issued by Cyrus the king for the rebuilding of this house of God in Jerusalem. And let the king send us his pleasure in this matter.”

Verses 11-17 contain a record of the Jews’ answer to the questions posed by the Persian governor, and the first thing we note is that Jews knew their own history, and they understood their own role in that history. Starting with the construction of the temple by Solomon,

they described how it was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar and ordered rebuilt by Cyrus.

Usually Cyrus is called the king of Persia, but in verse 13 he is called the king of Babylon. Archeologists have found ancient inscriptions that also refer to Cyrus as the king of Babylon, and that title makes more sense in this context. The Jewish history with Cyrus begins with his victory over Babylon. It was during his first year as King of Babylon (not his first year as King of Persia) when this decree was made.

This decree was the Jews' best argument. They had legal backing for what they were doing, and that legal backing gave them certain rights under the Persian system. And they had a special legal backing – Cyrus was still honored as the great founder of the Persian Empire. In fact, history tells us that Darius made efforts to follow the policies of Cyrus.

In verse 14, Sheshbazzar is called the governor, and we have discussed him in our earlier lessons, and particularly the confusion regarding his relation to Zerubbabel, another governor. Part of that confusion comes from verse 16, which says that Sheshbazzar laid the foundations of the house of God. Ezra 3:10 suggests that the foundations were laid under Zerubbabel. What is the answer?

First, and this is a subtle point, Ezra 5:14 is a record of what the Persians told the king they had been told by the Jews. Were the Jews speaking by inspiration when they answered the Persians? There is no indication they were. Were the Persians inspired when they wrote the letter to the king? There is no reason to believe they were. Thus, the Jews could have been mistaken in their answer, or the Persians could have mistakenly recorded that answer. All we know from inspiration is that we have a true record of the letter they sent the king. Do I think the statement in verse 16 is mistaken? No. But could it be mistaken? Yes – inspiration tells us that the Persian governor wrote it, and inspiration tells us that we have an accurate record of what he wrote, but it does not tell us that what the Persian governor wrote was correct.

So how could Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel both lay the foundation? Some surmise that one started, while the other finished. Others suggest that one laid a foundation, but it had to be re-laid when the work was begun again under another. Others note that Sheshbazzar is credited in this Persian context, whereas Zerubbabel is credited in the earlier Jewish context. This suggests the possibility

that Sheshbazzar was a Persian leader, perhaps a Babylonian governor that Cyrus left in charge. (Ezra 1:8 does refer to him as the “prince of Judah,” which many take to mean that he was Jewish, and possibly from the royal line, but others argue that the word “prince” in that verse could have been used as a synonym for “governor.”)

Verse 17 requests that a search be made for this decree. Apparently the Jews did not possess a copy or they would have just shown it to the governor.

Ezra 6

Verse 1

1 Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in Babylonia, in the house of the archives where the documents were stored.

King Darius takes notice of the letter and does what the letter suggested. He orders a search for the decree. No doubt the rebellions early in his reign made him particularly sensitive to issues such as this. Archaeologists have found rooms that were used to store documents and that were linked to royal treasuries.

Verse 2a

2 And in Ecbatana, the capital that is in the province of Media, a scroll was found on which this was written:

Verse 2 includes two details that are very interesting historically. First, the decree was found on a scroll, and second, the decree was located not in Babylon but in Ecbatana (ehk-BAT-uh-nuh).

Because thousands of clay tablets from this time have been found, we generally assume that all writing was done on such tablets. But sources other than the Bible speak of the “royal parchments” on which the Persians kept records.

As for Ecbatana, it was the location of the king’s summer palace because of its high elevation and comfortable climate. Cyrus lived in Babylon during the winter, in Susa during the spring, and in Ecbatana during the summer.

Verses 2b-5

2b “A record. 3 In the first year of Cyrus the king, Cyrus the king issued a decree: Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the house be rebuilt, the place where sacrifices

were offered, and let its foundations be retained. Its height shall be sixty cubits and its breadth sixty cubits, 4 with three layers of great stones and one layer of timber. Let the cost be paid from the royal treasury. 5 And also let the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple that is in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be restored and brought back to the temple that is in Jerusalem, each to its place. You shall put them in the house of God."

Verses 3-5 provide a record of Cyrus' decree, and the first thing we notice is that it is different from the decree we saw in Chapter 1. As we discussed in that lesson, this version of the decree appears to have been a memorandum to the royal treasurer regarding the expenses for the rebuilding of the temple. It was possibly a longer document with only the relevant portion being reproduced here. The version of the decree in Ezra 1 was a public announcement.

Verse 3 says "its height shall be sixty cubits and its breadth sixty cubits." Some point out that such a temple could not have been built in the place of the original temple because the original temple was sixty cubits by 20 cubits (1 Kings 6:2). What is the explanation? First (and once again), inspiration tells us that this is what Cyrus wrote to his treasurer; it does not vouch for the veracity of what Cyrus wrote. Second (and also once again), Hebrew numbers were difficult to copy, and thus we may have simply had a scribal error here.

It is remarkable that Cyrus' decree in verse 5 regarding the gold and silver items agrees so well with what the Jews told the Persian official in 5:14-15. As one commentator noted, it certainly lends credence to the integrity of their report. Jeremiah had prophesied that these items would be carried off to Babylon and later returned. (Jeremiah 27:21-22)

Verses 6-7

6 "Now therefore, Tattenai, governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and your associates the governors who are in the province Beyond the River, keep away. 7 Let the work on this house of God alone. Let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site.

After recording the decree by Cyrus, verse 6 picks up again with the message from Darius to the Persian officials, and that message in verse 6 is for them to keep away. That phrase is actually a technical legal term that means the accusations were rejected. The Jews had won their case!

We would suppose that the governor in verse 7 is Zerubbabel, although he is not mentioned by name. (In fact, after 5:2, he is never mentioned again in the book of Ezra, which may be good news to those tired of hearing about the Sheshbazzar/Zerubbabel conundrum!)

Verses 8-10

8 Moreover, I make a decree regarding what you shall do for these elders of the Jews for the rebuilding of this house of God. The cost is to be paid to these men in full and without delay from the royal revenue, the tribute of the province from Beyond the River. 9 And whatever is needed—bulls, rams, or sheep for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, or oil, as the priests at Jerusalem require—let that be given to them day by day without fail, 10 that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the life of the king and his sons.

The Jews were likely very anxious about what Darius would say, but their fears turned out to be unfounded. In fact, what could have been bad news, turned out to be tremendously good news. Those Persian officials (prodded along by the Jews' troublesome neighbors) had indirectly done the Jews a huge favor – they once again had funding for their project from the king! “The clouds ye so much dread are big with mercy” – and that was certainly the case here.

Some are surprised by Darius' concern for the details of the Jewish worship in verses 9-10. As before, the most likely explanation is that he had help from a Jewish scribe in writing this letter.

Verse 10 shows us that Darius took these religious matters seriously. He wanted the Jews to pray for his life and the lives of his sons. We saw a similar request in the Cyrus Cylinder – “May all the gods whom I have resettled in their sacred cities ask daily Bel and Nebo for a long life for me and may they recommend me to him.”

Verses 11-12

11 Also I make a decree that if anyone alters this edict, a beam shall be pulled out of his house, and he shall be impaled on it, and his house shall be made a dunghill. 12 May the God who has caused his name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who shall put out a hand to alter this, or to destroy this house of God that is in Jerusalem. I Darius make a decree; let it be done with all diligence.”

In verse 11 we find the penalty for anyone who would alter the king's edict, and it is quite severe: “a beam shall be pulled out of his house,

and he shall be impaled on it, and his house shall be made a dunghill.” Once again, a Jewish scribe may have had a hand in crafting this penalty! But we know that it was common for ancient covenants to include curses against those who broke them, and many ancient decrees include punishments for those who disobeyed.

Verse 12 contains an additional curse. The phrase “the God who has caused his name to dwell there” is the strongest indication that a Jewish scribe helped Darius prepare this letter. And Darius was almost speaking as a prophet here because we know from Daniel that God would indeed overthrow kings and peoples as part of his plan to usher in his eternal kingdom.

Verses 13-15

13 Then, according to the word sent by Darius the king, Tattenai, the governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their associates did with all diligence what Darius the king had ordered. 14 And the elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. They finished their building by decree of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia; 15 and this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king.

In these verses we are reaching the grand conclusion of the first half of Ezra – the rebuilding of the temple. God’s providence has been seen throughout, but no more so than here at the end where Darius the Great is seen moving to help God’s people as God pulls his strings. As one commentator noted, this victory of God’s people clearly displays the providence of God at work through these pagan potentates.

God used foreign kings and foreign peoples to accomplish his plan. God raised up prophets from among his own people to accomplish his plan. God used his own people to accomplish his plan. He opened doors using the enemies of his people (who reported the building efforts to the local Persian officials), and he opened doors using royal decrees. We, too, are a part of God’s plan, we, too, have a role to play in that great plan, and we, too, are presented with great open doors. These people walked through that door. Do we?

Verse 14 says that the people “finished their building by decree of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia.” The most powerful word on earth at that time was the

decree of a Persian king, but that king was being directed by an infinitely more powerful decree.

The inclusion of King Artaxerxes in verse 14 requires an explanation because he didn't become king until much later than these events in 515 BC. Instead, he was the king when Ezra and Nehemiah returned in 458 and 445 BC. Why is he included here with Cyrus and Darius?

The most likely answer is one that we have seen before – the author jumped out of the chronology for a moment to make a point. Remember, this book was written after the walls had been built under Artaxerxes, and the author was looking back through history to the times of Cyrus and Darius. Just as he included the (then future) opposition during the reign of Artaxerxes in Chapter 4, here in Chapter 6 included the support for the Jews that also occurred during the reign of Artaxerxes (although that support involved rebuilding the walls rather than rebuilding the temple).

Verse 14 makes it clear that the building (not just of the temple) would continue with divine direction and Persian support through the time of Artaxerxes. One commentator describes verse 14 as the key verse book in the book of Ezra.

And finally in verse 15 the temple was completed! Haggai and Zechariah began preaching in 520 BC, and the temple was completed about five years later on March 12, 515 BC (converting to our own calendar). This great event occurred 72 years after the destruction of the temple in 587.

The people had started off strong, but through disobedience and neglect they had wandered away from God and had eventually been carried off into captivity after witnessing the destruction of their temple. Now that temple had been restored. How? By Godly people who turned back to God's word to discover how he wanted them to live and how he wanted them to worship. God's plan continued through the process of restoration – as it did yet again in our own recent history, and as it will likely do again if the present digression continues unabated. One thing is certain – God will accomplish his plans.

Verses 16-18

16 And the people of Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy. 17 They offered at the dedication of this house of God 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel 12 male goats, according to the

number of the tribes of Israel. 18 And they set the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their divisions, for the service of God at Jerusalem, as it is written in the Book of Moses.

Now comes the celebration! We should always take the time to celebrate great victories. The term translated “dedication” is Hanukah, the name of the Jewish holiday that celebrates a similar dedication of this same temple after its defilement by the Seleucid King Antiochus IV in 165 BC. (Following a major renovation by Herod, the “second temple” was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70.)

We can also compare this dedication with that of the first temple under Solomon in 1 Kings 8. There the number of sacrificed animals was much greater: 22,000 cattle and 120,000 sheep and goats.

In verse 17, the people offered 12 male goats as a sin offering “for all Israel.” Again, we see the theme of continuity. Even though most of the former exiles were from the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and Levi, all of the tribes were represented by this sacrifice. They were collectively the people of God, and they were collectively the heirs of his covenants.

In verse 18, the organization of the priests and the Levites was reinstated as it was practiced before the exile. And how did they know how to do that? Verse 18 tells us that, also: “as it is written in the Book of Moses.” Restoration must begin with a return to the word of God.

But that book was so dated! It was so old! These people were much more sophisticated now! They had much better ideas about how to do things! Surely God was looking for a modern approach to go along with their new modern temple – right? Wrong! They turned back to the unchanging word of God to discover what God wanted them to do, and men today must do the same thing.

The Aramaic section of Ezra that began in 4:8 ends in verse 18. From verse 19 onward the text is once again in Hebrew.

Verses 19-22

19 On the fourteenth day of the first month, the returned exiles kept the Passover. 20 For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together; all of them were clean. So they slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the returned exiles, for their fellow priests, and for themselves. 21 It was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile, and also by every one who had joined them and separated

himself from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to worship the LORD, the God of Israel. 22 And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the LORD had made them joyful and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

The fourteenth day of the first month was the day stipulated in Exodus 12:6 for celebrating the Passover. In 515 BC it would have been on April 21 according to our calendar.

The Passover, as we know, commemorated Israel's deliverance from Egypt and also prefigured our redemption by Christ's death ("For even Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us." 1 Cor. 5:7)

Although Passover's were celebrated yearly, they were typically only recorded when they were celebrated in relation to some important event, and most often when associated with revival movements, such as under Hezekiah in 2 Chronicles 30, under Josiah in 2 Chronicles 35, and here in Ezra 6.

The purification of the priests in verse 20 would have involved a ritual washing with water as described in Exodus 29:4 and Numbers 8:7. Hezekiah's great Passover celebration had to be delayed because there were not enough ceremonially pure priests. (2 Chronicles 30:3)

Verse 21 confirms that this group included some Jews who had remained behind when the others were taken away into exile. Apparently, many of them had assimilated themselves with the non-Jewish people who lived there, and some of them had been encouraged by these returning exiles and the by the prophets to return to the religious requirements of the Law of Moses. These non-exiled Jews were welcome to join the exiles, but each had "to separate himself from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to worship the LORD, the God of Israel."

The Feast of the Unleavened Bread in verse 22 was a separate feast that started the day after the Passover and lasted for seven days, but it was so closely associated with the Passover that the two were often treated as one feast.

The theme of verse 21 is joy. Throughout the Bible, joy is the characteristic of those who trust in God. In the Old Testament, thirteen different Hebrew roots (27 different words) are used to express joy in worshipping God, which tells us how important that

concept was to the Jewish people. As Nehemiah would tell them later in Nehemiah 8:10, “for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

The deeper we go in our study of God’s word and our desire to know God and please God, the more joyous we become. If we lack joy, it is an indication that we are living on the surface – that we have just enough religion to make us miserable!

We end Chapter 6 with another puzzle – why does the author mention the “king of Assyria” in verse 22? But this puzzle is an easy one when we remember that a major theme in this book is continuity. The trouble began with the Assyrians, and that empire had continued all the way to the present day, albeit through the Babylonians and then through the Persians. Even Herodotus recognized this continuity when he referred to Babylon as the capital of Assyria. The Gentile oppression had begun under the Assyrians, as Nehemiah also recognized:

Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who keepest covenant and mercy, let not all the trouble seem little before thee, that hath come upon us, on our kings, on our princes, and on our priests, and on our prophets, and on our fathers, and on all thy people, **since the time of the kings of Assyria unto this day.** (Nehemiah 9:32)

Although the Gentile domination was not over, God had given his people a brief period of favor in the eyes of the foreign kings.

One commentator says that the reference in verse 22 to Darius as the king of Assyria is “perhaps the most significant statement about Persia in the book.”

So where are we at the end of Ezra 6? The first return under the decree of Cyrus has occurred and the goal of that return has been accomplished with the dedication of the second temple. Ezra 6 ends with a joyous celebration over the victory of God’s people.

What happens next? Ezra 7 will begin almost 60 years after the events in Ezra 6, with the second return under Ezra in 458. But we are not going to study the second half of Ezra until after we look at what happened between those two chapters, and we read about those events in the book of Esther, which is centered on the royal city of Susa. Other than a brief note about Xerxes in 4:6, Ezra tells us nothing about this interim period.

Lesson 5: Introduction to Esther

Esther is a Strange Book

If Esther is not the strangest book in the Bible, it must be in the top two or three. Most commentaries begin with the question, “what kind of book is Esther?” – and there are about as many answers to that question as there are commentaries. Is it history? Is it fiction? Is it historical fiction? Is it comedy? Is it a Persian chronicle? Is it a Greek romance? Is it a carnival tale? Is it a wisdom tale? Is it burlesque? Each of those answers is proposed by commentaries.

About all the commentators can agree upon is that Esther is strange. For example:

- Although the heathen king of Persia is mentioned 190 times in 167 verses (29 times by name), God is never mentioned in the book. There is not even a divine title or pronoun referring to God in the book. (God is likewise not named in the Song of Solomon.)
- There is likewise no mention of God’s commands or of his relationship with his people. There is no mention of Satan or angels. There is no mention of the covenant. Unlike the book of Daniel, no one prays in the book of Esther, and no one has a vision in the book of Esther. There are no miracles in Esther.
- Other than the fact that the book is about the Jewish people, there is nothing Jewish about it in the religious sense. There is no apparent concern for the law in Esther. (Haman does say in 3:8 that “their laws are diverse from all people.”) Although the book was written after the events in Ezra 1-6, there is no mention of Jerusalem or the temple. “If one went through the text and replaced every occurrence of the word ‘Jews’ with the name of some other ethnic group, there would be no reason to think the story had anything at all to do with the Bible.” The lack of religious language in the book is highly unusual for books of that time and is certainly intentional. (But, as one commentator noted, God seems to lurk everywhere in the background of the book!)
- Esther is the only book in the Old Testament that was not found among the Dead Sea scrolls. (That omission is probably because the Essenes did not celebrate the Feast of Purim.)

- The book of Esther is never cited or alluded to in the New Testament.
- Neither Esther nor Mordecai is ever mentioned anywhere else in the Bible. (As we discussed, the “Mordecai” in Ezra 2:2 is almost certainly *not* the same Mordecai we meet in Esther.)
- Esther is one of only two books in the Bible named for a woman (the other being Ruth).
- The longest verse in the Bible appears in Esther 8:9 (78 words).
- Surprisingly, one of the central themes of Esther is *feasting*. The Hebrew word for “feast” or “banquet” occurs nearly as many times in Esther as it does in the rest of the Old Testament books put together. The Feast of Purim comes from Esther and is one of the two Jewish feasts not found in the Law of Moses (the other being Hanukkah.)
- Esther is the only Old Testament book describing events that take place entirely in Persia. In fact, every scene in Esther (except for two brief episodes in Haman’s home and the brief account of the Jewish victory in Chapter 9) takes place in the royal court of Persia, with some in the throne room and the king’s private quarters.
- In the rest of the Old Testament, Jews are introduced by giving the name of their father or the name of their tribe, while foreigners are introduced by giving the name of their country or ethnicity (Uriah the Hittite, Ruth the Moabitess). But in Esther, Mordecai is called “Mordecai the Jew” six times (the only six times the phrase “the Jew” occurs in our English Old Testament).
- The characters in Esther are presented very differently from one another. With Haman, for example, we are told his motives, his drives, and his ambitions. As one noted, Haman is allowed no mysteries. But with Mordecai and Esther, we see only their words and actions – we are largely left to wonder as to their motives. For example, (although we might be able to guess) we are never told why Mordecai refused to bow to Haman or show him any reverence – the event that leads to all the trouble that follows.

- On one level Esther is a simple story, yet it has an incredibly detailed structure in which thesis after thesis is met by antithesis after antithesis. (See the handout.)
- There is very little direct speech in the book. In the book of Ruth, the plot is advanced primarily through dialogue, but the opposite is true in Esther, where the plot is advanced primarily through narration. Mordecai, for example, is mentioned by name 56 times in Esther, yet he has only one short (albeit very memorable) speech (4:13-14).
- The first chapter of Esther has not a word to say about God or God's people, but rather is focused on pagan characters involved in a pagan event from the pagan world (albeit one that will later prove very important to God's people).

In addition to being a strange book, the book of Esther is an incredibly meaningful book, particularly to those facing persecution. We will see how it is meaningful to Christians, but it has always been a very meaningful book to Jews as well, particularly when they have been faced with those seeking to destroy them, as Haman did in Esther's day and as Hitler did in ours. The Nazis forbade the reading of Esther in the concentration camps, but Jewish prisoners wrote the book from memory and read it in secret on Purim (the feast that traces its history back to this book).

What Kind of Book is Esther?

That is a strange question to ask about a book of the Bible. No one ever asks, what kind of book is Exodus or what kind of book is Ezra? But all commentaries on Esther begin with that question, and many different answers are proposed.

Some argue that Esther is a historical narrative. That is, Esther contains an accurate account of a series of events that took place at the stated time and place. (Not wanting to keep anyone in suspense, this is where we are going to end up – but first we will consider some of the other ideas that have been put forth.)

Some argue that Esther is a historical novel. That is, the author is writing about a historical event, but he is doing so with a degree of poetic license. Something of historical importance is being told, but in a creative way.

Others argue that Esther is a fictional narrative. That is, Esther is just a very creative short story meant to entertain or teach (or both), but not meant to convey a history of actual events.

Some argue that Esther is a comedy (and no one disputes that some of the events in the book are very funny). They point to Haman and the King as a megalomaniac and a buffoon, respectively. They point to the many amusing coincidences, parallels, and reverses in the book. They point to what they see as mockery, ironic exaggeration, and underdeveloped characters and caricatures in the book.

Each of these proposals (except for the first) has something in common – they all propose that Esther is fictional to some degree. Thus, we can group these proposals into two categories: (1) The first option in which Esther is not fictional at all, and (2) The second option in which Esther contains portions that are fictional (either partly fiction or entirely fictional).

The arguments in favor of the second option and against Esther's historicity are based primarily not on evidence but instead on two things: (1) the absence of confirming evidence about some of the details in the book, and (2) events judged to be highly improbable, at least based on our limited knowledge of the ancient world. As for (1), those who bet against the Bible have been proved wrong over and over again as additional archaeological evidence is found, and we will see examples of that in our study of this book. And as for (2), God may not be named, but God is present – and what may seem like improbable coincidences, make perfect sense when viewed as God's providence providing for his people and fulfilling his plans.

Those who argue that the book is *not* historical very often point to contradictions they see between Esther and the writings of the Greek historian Herodotus. (Of course, it never seems to occur to them that perhaps Herodotus is the one that is mistaken.) For example, Herodotus says that Xerxes' queen was Amestris. Also, Herodotus says that Persia was divided into 20 satrapies, whereas Esther says that Persia was divided into 127 provinces. But even if we assume that Herodotus was correct, these difficulties have easy explanations. For example, some argue that Amestris was Vashti (the first queen in the book), while others argue that the king had multiple wives. (Some argue that Amestris was Esther, but that is almost certainly *not* the case due to some of the horrible deeds attributed to Amestris.) While it is true that Herodotus does not mention Esther, Mordecai, or Vashti, it is also true that Herodotus does not mention Belshazzar,

whose existence was likewise denied by modern scholars until archaeological discoveries confirmed his place in history.

In Esther 3:7, Haman casts lots during the first month of the year to determine a date (in the 12th month) on which to execute his plans. Commentators once pointed to this event as an example of something highly improbable, but evidence has since been found that some rulers in the ancient world would cast lots in the first month to determine events and actions for the following twelve months – and suddenly the improbable looked much more probable.

The book also agrees very well with what we know about King Xerxes from other sources – the greatness of his empire, his quick and sometimes irrational temper, his almost unlimited promises and generous gifts, his drunken feast, and even his efficient postal system (3:13 – “Letters were sent by couriers to all the king’s provinces”).

Details such as these have tended to change the critical climate. Few today would argue that Esther is a complete fiction. Instead, most modern scholars view it as a historical novel.

We, of course, will take the position that Esther is not any sort of a novel, but instead is a historical narrative describing actual events and actual people – and we will do so for at least four reasons:

1. There is no indication that the book is intended to be taken in any way other than as a straightforward narrative of events as they occurred. It goes to great lengths to include places, names, events, and many historical details. If this book is not a history, then how can we distinguish it from the other historical books in the Bible?
2. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that Esther is an accurate witness to Persian affairs and Persian culture.
3. Although we have no record of Jesus ever mentioning Esther, Jesus’ view of the Old Testament is that it is an unquestionably reliable guide to past events. He mentions Abel, Noah, Abraham, Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot, Isaac, Jacob, David, and many other persons and incidents from the Old Testament. “It is not too much to say that he accepted without reservation the entire historical fabric of the Old Testament, including those aspects of it most troublesome to modern minds.”

4. The Bible is the inspired word of God. Although there are within it some fictional accounts that are intended to teach a lesson (the parable, for example), they are always clearly indicated as such (“Then he began to speak to them in parables”). Esther has no such indication, and so we must take it for what it claims to be – a true history of actual events. The first words in the book are “Now it came to pass,” not “Once upon a time.”

One of the main objections raised by some against Esther is that, they say, it contains events that are just too improbable to be true. Esther is in the right place at the right time when Vashti is deposed and when Haman’s evil plans come to light. When the king cannot sleep and asks for historical records to be read, the page happens to fall at the page highlighted Mordecai’s role in foiling a plot against the king. As the king considers what to do, Haman just happens to be standing outside. How do we answer those who argue such coincidences are too unlikely to be true?

First, as we have already said, such comments forget that although God is not mentioned in Esther, God is nevertheless present in Esther – and with God all things are possible. Second, it should go without saying that fact is stranger than fiction. Third, those who make such comments appear to know as much about mathematics as they do about theology! There is a difference between picking a lottery winner ahead of the drawing and reporting on the winner after the drawing – one is so improbable as to be unbelievable, whereas the other happens every week. We are not looking at an event randomly plucked from history; we are looking at an event chosen after the fact because it was so interesting it was deemed worthy of inclusion in the Bible.

And one final note on this point – those modern scholars who believe Esther is so unlikely to have happened most likely believe that they themselves evolved through random mutations from single cell creatures that somehow arose from lifeless matter after a big bang. When viewed alongside that fairy tale, Esther should look much less improbable!

This book has much to say about coincidences and luck. Are the events in the book just lucky coincidences, or is a greater power involved? The answer seems clear in Esther – each of the incidents regarded by itself might well appear to be the result of chance, but taken together, the element of chance disappears. They all converge to one point, and their design is evident. If I flip a coin and get four

heads in a row, you may think I am lucky. But if I flip that coin and get 40 heads in a row, you will no longer be thinking that luck has anything to do with it – you will suspect I have a two-headed coin!

What is the answer regarding the lucky coincidences in our own lives? While it is true that time and chance happens to us all (Ecclesiastes 9:11), not everything that happens to us comes by chance. If God by his providence is actively working in this world, then we need to look for his hand and for his open doors. The pagan may believe that all we do and all we are is governed by chance, but the Christian knows better. Esther can teach us to recognize God's providence in our own lives. I am reminded of a story I once read in a book about prayer. The author told about how he was trying to get to sleep one night in advance of a big speech the next day, but he was being kept awake by a barking dog next door. He prayed for the barking to stop, and (to his surprise) it did so at once. He was then unable to sleep for wondering whether the dog had stopped barking on account of his prayer!

What is the Historical Setting of Esther?

We discussed the history of Persia in our first lesson on Ezra, and we won't repeat that here. But we will consider the history of Xerxes, the Persian king at the center of these events.

The events in Esther took place during the reign of Xerxes, who in Hebrew is called Ahasuerus. Xerxes was king of Persia from 486 until 465 BC. He was preceded by Darius the Great (who was king when the second temple was completed) and was followed by Artaxerxes (who was king when Ezra and Nehemiah returned).

Our main evidence from this era comes from Herodotus, the Greek historian, whose book *Histories of the Persian Wars* (490-480 BC) tells us about the Persian kings and their campaigns. Although he was a Greek writing about his Persian enemies and therefore not an objective source, his books does provide some evidence about Persian personalities and practices. For example, he describes Xerxes as tall and handsome, as an ambitious ruler, and as a warrior. It appears that Herodotus was fascinated by Xerxes because about a third of his book is taken up with his reign.

Herodotus describes Xerxes' Greek expedition in 480-479, which ended as a dismal failure. But Xerxes also had some victories. He reconquered Egypt, which had rebelled under Darius, and he also suppressed a rebellion in Babylon.

Xerxes' greatest achievement may have been his completion of the palace complex that Darius began in Persepolis. It has been called a marvel of grandeur, beauty, and luxury. A foundation stone has been found that begins, "I am Xerxes, the great king."

But Xerxes had a problem (according to Herodotus and according to Esther): he did not measure up to the moral quality of his predecessors (who weren't that high on the scale to begin with!). One historian notes that Xerxes inherited none of the good qualities of the previous kings, but only a love of opulent display that progressively sapped his moral fiber. Another wrote that Xerxes "had the weakness, tyrannical character, and love of luxury to be expected in a prince reared at court."

In 470, the Persian army again suffered defeat at the hands of the Greeks, which ended their 50-year struggle with Greece. Persia maintained control over Egypt and Cyprus, but lost control over the Greek colonies of Asia Minor. Xerxes was killed in a conspiracy in 465 and was succeeded by his son Artaxerxes I, who is the king who later allowed Ezra and Nehemiah to return.

What is the theme of Esther?

As shown on the handout, Esther has a remarkable structure that is built around the key event in Chapter 6 in which the tables are turned between Haman and Mordecai. For each thesis leading up to that event, there is an antithesis following that event.

Each of these thesis/antithesis pairs reinforces a central theme of Esther, which is the theme of reversal. That theme is seen most clearly in Esther 9:1, which has been called the guiding principle of the book:

Now in the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's command and edict were about to be carried out, on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, **the reverse occurred**: the Jews gained mastery over those who hated them.

That verse is a summary statement of the entire book, and it emphasizes that events had taken an unexpected and complete turnaround.

In a book that does not refer to God, this theme of reversal has the providence of God at its center. The reversals occur because the actions of powerful people are overturned by power from a different source. The tables get turned repeatedly in Esther, and God is the great over-turner of tables. He turns darkness into light. He turns mourning into rejoicing. He turns defeat into salvation. He turns death into life. Is it an overstatement to say that this theme of reversal that we see so clearly in Esther is perhaps the theme of the entire Bible? (And, if so, what does that tell us about the importance of this oft-neglected little book?) Who overturned more tables than Jesus? "Kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which has not been told them they see, and that which they have not heard they understand." (Isaiah 52:1)

A second theme that we find in Esther is the theme of feasting. The word translated "feast" or "banquet" occurs nearly as many times in Esther as it does in the rest of Old Testament. The events in Esther open and close with feasting, and others feasts occur throughout. One of the central events in the book is the establishment of the feast of Purim (or "lots"), which is still celebrated by Jews today. Why the emphasis on feasting?

Perhaps the best explanation is that the interplay between feasting and reversal reflect the interplay between God's providence and human behavior. Esther herself, for example, is propelled forward by the interplay of human behavior and God's providence. She begins as a pawn, and we see things happening to her rather than through her. But by the end, she is in control and acting with full authority (9:29). Why? Because at a decisive moment she decided to act, crossing that boundary between human behavior and God's providence. (4:15) That decision led to the reversals in the book, and God's providence worked through her decision. If she had made another decision, God's providence no doubt would have looked elsewhere, but she made that decision, and we can see the outcome. (God likewise works through our decisions today, and he will likewise turn elsewhere if we remain undecided.)

As we study Esther and see the providence of God in action, we are reminded of the events in the life of Joseph. As with Esther, those events are often viewed by some as too improbable to be true, but as with Esther, the answer to that objection is the providence of God.

In one way, this ancient tale of intrigue from the Persian court is the most modern book in the Old Testament. Why? Because in this book, God deals with his people as he deals with us today. Like the

Jews of Persia, we have no earthly king, no earthly prophet, and no earthly kingdom. Like them, we live in an age without miracles. Instead, what we see is God working behind the scenes to providentially provide for his people as they live in a hostile and pagan environment. What we see is God using those people to fulfill his plans. What we see in Esther is how God's providence works through human action, and we see how our inaction can hinder the providence of God. If Esther had failed to act, God would have looked elsewhere. Is God looking elsewhere today because of our own failure to act?

God is not hidden in Esther, but rather God is veiled. "Visions and revelations may come and go, but the veiled presence of God is a constant that may not be seen or felt but will always sustain his people in good, bad, and ugly times. This is the precious truth that Esther's story celebrates."

The events in Esther encourage the reader to look behind that veil to understand what is really going on behind the scenes, and the key way that Esther does that is by not mentioning God at all. What better way to illustrate the veiled nature of God? What better way to illustrate God's unseen role in history? What better way to encourage faithfulness even when it appears that God is hidden?

And is God really veiled in Esther? Those who look for him will find him – even in Esther. In 4:3, what did the Jews do in response to the edict from Haman? They fasted. What purpose would that have if not to affect God's will? The veil is pretty thin in that verse!

The providence of God also explains the book's humor. Despite the seriousness of the events, there is a sense of lightness in the book. Although God is not mentioned, Esther is undeniably written based on an understanding that God is actively present in the world. There is optimism from the outset that the Jewish people will survive. Esther is an optimistic book, and it calls his people (both then and now) to be an optimistic people. Esther shows us that the phrase "*pessimistic* child of God" is the ultimate oxymoron.

Another way to look at Esther is to see it as a conflict between competing worldviews. One worldview is represented by Haman, who believed in fate and tried to use it to destroy his enemies. This belief in fate pervaded the ancient world except for Israel, and it formed the basis for the astrology, omens, and magical practices so strongly condemned in the Old Testament. Many aspects of these

ancient pagan practices are being revived today and called “New Age” beliefs. They are anything but new!

By contrast, the Biblical worldview knows nothing of fatalism. God is the Lord of history, although he has made men responsible for their decisions and actions. The Bible views history as a dialogue between God and man. God is in control, and history moves toward the goal that God has marked. Esther can be seen as a conflict between this worldview and Haman’s fatalism.

When was Esther written?

Commentaries have much to say about this question. Most modern scholars have a simple method for dating books of the Bible. If the book contains a prophecy about a certain event, then the book was written *after* that event occurred. If external evidence dates the existence of the book to a certain earliest known date, then the book must have been written on the day before. Finally, if the book dates itself to a certain date or time period, then it could not possibly have been written on that date or during that time period.

For no book are these rules more clearly applied than with Daniel. Modern scholars have to push that book forward in time because if they did not, they would have to agree that it contains genuine prophecies. But they can’t push it too far because a copy was found among the Dead Scrolls. In fact, because Daniel’s prophecies about Roman emperors who ruled *after* the Dead Sea Scrolls were written, the modern scholars have a problem – and they solve it by misapplying the prophecies in Daniel to apply to the Greeks rather than to the Romans. They are nothing if not consistent!

What about Esther? First, there are no prophecies in the book that would preclude the book from having been written after a certain date. All we can say with absolute certainty is that it was written between 465 BC (the end of Xerxes’ reign) and AD 70 (when Josephus included the events of Esther in his *Antiquities*). There is some evidence that Esther was translated into Greek by Lysimachus, which could move the endpoint of that range to 76 BC or possibly to 112 BC. Can we narrow that range further?

Most modern scholars date the book in the third century BC during the Greek rule in Palestine. They reject a second century date because the Dead Sea Scrolls seem to reflect a Hebrew language with diction, idioms, and syntax later than that found in Esther. And, following the

modern scholar rulebook, they push it as close to that point as they can – hence the third century BC.

Others, however, have pointed to evidence that Esther was written at a much earlier date. Some, for example, argue that the language used to describe dates in Esther points toward a late fifth century date. Also, the lack of any reference to Greek culture suggests that the book was written during or before the first half of the fourth century BC (around 330 BC or earlier). There are no words of Greek origin, but many words of Persian origin. Further, the book displays an accurate knowledge of life in Susa during the time of Xerxes, which also argues for an early date.

Thus, it is probably best to date Esther as being written during the Persian period, and no later than around 350 BC. As for the author, we are not told, but some have suggested Ezra or Mordecai.

Lesson 6: Esther 1:1 – 2:18

Esther 1

As we discussed, feasting is one of the themes in Esther, and in fact the book of Esther begins with a feast given by King Xerxes. The events of the banquet lead to the king's anger against Queen Vashti and to her subsequent departure. That departure sets the stage for Esther to come forth and deliver her people.

Other women in the Bible are renown because they were the mothers of sons who became great in Israel (e.g., Sarah, Rebecca, Hannah). The only other book in the Bible named for a woman is Ruth, whose role in history was to give birth to an ancestor of King David. In contrast, Esther is renown because of her courage.

Verses 1-3

1 Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces, 2 in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the capital, 3 in the third year of his reign he gave a feast for all his officials and servants. The army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were before him,

Verse 1 begins with the phrase “This is what happened during...” or “Now in the days of...,” which is the same type of introduction we find in books such as Joshua and Judges. Those who argue this book is not historical (a) must admit that the book presents itself as a history, and (b) must explain why their reasoning as to Esther would not also mean that Judges and Joshua are likewise fictional.

Ahasuerus is the Hebrew form of the name of the Persian king called Xerxes I by the Greeks. We saw him briefly in Ezra 4:6. He reigned from 486 to 465 BC, and from his father Darius the Great he inherited the great Persian Empire that extended from India to Ethiopia (as verse 1 tells us and as history confirms). This was the largest empire known up until that time.

Critics argue that the “127 provinces” in verse 1 is inaccurate because Herodotus listed only 30 satrapies. Fair-minded critics, however, notice that verse 1 does say there were 127 satrapies, but rather that there were 127 provinces. The Hebrew word translated “province” no doubt refers to a subdivision of a satrapy. In Daniel 2:49, the same Hebrew word refers to the province of Babylon, and in Ezra 2:1 and Nehemiah 7:6 it refers to the province of Judea. (Although Daniel

does refer to the leaders of the 120 provinces as “satraps” in 6:1.) As for the different numbers between Daniel and Esther, I could point you to any number of sources that say the United States has 48 states!

One interesting suggestion was that 127 is symbolic of Xerxes’ reign over the entire earth, being a combination of 12 (the number of God’s people), 10 (the number of completeness), and 7 (the number of perfection). But I think we must reject that option because Esther is a historical text that is not presented using apocalyptic language. Although apocalyptic language is properly interpreted by assuming the language is figurative unless forced to do otherwise, historical narrative is properly interpreted according to the opposite rule.

Susa had been the capital of ancient Elam. Darius I rebuilt it and used it as his main residence before he moved his capital to Persepolis. Xerxes also had his main residence at Persepolis, but he lived in Susa during the winter. Daniel previously had a vision at Susa (Daniel 8:2), and later Nehemiah served in Susa as cupbearer to Xerxes’ son, Artaxerxes I (Nehemiah 1:1).

Xerxes ascended to the throne in 486 BC at the age of 32. The third year of his reign was 483 BC, three years before his famous expedition against the Greek mainland. Rulers used banquets to show their greatness and to reward their loyal subjects. Herodotus described banquets with 15,000 guests. The Assyrian king Ashurnazirpal once gave a feast with nearly 70,000 guests.

At the Louvre Museum you can see part of a wall covered with many-colored mosaics from the great banquet hall built by Darius in Susa – the same place where many of these events took place.

Verse 3 refers to “Persia and Media” rather than “Media and Persia.” This ordering attests to the book’s historical accuracy. Prior to the days of Cyrus, the Medes had been the dominant partner. Cyrus won the allegiance of both and united them because his father was Persian and his mother was a Mede. By the time of Xerxes, Persia was the dominant partner within the joint empire.

Verses 1-3 thus provide the setting for the events that will follow: the Persian court in Susa in the fifth century BC.

Verses 4-8

4 while he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days. 5 And when these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in Susa, the citadel, both great and small,

a feast lasting for seven days in the court of the garden of the king's palace. 6 There were white cotton curtains and violet hangings fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rods and marble pillars, and also couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and precious stones. 7 Drinks were served in golden vessels, vessels of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king. 8 And drinking was according to this edict: "There is no compulsion." For the king had given orders to all the staff of his palace to do as each man desired.

Verses 4-8 tell us about the splendor of King Xerxes. Persia's wealth and magnificence dazzled even Alexander the Great when more than a century later he entered this same palace and found 1200 tons of gold and silver bullion and 270 tons of gold coins. Excavations at Susa between 1884 and 1886 produced many treasures from this very palace (which are now displayed at the Louvre in Paris). (See also the handout for Lesson 6.)

The same critics who complain about the 127 provinces in verse 1 also complain about the 180-day banquet in verse 4. But the language does not say that the banquet lasted that long. More likely, Xerxes must have had some sort of public exposition that lasted that long. This may have also been a time of planning for the military campaign against the Greeks, which would explain why "the army of Persia and Media ... were before him" in verse 3. The feast itself, verse 5 tells us, lasted only 7 days.

The banquet corresponds well with the great war counsel of 483 BC. Herodotus records the following words of Xerxes at that counsel, which may have been the same banquet described here in Esther: "For this cause I have now summoned you together, that I may impart to you my purpose." He then proceeded to describe the upcoming Greek invasion, and he told them they would receive lavish gifts in exchange for their support. If so, it was important that he display his wealth and power to convince them he would make good on his promises.

Verses 6-7 emphasize the incredible luxury of the Persian palace. Herodotus relates an incident that occurred during Xerxes' retreat from Greece in which the king left one of his tents in an abandoned camp. The Greeks were astonished to find gold and silver couches in the tent. They wondered what such a rich Persian king would want with Greece!

The word translated “edict” or “law” in verse 8 is used 19 times in the book and each time refers to a royal decree. Usually a toastmaster would indicate when everyone was to drink, but here the people could drink whenever they pleased. This detail suggests that the banquet was not only luxurious but was also licentious. We are reminded of the banquet in Daniel 5 that preceded the fall of Babylon to Persia.

These introductory verses emphasize one of the key themes in the book of Esther – the theme of reversal. All who read the book originally knew as they read Chapter 1 how these events were going to turn out – Xerxes campaign against the Greeks was a total failure! They knew that Xerxes would return from that campaign with depleted power and a depleted treasury. This unstated reversal sets the stage for the other reversals that will follow.

And there is yet one more hint of reversal in these opening verses. The elaborate description of this foreign palace is unusual in the Bible. Only the description of the temple receives similar treatment, but that temple had been destroyed and had now been rebuilt in a much less grand manner. Perhaps the author wants the reader to see the beauty of the temple as having been moved to Persia, along with the people of God. If so, then we are being reminded of yet another humiliating reversal.

Verse 9

9 Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus.

Verse 9 tells us about the Queen’s banquet, and the fact that she gave one tells us that she had liberty to make such decisions and take such actions. We will later see Queen Esther exercising similar powers.

Herodotus tells us that the name of Xerxes’ queen was Amestris, and many point to this discrepancy as evidence that the book is fictional. But fair-minded critics will notice that Xerxes himself has a different name in the book of Esther, and such could have been true of his queen. (Esther has two names in this book.) Also, the king may have had several queens. Also, some suggest that Vashti, which means sweetheart, may have been an epithet.

It is known that Amestris was the mother of the next king, Artaxerxes I, and served as queen mother during his reign. Perhaps Herodotus mentions only Amestris because he was concerned only with the royal wives who bore successors to the throne. He mentions only two

of the several wives of Darius, both of which bore sons who contended for the throne.

Verse 9 shows the King and the Queen acting separately, and it thus foreshadows the trouble that will soon come between them.

Verses 10-12

10 On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, 11 to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at. 12 But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him.

Verses 10-12 describe a command from the King and the Queen's denial of that command. Verse 4 tells us that Xerxes wanted to display his splendor and glory, and the beautiful Queen Vashti wearing her royal crown would have been seen as a living trophy of that splendor and glory.

Why did he send seven eunuchs to go and get her? The eunuch part is self-explanatory, but why seven? Some suggest that seven may have been needed to carry her in while seated in the royal litter. In any event, they are listed by name in verse 10 for a reason – their names serve to verify the event.

Herodotus tells us something interesting about the Persian view of alcohol – they drank as they deliberated matters of state:

Moreover it is [the Persians'] custom to deliberate about the gravest matters when they are drunk, and what they approve in their counsels is proposed to them the next day by the master of the house where they deliberate, when they are now sober and if being sober they still approve it, they act thereon, but if not, they cast it aside. And when they have taken counsel about a matter when sober, they decide upon it when they are drunk.

The ancients believed that intoxication put them in closer touch with the spiritual world. If Herodotus was correct, then drinking would have been an essential element of Xerxes' war counsel – yet another historical fact in the book of Esther.

A key event in the entire book occurs in verse 12 – Queen Vashti refused to come to Xerxes, the most powerful person on earth at that time. Why? The rabbis said it was because the king wanted her to appear before him naked, wearing only “her royal crown” in verse 11. But the text does not tell us that. We do know, however, that coming to show the princes her beauty would have meant coming unveiled – and would have meant doing so before a large crowd of drunken men. Thus, it is not difficult to see why the queen refused. Also, it was important for God’s plan that Vashti exit the scene, and so God may very well have been behind her decision to defy the king.

In any event, it was a courageous action on her part (some might say foolhardy), and she paid the price for that courage. (“Cowards die many times before their deaths; the valiant never taste of death but once.”) She defied her king and her husband by refusing to shame herself in public. It seems that she was willing to give up her status and power in order to do what was right. We will see a similarly courageous action by Queen Esther in Chapter 5.

We see a very subtle message in these verses – this all-powerful king was not in charge! Instead, rightness was in charge. We see very early in this book an answer to the questions, “Who is really in charge? And who should be obeyed, and at what cost?” These verses are doing more than just providing an explanation for why Esther would enter the scene. These verses are also showing us a glimpse of a central theme in this book.

Verse 12 tells us that King Xerxes became enraged. One reason for his great wrath was no doubt because the refusal had occurred in front of his officers and nobles. He needed his men to obey his commands as they went to war, but in his own palace he could not even get his own wife to obey him! We see in these opening verses the inner weakness of what was outwardly the most powerful empire on earth.

One reason Vashti’s decision took such courage was that she no doubt knew what kind of man Xerxes was. History records a number of events attesting to Xerxes’ instability, not the least of which involved his punishment of the ocean. That strange event is described as follows in a 1913 text by Ellis and Horne:

Darius was ... succeeded by his son Xerxes, under whom the war with Greece was carried to a disastrous climax. Xerxes was accounted the handsomest man of

his time, but proved also the most feeble; he was as idle and foolish as his father had been active and wise.

Inexperienced in warfare, Xerxes planned an expedition of numbers so vast that he expected them completely to overwhelm the rebellious Greeks. It was not easy for a Persian army to travel all the way to far-off Greece, and Xerxes was weary of the march before it was well begun. When at length his forces reached the strait which separates Asia from Europe, a bridge of ships was built from shore to shore. A storm swept this away, and Xerxes showed his petty wrath by commanding his soldiers to give the sea three hundred lashes with whips, as if it had been a human slave. He also had a set of fetters thrown into the water as a symbol of its bondage to him. After this punishment, though possibly not because of it, the sea behaved better; the bridge of ships held firm, and Xerxes entered Europe.

Herodotus tells us that Xerxes once beheaded the men building a bridge during his Greek campaign simply because a storm delayed its completion. This was the person whom Vashti openly defied and embarrassed!

While we generally view Vashti as noble and heroic, that is not the case with all commentators. And because the book of Esther does not reveal her motives, there is some ambiguity as to why she did what she did. (We will encounter the same sort of ambiguity with Esther herself.) Many ancient Jewish and Christian sources villainize Vashti as a wicked and rebellious woman for refusing to obey her husband. Even Martin Luther used Vashti as a negative example in his writings about divorce, urging husbands in some situations to “take an Esther and let Vashti go.” But verse 10 seems to be the key verse here – it suggests that Vashti’s refusal had something to do with the king’s drunkenness. Also, if Vashti and Amestris were in face the same person, then she was likely in the late stages of pregnancy with her son, Artaxerxes I.

One reason why Esther is such an incredibly interesting book is because it does not tell us why the people involved did most of the actions in this book. There is a conspicuous ambiguity throughout the book that must have been intentional. We are invited to reach our own conclusions – and while most of us view Vashti and Esther in a positive light, others do not. (The Greeks later rewrote the book of

Esther and added non-inspired explanations and motives for the actions in the book.)

Verses 13-15

13 Then the king said to the wise men who knew the times (for this was the king's procedure toward all who were versed in law and judgment, 14 the men next to him being Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king's face, and sat first in the kingdom): 15 "According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti, because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs?"

In verses 13-15, the King discusses what happened with his counselors. It was customary for a Persian king to have such counselors, and it was also customary to sometimes have them killed when they angered him – as Darius II and Cambyses are known to have done. In verse 15, the king asks then what he should do.

Ezra 7:14 also speaks of the king's seven counselors. Herodotus confirms that only the king's seven closest advisors were permitted to enter the king's presence uninvited and unannounced. Verse 13 says that they knew the times, which means they used astrology and other forms of divination.

Verses 16-18

16 Then Memucan said in the presence of the king and the officials, "Not only against the king has Queen Vashti done wrong, but also against all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. 17 For the queen's behavior will be made known to all women, causing them to look at their husbands with contempt, since they will say, 'King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.' 18 This very day the noble women of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will say the same to all the king's officials, and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty.

Verses 16-18 describe the seriousness of Vashti's offense against the king – Memucan, one of the king's advisors, explains that it was an offense not just against the king but also against all husbands. When the word gets out about what Vashti has done, it will cause other wives to "say the same to all the king's officials." This answer was very clever because it relieved the king from a charge that he was acting out of personal animosity or capriciousness.

Verses 19-22

19 If it please the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be repealed, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus. And let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she. 20 So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, for it is vast, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike.” 21 This advice pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed. 22 He sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, that every man be master in his own household and speak according to the language of his people.

Verses 19-22 describe the Queen’s punishment and the King’s decree. For her punishment, Vashti would lose her royal position and never again be allowed to come before the king. Verse 19 says that in her place would be put someone “who is better than she.” Notice that for the first time in the book, Queen Vashti is referred to simply as “Vashti” in verse 19. She had experienced a reversal!

The irrevocability of the king’s command in verse 19 is also mentioned in Daniel 6, where Cyrus’ governor was manipulated by his administrators into issuing an irrevocable decree forbidding prayer. Many critics complain that there is no evidence of such irrevocable decrees outside of the Bible. As one noted:

It is hard to conceive of a legal system which does not allow for emendation of its laws. Furthermore, there is no attestation of such an idea in any Persian source. Nor is there any mention of it in Greek sources, which presumably would not hesitate to point out peculiarities in the Persian way of doing things, as they do when they mock the splendor of the Persian court, for example.

That commentator suggests that the word “repealed” in verse 19 should be translated “transgressed,” and that the irrevocable decree against the Jews we will see later was irrevocable only in the sense that once the order had gone out to all the provinces the damages could not be undone because there was no mechanism for recalling it. This explanation, however, does not explain the repeated references to the same concept in Daniel 6. I think we must conclude that, for whatever reason, Esther and Daniel are describing an aspect of Persian law that has not been found in other ancient sources. And as for never changing the edicts, we have already seen an example in

Ezra where the law was worded in such a way to permit its change – and that may explain why it was not often an issue. Perhaps the problem arose only with hastily created laws, which certainly describes the irrevocable decrees in Esther and Daniel. (Even today we have some experience with hastily created legislation that is seemingly irrevocable – healthcare anyone?)

Some commentaries cite a passage from the writing of Diodorus Siculus as support for the irrevocability of Persian law. Specifically, they argue that a man named Charidemus was executed by Darius III because Darius could not change what had been decreed. However, I believe a careful reading of the source document shows otherwise:

Charidemus became angry and made free with slurs on Persian lack of manliness. This offended the king, and as his wrath blinded him to his advantage, he seized Charidemus by the girdle according to the custom of the Persians, turned him over to the attendants, and ordered him put to death. So Charidemus was led away, but as he went to his death, he shouted that the king would soon change his mind and would receive a prompt requital for this unjust punishment, becoming the witness of the overthrow of the kingdom. Charidemus's prospects had been high, but he missed their fulfillment because of his ill-timed frankness and he ended his life in this fashion. Once the king's passion had cooled he promptly regretted his act and reproached himself for having made a serious mistake, but all his royal power was not able to undo what was done.

It seems to me that Darius' regret occurred after Charidemus had been killed, and the thing he could not undo was the act of having already put Charidemus to death. Even though it would be nice to have a secular example of an irrevocable Persian law, we need to be careful that we do not twist the historical record to create such an example where it does not exist. If the world sees us twisting history, won't it assume we are doing the same thing with the Bible?

The command in verse 22 is curious – “that every man be master in his own household and speak according to the language of his people.” The traditional view is that the king ordered everyone to speak only their father's native language in their house, which some argue would have been an odd decree from a Persian king. The NIV solves the problem by just rewriting the verse: “proclaiming in each

people's tongue that every man should be ruler over his own household." (But careful Bible students avoid solving such problems by rewriting the text!) The most likely reason for the edict (and contrary to the NIV's rewrite of the original text) is that the use of the man's language in his home was a sign of his leadership, which fits well with the context of the edict.

Ironically, by accepting Memucan's advice, the king ends up publicizing his embarrassing plight to the entire empire! Afraid that all women of the empire would hear about what Vashti had done, he ends up assuring what he fears by sending a dispatch to every province of the empire!

As we have already noted, Esther is one of the funniest books in the Bible. (And, yes, there is humor in the Bible. Anyone who disagrees either has no sense of humor or hasn't read the Bible!) But is humor appropriate in a book that describes the near genocide of God's people? The simplest answer is that by the time Esther was written, the threat had passed and all who read it knew of the happy ending. Another explanation may be that provided by Byron – "If I laugh at any mortal thing, 'tis that I may not weep." In any event, as another has noted, "The book's incongruous humor is one of its strange hallmarks."

At the end of Chapter 1, Queen Vashti has courageously exited the scene, and she has prepared the way for one to replace her and exceed her courage. Does the Bible denigrate women as some argue? Hardly! No religion has done more for the status of women than Christianity, and the Judaism that preceded it.

Esther 2

Verses 1-4

1 After these things, when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her. 2 Then the king's young men who attended him said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king. 3 And let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in Susa the capital, under custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women. Let their cosmetics be given them. 4 And let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This pleased the king, and he did so.

The phrase “after these things” in verse 1 does not specify how much later these events took place. Verse 16 will tell us that Esther came before the king in the seventh year of his reign, which would be four years after the events in Chapter 1, which 1:3 tells us occurred in the third year of his reign. Xerxes’ disastrous campaign against the Greeks in 480-479 occurred between these two events. That loss depleted his treasuries and discredited him in the eyes of his subjects. Herodotus describes the king’s life after that defeat as one focused on sensual overindulgence. He had affairs with the wives of some of his generals, which, among other things, led to his assassination in his bedroom in 465 BC.

It seems from verse 1 that the king regretted his decree against Queen Vashti, but that decree had been irrevocable, and so in these verses we see the beginning of a search for a replacement.

On the surface, this search sounds like a beauty contest, but for the women involved it would not have been a pleasant experience. They were uprooted from their homes and taken to live in the king’s harem. A Persian king could have had any woman he wanted, and history tells us about the suffering they caused in satisfying their personal desires. Herodotus also reports that 500 young boys were taken each year and castrated to serve as eunuchs in the Persian court. As one commentator remarked, “One might argue that the young women actually got the better deal.”

According to Herodotus, Persian kings found their wives from among the noble families or from among the families of their seven closest advisors. (Perhaps this explains why those same advisors were so eager to see Vashti banished.) Plutarch, however, reports that other Persian kings sometimes married women from outside those sources, which seems to be what Xerxes was about to do here.

Verses 5-9

5 Now there was a Jew in Susa the citadel whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite, 6 who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away. 7 He was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had neither father nor mother. The young woman had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter. 8 So when the king’s order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered in Susa the citadel in custody of Hegai, Esther also was taken into the king’s palace and put in custody of Hegai,

who had charge of the women. 9 And the young woman pleased him and won his favor. And he quickly provided her with her cosmetics and her portion of food, and with seven chosen young women from the king's palace, and advanced her and her young women to the best place in the harem.

Of the 16 people mentioned by name in Chapter 1, only King Xerxes remains to be mentioned by name. The Jews are mentioned for the first time in verse 5, and it is interesting that they are spoken of in the third person. One commentator suggests that the author was a Jew but that he wrote the book as though it were a Persian court chronicle written by a non-Jew. If so, that would explain some of the other unique features of the book.

The phrase “who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away” in verse 6 could refer grammatically either to Mordecai or to Kish. But the event referenced in verse 6 occurred in 597 BC, which would make Mordecai over 120 years old if it referred to him. Thus, it must refer to Kish, his great grandfather (although at least one commentator argues that is not the most natural way of reading the Hebrew).

The name “Mordecai” likely came from the Mesopotamian god Marduk. We see other Jews who also have names that came from their country of exile. (See Daniel 1:6-7, for example.)

The author is clearly associating Mordecai with another Benjaminite whose father's name was also Kish – King Saul. We will see why this association is important when we meet Haman.

In a text from the last years of Darius I or the early years of Xerxes discovered in 1904 at Persepolis, archaeologists found a reference to a man named “Marduka” who was an accountant on an inspection tour from Susa. Some suggest this was Mordecai.

In verse 7, we finally meet Esther. Mordecai had adopted his cousin Esther because her parents were dead. Esther is the only person in the book with two names, although it was not uncommon for Jews to have both a Hebrew name as well as a name from the culture in which they were living. Hadassah means myrtle, and Esther may be the Persian word for “star,” or it may be a Hebrew transliteration of Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of love and war. By mentioning both names, the author may be stressing that Esther was a woman with two identities, as we will soon see.

Commentators have different opinions regarding how many women were brought before the king. Josephus says there were 400. The phrase “Esther also was taken” suggests that she and the others were not given a choice. Although the passive voice does not require that interpretation, the same passive voice is used in 2:6 to describe the captives who were carried away from Jerusalem. The passive voice is used quite often in Esther, probably to stress that the characters are for the most part caught up in events over which they lack control.

There is a strong note of irony in verse 9. The man who was pleased by Esther and whose favor she won was Hegai, the king’s eunuch. “Esther’s beauty was overwhelming, even to a eunuch.”

Some wonder why Esther did not protest eating the unclean food as Daniel did. Although the text gives no answer, we will see in verse 10 that Esther was instructed not to disclose her identity as a Jew.

Verses 10-14

10 Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known. 11 And every day Mordecai walked in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and what was happening to her. 12 Now when the turn came for each young woman to go in to King Ahasuerus, after being twelve months under the regulations for the women, since this was the regular period of their beautifying, six months with oil of myrrh and six months with spices and ointments for women-- 13 when the young woman went in to the king in this way, she was given whatever she desired to take with her from the harem to the king’s palace. 14 In the evening she would go in, and in the morning she would return to the second harem in custody of Shaashgaz, the king’s eunuch, who was in charge of the concubines. She would not go in to the king again, unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name.

We are not told why Mordecai told Esther to conceal her identity, even though it would almost certainly require her to compromise her fidelity to the Law. Some suggest that she would have had no chance of becoming queen had her nationality been known. But does that mean that Mordecai was acting out of ambition? Perhaps, but more likely he knew (or was made to know) that Esther as Queen would be in a much better position to help her people.

Another possibility is that knowledge of her identity might have proved dangerous to her. We see anti-Semitism in this book, and Haman might not have been the only one who felt that way and was prepared to act on it. In fact, as we will see, Haman’s immediate

reaction to being insulted by a Jew is to strike out against all the Jews in the land. Thus, Mordecai likely had good reason to fear for Esther's safety. The fact that he checked on her daily shows that he was concerned.

Verses 12-14 reveal the process by which the girls were presented to the king. Apparently, most of the girls spent only a single night with the king, after which they moved to the house of Shaashgaz and became a concubine. There was no guarantee that the king would ever call them again, which meant they would be confined to what one commentator called "perpetual widowhood." After one night with the king, most of them would live the rest of their lives secluded in the harem. The author is showing that the odds were stacked against Esther, but these events are not occurring by chance! How could such a marginalized person in a hostile world ever make a difference for God? Only by a great reversal!

Verses 15-18

15 When the turn came for Esther the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her as his own daughter, to go in to the king, she asked for nothing except what Hegai the king's eunuch, who had charge of the women, advised. Now Esther was winning favor in the eyes of all who saw her. 16 And when Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, into his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign, 17 the king loved Esther more than all the women, and she won grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. 18 Then the king gave a great feast for all his officials and servants; it was Esther's feast. He also granted a remission of taxes to the provinces and gave gifts with royal generosity.

We need to pause and consider an important question that we have only hinted at so far in our discussion – is Esther portrayed here as a positive example or a negative example? For many, the question itself is surprising – is there any doubt that Esther is a positive role model? Yes, there is doubt, at least by some. And remember that the author has carefully concealed Esther's thoughts and motivations from us. We see her actions, but we are not told why she acted in that way. And she does not seem to rise to her high position by consistent obedience to the Law as, for example, Joseph did in Egypt.

Here is what one modern commentator has said on this issue:

How would you use this episode from Esther's life to teach virtue to your teenage daughter? What message would she get? Make yourself as attractive as possible to powerful men? Use your body to advance God's kingdom? The end justifies the means?

Did Esther initially hide her identity rather than face persecution as a child of God, as some suggest? Did she engage in situational ethics, as others argue? We know that she will soon take a very courageous stand, but is she being courageous here as well? Here is a very harsh quote from a 15th century Jewish commentator:

Now when Mordecai heard the king's herald announcing that whoever had a daughter or a sister should bring her to the king to have intercourse with an uncircumcised heathen, why did he not risk his life to take her to some deserted place to hide until the danger would pass? He should have been killed rather than submit to such an act. Why did Mordecai not keep righteous Esther from idol worship? Why was he not more careful? Where was his righteousness, his piety, and his valor? Esther too should by right have tried to commit suicide before allowing herself to have intercourse with Xerxes.

The author of Esther makes no attempt to vindicate her by explaining the extenuating circumstances or reporting that she was operating under God's special instructions. Later Greek translators added such explanations, even having Esther announce at one point that she abhorred "the bed of the uncircumcised." It cannot be an accident that the original text is silent on these questions. The reader is left to decide. Is Esther wholly righteous? Is she partly or maybe even mainly unrighteous? Although we are not without clues, the Bible does not explicitly answer that question, either here or elsewhere. You will look in vain for Esther's name on the roll call of faith in Hebrews 11.

So what is the answer? I think the answer is likely somewhere in between. We definitely see Esther's righteousness and courage in the book, but we may also see the opposite. And, if so, would it be that surprising? How many Old Testament characters are presented as solely righteous? Don't we more often than not see negative qualities mixed with the positive? And remember that every Jew we see in the book of Esther is here only because they had not returned with God's

people to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and the temple. Thus, to many, every Jew in Esther would have started off with a negative mark.

As for the intercourse with Xerxes, I think the Jewish scholar had at least one thing right – it would have cost Esther her life to refuse. And I believe we can see that God did not want Esther to pay that price, but rather he had other plans for her. The ultimate answer to the question of Esther's character is to see the providence of God working in her life and in the events of this book. Whether righteous or not, God was able to use her to advance his plans – and that is something we see throughout the Bible. And when the time for decision finally came, Esther made the right decision. And that, too, is a message for us if we, perhaps like Esther, ever look back on our lives with regret. "But this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before." (Philippians 3:13) As long as we remain on this earth, it is never too late to do the right thing.

After the 12-month beauty treatment in verse 12, Esther is finally taken before the king in verses 15-18. She took with her only what Hegai suggested, perhaps trusting that he knew best what would please the king.

The tenth month was a cold, wet month in the middle of winter. The seventh year would have been 479 BC.

Verse 17 is a key verse in the narrative – King Xerxes made Esther queen instead of Vashti. This sudden decision suggests that the king was overwhelmed by Esther's beauty, and may explain why he chose a queen outside of the leading Persian families. Although Esther was no doubt beautiful, I think we also see here the providence of God pulling Xerxes' strings, just as he had the strings of Cyrus and Pharaoh.

The author avoids the word "marriage," although it is implied (but not until some time after their first night together). Or was it, as some commentators argue, a marriage beyond her control and therefore not a true marriage at all?

It is interesting to note that Jewish Esther married Gentile Xerxes at about the same time that intermarriage became an issue among the Jews who had returned to Jerusalem. When we return to Ezra 9 and 10, we will see Ezra's harsh condemnation of the mixed marriages and his insistence that they divorce. How would Ezra have judged this Jewish queen?

What was Esther thinking about all of this? Had she been swept off her feet by the attention of the most powerful man on earth? Or was she wondering why God had allowed such a horrible thing to happen to her? We are not told.

To celebrate, the king gave a great feast and granted a remission of taxes, which no doubt caused the people to love Esther as much as the king did!

It is interesting how often the people of God found themselves in royal courts. Joseph and Moses went before Pharaoh, Daniel went before Nebuchadnezzar, and now Esther goes before Xerxes. As Christians, we should never shy away from opportunities to do likewise. Who knows but that we might have come to that position for such a time as this? For those who don't believe God's people should ever be involved in politics, I'm glad they didn't convince Esther or Joseph or Daniel of that!

Lesson 7: Esther 2:19 – 4:14

Verses 19-20

19 Now when the virgins were gathered together the second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. 20 Esther had not made known her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had commanded her, for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him.

What does verse 19 mean when it says that the virgins were gathered together “the second time”? Some think it is a flashback to a time before Esther was chosen as queen, but the better view is that it refers to a second gathering of the virgins after Esther became queen. Most likely it was a second procession of the unsuccessful contestants, perhaps intended to highlight Esther's beauty in comparison to theirs.

That Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate tells us that he was an official of some sort. One commentator suggests that after Esther became queen she had Mordecai appointed a magistrate or a judge.

The king's gate was a building with a gate within it and in which legal, civil, and commercial business was conducted. The foundations of this gate have been located at Susa (in present day Iran), and it measures 131 by 92 feet. (See the handout from Lesson 6.) It consisted of a central hall that led into the royal compound and two rectangular side rooms. The evidence from the excavation of the gate and the palace corresponds well with the details given in Esther.

In verse 20 we are again reminded of Mordecai's command to Esther that she not reveal her identity. Later we will see Esther commanding Mordecai, which will be yet another example of our theme of reversal.

Verses 21-23

21 In those days, as Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. 22 And this came to the knowledge of Mordecai, and he told it to Queen Esther, and Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai. 23 When the affair was investigated and found to be so, the men were both hanged on the gallows. And it was recorded in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king.

The details in Esther such as the names of the eunuchs in verse 21 further confirm that what we are reading is history. These names were likely recorded in the court records of the period.

Why did these two eunuchs become angry? We are not told, but remember that between these events and the events in Chapter 1, the king had been humiliated in a battle against the Greeks. Some surmise that humiliation may have caused this anger. We know that the king was eventually killed under similar circumstances.

Mordecai hears of the plot, and he tells Esther, who then tells the king. The conspirators are hanged, and the events are recorded in the book of chronicles of the king. Herodotus tells us about such a book in which the king had his secretaries record each time he saw one of his officers acting with distinction during a battle against the Greeks.

Verse 22 tells us something very important about Esther – she gave credit where credit was due. And if she had not done so, these events would have turned out very differently. And there are some lessons for us here. First, the obvious lesson is that we should also give credit where credit is due and not take unearned honors upon ourselves. But there is also a second lesson – our seemingly small acts of integrity (which may seem like nothing to us at the time) can have huge unforeseen impacts on our lives and the lives of others.

Esther 3

Verse 1

1 After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, and advanced him and set his throne above all the officials who were with him.

The villain takes the stage in Chapter 3. When Jews today celebrate the feast of Purim, the children are given noisemakers to use while the book of Esther is read, and they try to drown out the reader with noise every time Haman's name is mentioned.

We are not told why Haman is honored in this way, but it is interesting that the author places the promotion of Haman just where a reader would expect to see Mordecai's promotion for foiling the plot against the king's life. Haman is promoted to be second only to the king, while Mordecai appears to go unrewarded.

When Haman is introduced, he is identified as an Agagite (which is one of the most important words in the entire book). This reference

to Haman's nationality hints at a conflict that by this time was already centuries old. Agag was the king of the Amalekites at the time that Saul was the first king of Israel. (You will recall that Mordecai and Saul were both of the tribe of Benjamin and were both descended from someone named Kish, although that could not have been the same Kish with each.)

The Amalekites had the dubious distinction of being the first nation to attack and try to destroy God's newly formed covenant nation. In response, God promised Moses that he would completely destroy the Amalekites and be at war with them from generation to generation. (Exodus 17:8-16) Balaam's oracle in Numbers 24:7 predicted that the Israelite king would be greater than Agag (the Amalekite royal title).

Later, God instructed King Saul to attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. (1 Samuel 15:1-3) Saul did attack them, but he spared the life of King Agag and kept the best of the sheep and the cattle, in disobedience to God's command. When Samuel showed up, he cursed Saul and he cut Agag into pieces.

God's promise to be at war with the Amalekites in every generation was given to Moses within the context of the Sinai covenant. Would that promise still stand for the Jews living in exile for having violated that same covenant? Could they expect God to remain faithful to his promises when they had not remained faithful to theirs? These are the questions posed by the simple identification of Haman as an Agagite.

Verses 2-4

2 And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and paid homage to Haman, for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage. 3 Then the king's servants who were at the king's gate said to Mordecai, "Why do you transgress the king's command?" 4 And when they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them, they told Haman, in order to see whether Mordecai's words would stand, for he had told them that he was a Jew.

In the first chapter, we saw an example of respect commanded and respect refused, and here we see a second such example.

Why did Mordecai refuse to honor Haman? Some have suggested that Mordecai resented Haman's promotion and his own lack of reward. In the Greek version of Esther, Mordecai explains that he refused to bow to Haman because he would not give the glory due to

God to any man. But, it is known from other sources that many Jews did bow to pagan officials of the Persian court because it was not seen as a religious act but rather one of court protocol. (Our own president, for example, has bowed down before a Saudi Arabian king, a Japanese emperor, and the Mayor of Tampa, Florida.) Also, if (as it seems) Mordecai was an official in the Persian court, then he must have honored the king.

I think the correct answer is most likely the same one supported by Jewish tradition, which says that no self-respecting Benjaminite would show reverence to a descendant of the Amalekites. Although it could have been due to religious scruples instead, particularly if the act of bowing down had more than just a political meaning. But not even the Persian king himself demanded worship from his subjects, and so the more likely cause is the ancient animosity between the Jews and the Amalekites (which also explains why the text specifically points out Haman's ancestry).

Whatever caused Mordecai to refuse, the text does not tell us and it was not obvious to his colleagues, who repeatedly asked him to explain his actions. The final phrase in verse 4, "he had told them that he was a Jew," supports the idea that his refusal was based either on the animosity between the Jews and the Amalekites or on his fidelity to the Jewish law.

Identification with God's people can cause hardships, and Mordecai made that identification in verse 4. Esther had not yet done so, but her opportunity was coming.

Verses 5-6

5 And when Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage to him, Haman was filled with fury. 6 But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone. So, as they had made known to him the people of Mordecai, Haman sought to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus.

Haman's pride and hunger for power causes him to become filled with fury at Mordecai's refusal to honor him. Notice the difference here in how Mordecai, Esther, and Haman are presented by the author. We are left to wonder at Mordecai's reasons for refusing to bow down, and we are left to wonder about Esther's feelings in Chapter 2. But we have no doubt about how Haman feels – he is filled with fury. Haman is allowed no mysteries!

Rather than attack Mordecai alone (which further supports the notion that Mordecai was an official), he decides to wipe out Mordecai's entire race. Whatever we say about Esther and Mordecai, Mordecai's Jewishness was known, whereas hers was not. That also explains why they spoke using intermediaries. Mordecai's relation to Esther must have still been a secret because otherwise Haman would have known that Queen Esther herself was a Jew.

That Esther's Jewish ancestry was not known may tell us something about how the two had been living. As one commentator noted, "For the masquerade to last that long, Esther must have done more than eat, dress, and live like a Persian. She must have worshipped like one!" And before we become too judgmental, perhaps we should examine our own lives. Are we hiding our true identity from the world while we eat, dress, live, and worship like the Persians who surround us?

Incredibly, some commentators argue that Haman's attempted genocide is so improbable that the story must be fictitious. It is because of arguments such as that that professors get the reputation of living in isolated ivory towers unaware of what is going on around them! How anyone living in today's world could argue that attempted genocide is too improbable to be true is beyond me! Even in Haman's day it was not that incredible. When Smerdis the Magus was killed, every Persian in the capital took up weapons and killed every Magus they could find.

We should pause for just a moment to say a few words about anti-Semitism, of which this attempted genocide is but one of many examples extending up until the present time. The sad fact is that anti-Semitism has often been linked with Christianity, and that is something we must never condone. Here is a quote about the Jews by a famous German – who said it?

First to set fire to their synagogues or schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn ... Second, I advise that their houses also be razed and destroyed. ... Third, I advise that all their prayer books ... be taken from them. ... Fourth, I advise that their rabbis be forbidden to teach henceforth on pain of loss of life and limb. ... Fifth, I advise that safe conduct on the highways be abolished completely for the Jews.

Who said that? Hitler? Are those statements from the Nuremberg Laws? No. That quote is from Martin Luther. Samuel Sandmel has written that “the pogroms [organized massacres] in Eastern Europe from which my parents fled began with the ringing of church bells. I remember as an American boy how my mother used to shiver whenever the bells rang in the church near our home.” Very sad!

Certainly, we know what our attitude should be toward the Jewish race or any other race. As far as the church is concerned, there are only two groups of people in the world – those who are in Christ and those who are not in Christ, and that division crosses all racial boundaries. “Here [in the church] there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.” (Colossians 3:11)

Verses 7-11

7 In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur (that is, they cast lots) before Haman day after day; and they cast it month after month till the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. 8 Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, “There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom. Their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king’s laws, so that it is not to the king’s profit to tolerate them. 9 If it please the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay 10,000 talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king’s business, that they may put it into the king’s treasuries.” 10 So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews. 11 And the king said to Haman, “The money is given to you, the people also, to do with them as it seems good to you.”

That we are now in the 12th year of the king’s reign means that Esther had been queen for five years when Haman convinced the king to go along with his evil plan. This was more than a century after the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, more than 60 years after the first return to Jerusalem, and less than 20 years until Ezra’s return to Jerusalem.

To determine the time for the attack, Haman consulted the “pur” (plural “purim”), the Hebrew form of a Babylonian word meaning “lot.” Archaeologists have unearthed purim and found them to be clay cubes inscribed with either cuneiform characters or dots just like our modern dice. The difference is that they were not used for

gambling but rather for divination. Both Herodotus and Xenophon wrote about the Persian custom of casting lots.

Verse 7 also gives the equivalent Hebrew word for lot, which is goral. In Psalm 16:5, David praised God because “you have assigned me my portion and my cup, you have made my lot [goral] secure.” David praised God because it was God (rather than chance or luck) who had secured David’s destiny. Proverbs 16:33 likewise uses the same word: “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.”

We see in these verses one of the themes we discussed earlier – the clash of worldviews between those who trust in fate and those who trust in God. We know that God is at work, but like Esther and Mordecai, we cannot always see the end of things from the middle. But as Christians we walk by faith, not by sight. (2 Corinthians 5:7)

Haman casts the lots in the first month (for reasons we discussed in the introduction) and the lots fall on a day that gives the Jews almost a year to prepare. This simple event may tell us much about the providence of God – he did not override Haman’s free will in determining to act against God’s people, but he seems to have a hand in the outcome of these lots in determining the date when Haman would act.

Haman uses a mixture of truth, error, and exaggeration to convince the king to follow his plan. He tells the king that all the Jews disobey all the laws, even though only one Jew had disobeyed only one command. He also says that the Jews are scattered throughout all the provinces, which was likely also an exaggeration, although the Jews do seem have to been fairly widespread.

Haman’s charges against the Jews were based on the fact that they were different – they had different laws and different customs. Anyone who takes God’s word seriously will be different – in Esther’s day or in our own. But we must notice that Esther, it would seem, had not been very different herself because her ancestry appears to have remained hidden.

Haman knew that his promise in verse 9 would sway the king to his side – money! Xerxes desperately needed to replenish his treasury after the disastrous war with Greece. Haman presumably planned to obtain this massive amount of money by plundering the property of those whom he would kill.

By giving Haman the signet ring in verse 10, the king was giving him unlimited authority to do what he wanted regarding this issue.

Neither he nor Haman appears to have had any idea that Queen Esther herself was a member of this troublesome group. Notice that Haman never once mentioned the Jewish race by name in his argument before the king. Perhaps that was because Xerxes' two predecessors, Cyrus and Darius, had issued proclamations favorable to the Jews. In any event, you would think the king would ask – but he did not. Some surmise that he may have been looking for a scapegoat to blame for his loss in Greece, and if so it would not be the last time God's people found themselves in that position. Nero later used the church as a scapegoat for the devastating fire that many believed he himself started. And as times turn bad today, we might wonder if history might not repeat itself.

And Haman in verse 11 heard what must have been music to his ears – “the money is given to you” (although the king certainly expected his promised 10,000 talents, which was about two thirds of the entire empire's income, leading some to believe that Haman was using hyperbole.) Later in 7:4, Esther will confirm that her people had been sold. It would not be the last time that God's people would be sold. Those 30 pieces of silver have changed hands many times, and it is still happening today every time a congregation puts the contribution plate ahead of their faithfulness to God.

The king's permission in verse 11 to Haman that he “do with them as it seems good to you,” is paralleled by a similar phrase later in 9:5 that the Jews “did what they would unto those that hated them,” but by that time the tables had been turned!

Verses 12-15

12 Then the king's scribes were summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, and an edict, according to all that Haman commanded, was written to the king's satraps and to the governors over all the provinces and to the officials of all the peoples, to every province in its own script and every people in its own language. It was written in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed with the king's signet ring. 13 Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with instruction to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. 14 A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation to all the peoples to be ready for that day. 15 The couriers went out hurriedly by order of the king, and the decree was issued in Susa the citadel. And the king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was thrown into confusion.

Although Haman will have to wait eleven months for the day on which he will attack the Jews, he immediately sends out the decree announcing their fate. That edict is sent out on the 13th day of the first month, which is ironically the eve of the Passover. The day before they would celebrate their freedom from Egyptian bondage, a decree had been made calling for their destruction.

The decree is made and copies are sent to every province. Chapter 3 ends with what one commentator has called the most horrifying sight in the narrative so far – after the death document had been issued, “the king and Haman sat down to drink.”

It is interesting that verse 15 says “the city of Susa was thrown into confusion.” Everyone seems to have been bewildered by such an order, whether Jewish or not. Perhaps they wisely thought that if it happened to them, it could also happen to us.

We have noted that Esther has always been very meaningful to the Jews, particularly during times of persecution. But the same is also true with the church. In fact, the early church faced a similar situation when in the first century it felt the full force of the mighty Roman empire. The Roman emperors demanded respect with a command ordering all people to acknowledge them as Lord. When the Christians refused, they were persecuted. The early Christians, like the Jews in Susa, had their existence threatened by the government under which they lived. The book of Revelation is focused on that conflict between Rome and the early church, and it was written to encourage Christians in that time of persecution.

Esther 4

Verses 1-3

1 When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and he cried out with a loud and bitter cry. 2 He went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one was allowed to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth. 3 And in every province, wherever the king's command and his decree reached, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and many of them lay in sackcloth and ashes.

Mordecai shows intense grief over the edict, and no doubt particularly because his personal conflict with Haman has brought the entire Jewish nation into jeopardy. It is one thing to bring

persecution upon yourself, but he had brought it upon his entire people by his refusal to bow down before Haman. But there is no indication that Mordecai regretted having not bowed down to Haman, which some say supports the idea that it was done for religious reasons. (But since we are not told what Mordecai was thinking, we can't say for sure whether he had any regret.) In any event, had Mordecai not bowed down to Haman, Haman would have found another excuse to move against the Jews.

We see the tearing of clothes as a display of grief by Jews throughout the Old Testament by such men as Joshua, Caleb, David, and Ezra, but it was also a custom of the Persians. Herodotus says that the Persians under Xerxes tore their clothes because of their grief at having lost the battle of Salamis.

Mordecai went up to but did not enter the King's Gate because no one in sackcloth was allowed to enter.

Mordecai's mourning was duplicated by Jews wherever the decree reached – and they, of course, had no way to know what had caused the edict. In fact, Mordecai may have been the only Jew who knew what had triggered the edict.

Given the length of time between the edict and the carrying out of the edict, had things not turned out as they did later in this book, there might have been a much larger number of Jews who decided to join those who had already returned to Jerusalem!

Verse 3 includes the phrase “with fasting and weeping and lamenting,” which is the same phrase we find in Joel 2:12 – “Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning.” Many commentators see that phrase as an intertextual link between Esther and Joel. If so, the next phrase in Joel 2 is telling: “Rend your heart and not your garments.” And a verse later in Joel, we read, “Who knoweth if he will return and repent?” And in the next verse, there is a call for fasting. Each of these statements from Joel can be linked to an event in these verses from Esther.

The reference to fasting without any reference to prayer is unusual and almost certainly intentional. As we have said, the book omits direct references to God perhaps in order to highlight his providence at work behind the scenes. “The promise of God, the justice of God, and the providence of God shine brilliantly through the entire crisis, so that the mere omission of his name obscures nothing of his

identity, attributes, and purposes for his chosen people and for the entire world of mankind.”

But another possibility is that these exiled Jews had moved so far away from God that they did not even pray in this hour of crisis. If I had to point to the surest sign that someone has drifted away from God, I would point either to a failure to delight in God’s word or to a failure to pray. When either of those things occurs in someone’s life, that person has likely crossed the line and drifted away from the church.

- “Prayerlessness is an insult to God. Every prayerless day is a statement by a helpless individual, ‘I do not need God today.’”
- “The one concern of the devil is to keep Christians from praying. He fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work, and prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil, mocks at our wisdom, but trembles when we pray.”
- “Apostasy begins in the closet, no man ever backslid from the life and power of Christianity who continued constant and fervent in private prayer.”

These verses are the low point in the narrative. Death seems certain – unless a deliverer can be found. But who could that be? Verse 4 answers that question.

Verses 4-5

4 When Esther’s young women and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed. She sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. 5 Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king’s eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what this was and why it was.

The remainder of Chapter 4 presents three stages in the dialogue between Esther and Mordecai, although they never speak personally with each other. First, Esther sends clothes to Mordecai, but he does not accept them. Second, Esther sends someone to find out why Mordecai is upset, and she receives a detailed explanation. Third, there is a longer exchange in which Esther decides what she will do.

Esther was deeply distressed when she learned of Mordecai’s grief. She and Mordecai were still very close, although they seem to have

maintained the secrecy of their relationship. The eunuch who delivered the message must have been trusted to maintain that secret.

Verses 6-8

6 Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, 7 and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. 8 Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther and explain it to her and command her to go to the king to beg his favor and plead with him on behalf of her people.

Mordecai was well informed, knowing even the details of the money that Haman offered the king. The text emphasizes that he knew the "exact sum." Mordecai even sent Esther a copy of the decree so she could see for herself and know that he was not exaggerating.

Mordecai also instructed the eunuch to "command" Esther to go to the king and plead with him on behalf of "her" people. Who were "her" people? Was she Jewish or was she Persian? And if she had one foot in each camp, into which camp would she jump when forced to make a decision? (We could ask ourselves those same questions!)

And if she did what Mordecai commanded, then her secret would be out! Wasn't Mordecai the one who commanded her to keep her identity a secret? If Esther now obeyed Mordecai's new command to do the opposite, she might find herself on the wrong side of that edict! Revealing her identity as a Jew would make her an easy target in the treacherous Persian court.

Courage was called for – how would she respond? Esther was faced with a decision. She had to decide who she was – was she Esther or Hadassah? Who were "her" people?

We need to pray that we will be given such Esther moments! Every Christian has had at least one Esther moment because that is the choice demanded by the gospel. Either we will continue to live as the pagans or we will step out and became part of and identify ourselves with the people of God. That choice defines who we are. That choice answers the question: who are your people?

And those Esther moments will come again and again throughout our lives. Often they come unexpectedly and they pass quickly – but we should pray that they will come and that we will recognize them when they come and that we will respond correctly when they come. It is

those Esther moments in our lives that define who we are. And Esther moments don't just come to individual Christians, they come to congregations as well. And, as with individuals, it is the Esther moments that define us as a congregation. Are we on the side of Christ, or are we on the side of Persia? Congregations that have abandoned the word of God to appeal to the world on issues such as instrumental music and church organization have announced to the world that they are on the side of Persia.

Verses 9-11

9 And Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. 10 Then Esther spoke to Hathach and commanded him to go to Mordecai and say, 11 "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—to be put to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter so that he may live. But as for me, I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days."

Esther reminds Mordecai of the Persian law forbidding anyone to approach the king without first being called. Under that law, such a person was to be killed unless the king held out his golden scepter. Esther had not been called for 30 days.

Herodotus confirms that the Persians had such a law, but he also says that one could send a message to the king requesting an audience. If so, why didn't Esther do that? Perhaps because it would take too long, or perhaps the risk was too great that he would say no – and then what?

Under ordinary circumstances, Esther might have had less fear in approaching the king unannounced, but this decree changed things. Clearly, something had caused the king to issue the decree – and perhaps her secret was already out. (Verse 7 may suggest that Mordecai told Esther what had caused the decree to be issued, but we are not certain that he did.)

Remember that these events were taking place five years after Esther's initial encounter with the king. That he had not called for her in 30 days may suggest that his affection for her had cooled. Perhaps the king was ready for another queen, and, if so, perhaps he would welcome an opportunity to have Esther banished or killed. Is this what Esther was thinking? We are not told.

Verses 12-14

12 And they told Mordecai what Esther had said. 13 Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. 14 For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

Mordecai's only recorded words appear in these verses, and they leave us with a number of intriguing questions. From where or from whom would this other deliverance come if Esther failed to act? And why was Mordecai so certain that Esther would perish if she failed to act? (After all, her identity remained a secret among the Persians.)

Mordecai tells Esther that she is in danger no matter what she does. She is in danger if she acts, and she is in danger if she fails to act. Apparently, Mordecai felt certain her secret would not be maintained for very long. Other Jews knew who Esther was (see verse 16), and once the killing started they would likely also turn to her for help. She could not avoid danger by remaining silent.

Mordecai's statement to Esther is a little unsettling when you examine it closely. He understands that her life may be in peril if she acts, but he is certain she will perish if she fails to act. Was he invoking a divine judgment upon her if she failed to act for her people? Or was he, as some suggest, threatening to reveal her identity as Jew, thus bringing her under Haman's decree. How did Esther understand it? Did she see a veiled threat? We are not told.

As for the identity of this other deliverer, commentators have long seen in that verse an allusion to God's intervention should human efforts fail. But is that really the choice they were facing – that either man would save the Jews or God would save the Jews? Don't we see God acting through Esther already? God was working to save his people already. Mordecai was not saying either you do it or God will do it. Instead, he was saying either God will do it through you or God will do it through someone else.

And there is a lesson for us. We, too, cannot avoid danger by remaining silent. We cannot avoid danger by remaining inactive. We cannot remain with one foot in Persia and one foot in the kingdom.

At last we come to perhaps the key question in the book: "And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as

this?” Mordecai suggests that there is a purpose behind all that has happened in Esther’s life that goes beyond her own self interests. If Esther had ever wondered how she had come to this unlikely position, perhaps that question had now been answered. Why had she found herself in Persia? Why had she found herself in Susa? Why had she found herself in the bedroom of Xerxes?

Mordecai’s question reveals a deep conviction of God’s providence, and an understanding that God’s providence works through the actions of individuals. Yes, God would save his people – but he would do so through the courage and faithfulness of Esther, or he would find someone else. Could God have sent an army of angels to kill the Persians? Yes, but that is now he worked then, and that is not how works now. We are his army – and if we lay our weapons down and fail to act, then who will fight for him?

Lesson 8: Esther 4:15 – 7:7

Verses 15-17

15 Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, 16 “Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.” 17 Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

We see another reversal in verses 15-17. In verse 8, Mordecai issued his final command to Esther through the king’s eunuch, but here the roles are reversed—Mordecai does what Esther orders him to do. Esther has now taken charge. So far she has been passive, not taking action, but just following the path of least resistance. But now she has come to a defining moment, and *passive* Esther becomes *active* Esther. It is Esther, not Mordecai, who courageously goes before the king. It is Esther, not Mordecai, who plans the strategy to unmask Haman. It is Esther, not Mordecai, who prevents the genocide of her people. This great reversal in the life of Esther led to the great reversal in the life of her people – and at this point she has finally answered Mordecai’s question – the Jews rather than the Persians are “her” people.

What caused this great transformation in the life of Esther? When did it occur? We talked earlier about “Esther moments” – those moments of decision in which we are given an opportunity to stand up with the people of God and let our identity be known. We should pray for those moments and welcome them when they come. And one thing about those moments is that, when we respond correctly to them, they have the effect of strengthening us and emboldening us for other such moments. Isn’t that what we see in the life of Esther? She became a different person once she stood up and identified herself with the people of God. That was when the great reversal in her own life began. That decision was the pivot point in her life. It is often an imagined parade of horrors that prevents us from standing up when we should – and when that parade does not appear after we take a stand, subsequent stands become easier. And once we are identified with the people of God, we will become bolder and more confident about later stands. “If God be for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31)

Esther is the central character in this book. How do we know that? (And it is not only because the book is named for her!) We also know

it because she alone changes in this book. Mordecai, Xerxes, and Haman walk through the book unchanged and unchanging, but not Esther. The author is calling for us to focus on her as she progresses and matures through these events. And perhaps the author is inviting his readers to compare her development with their own. Are we progressing and maturing? Unless we are perfect, we need to be in a constant state of change! It is Jesus – not us – who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. We should be changing every day as we become more and more like him. (Or do we perhaps expect Jesus to become more and more like us?)

Do we see Esther acting by faith in these verses or do we see Esther following the fatalism of the Persians? We are not told, although the end of verse 16 perhaps shows us some fatalism – “if I perish, I perish.” Others though say that the phrase simply shows her courageous determination. As usual, the text does not tell us what she is thinking or what is motivating her. Each time we think we have her figured out, the text tosses us another puzzle.

Esther’s request that the people fast on her behalf may imply prayer, but the text does not mention it. The act of fasting also generally implies an appeal to God, but the text does not mention God.

Although fasts were generally practiced only during the day, this fast lasted both day and night. Although we see fasting throughout the Bible, the Jews were commanded to fast on only one day each year, the Day of Atonement. But they frequently fasted at other times for special occasions or times of special need.

What would Esther do next? So far we have seen two acts of courage – Vashti in refusing to dishonor herself, and Mordecai in refusing to honor Haman. Will we see a third? God’s providence has brought Esther to this point. How will she respond?

Esther 5

Verses 1-4

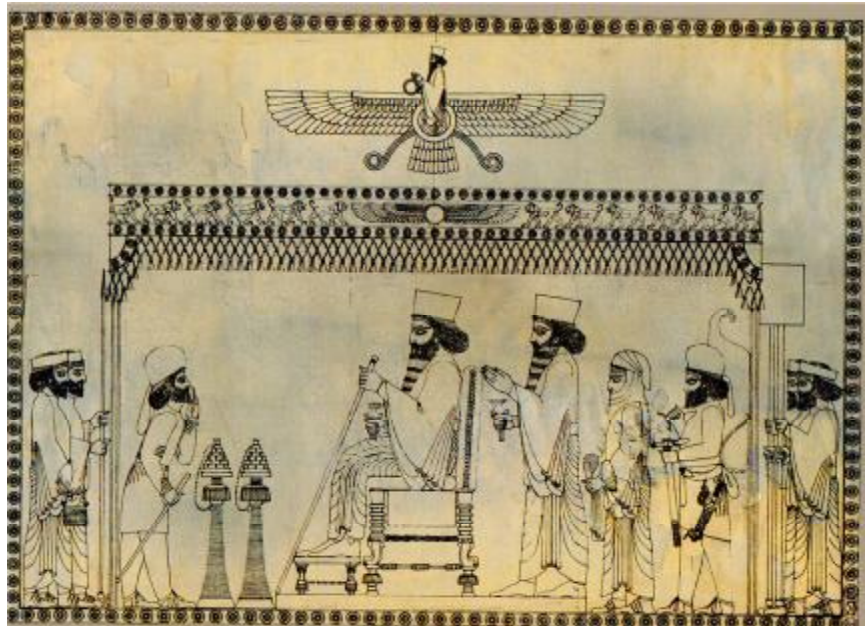
1 On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king’s palace, in front of the king’s quarters, while the king was sitting on his royal throne inside the throne room opposite the entrance to the palace. 2 And when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won favor in his sight, and he held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. Then Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter. 3 And the king said to her,

“What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom.” 4 And Esther said, “If it please the king, let the king and Haman come today to a feast that I have prepared for the king.”

In Chapter 1, Vashti risked her life by refusing to appear before the king when summoned. Here, Esther risks her life by doing the opposite – appearing before the king unsummoned.

You should put a circle around two very important words in verse 1 – “and stood.” Esther took a stand. We mentioned Martin Luther in a previous class when we discussed his anti-Semitism, but Luther also had positive qualities. In April 1521, Luther appeared before Emperor Charles V to defend what he had taught and written. At the end of his speech, he reportedly spoke the famous words, “Here I stand; I can do no other. God help me.” Everyone knew where Luther stood. Where do we stand? We need to ask ourselves that questions every day, and we need to make sure that we never cause the world to doubt where we stand.

The threat to Esther’s life in approaching the king unrequested was real. Archaeologists have uncovered an image of a Persian king (either Xerxes or Darius) seated upon his throne and holding a long scepter in his right hand. Behind him is shown a soldier holding a large ax. Either the scepter would rise or the ax would fall.



Xerxes’ offer to Esther of half his kingdom was an idiom that was not meant to be taken literally. It simply meant that the king was disposed to be generous to the person in question, in this case Esther.

Herodotus tells us about two other occasions when Xerxes made such an offer – and each time he ended up regretting it. He made that same “half kingdom” offer to one of his intended mistresses, Artaynte. She requested the beautiful robe he was wearing that had been handwoven by his wife, Amestris, who then discovered the affair and sought revenge. She gained it when, on her birthday she was also granted such a request and she asked for Artaynte’s mother (whom she believed was behind the affair). She had that woman brutally murdered, which led the woman’s husband, Xerxes’ brother, to instigate a revolt.

In verse 2, the king raises his scepter and Esther’s life is spared. All of the worry and all of the fear had been for nothing – the king was pleased with her, and he granted her an audience. I am reminded of one of my favorite Mark Twain quotes: “I have been through some terrible things in my life, some of which actually happened.” If even a tenth of the things we worry about came to pass, I doubt that any of us would still be here to talk about it. “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” (1 Peter 5:7)

The king was very curious about what had caused Esther to come before him unrequested. He knew it must be something extremely important because he knew she was risking death in coming to him that way. But Esther handles the situation as a master politician – she does not directly answer the king’s question. Instead, she invites the king along with Haman to come to a banquet she has prepared. It was an unusual honor for another man to be invited to a banquet with the queen because Persian kings were very protective of their wives.

In verse 4, the initial Hebrew letters in the phrase “Let the King ... Come Today” spell out the divine name, Yahweh (YHWH).¹ Some ancient manuscripts wrote those letters in large script to call attention to that fact, with some arguing that the author had included God’s name in coded form. I am always amused by those who seek secret codes in the Bible – they generally ignore what God is plainly saying to them in his word while they seek secret hidden messages from God. Today, there is an entire industry built around supposed secret Bible codes, and those efforts display an ignorance of scripture as well as an ignorance of statistics. The Bible does have a message for them – but they do not need a secret decoder ring to understand it: “Now the Spirit speaketh **expressly**, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith.” (1 Timothy 4:1)

¹ Most English translations say “let the King and Haman come today.” The verb, however, is singular. A better translation might be, “may the King come today—and Haman.”

Verse 4 ends with Haman being invited to his own downfall—and looking forward to it!

Verses 5-8

5 Then the king said, “Bring Haman quickly, so that we may do as Esther has asked.” So the king and Haman came to the feast that Esther had prepared. 6 And as they were drinking wine after the feast, the king said to Esther, “What is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.” 7 Then Esther answered, “My wish and my request is: 8 If I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my wish and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come to the feast that I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king has said.”

At the banquet, and after some drinks, the king again asks Esther what had caused her to come before him unannounced – and once again he is understandably curious why she had risked death. But once again, Esther sidesteps the question, instead inviting them both to another banquet on the next day.

The king is so curious that, as we will see in a moment, he cannot sleep (which turns out to be very important). Haman, on the other hand, doesn’t seem curious at all – he is just glad to be there! He has been blinded by his pride.

Why did Esther make the king wait for an answer? It was certainly a risk because the king’s agreeable mood could change – we know he was moody and erratic, and Haman could be tipped off at any moment to the danger he was in. Esther’s answer suggest she was treating the king’s promise as sort of a blank check that she could take with her – “tomorrow I will do as the king has said.” Why did she make him wait? For whatever reason the time was not right, and Esther wisely showed patience along with her courage – two qualities that do not always go hand in hand. We do know that the king had a sleepless night, likely because of this encounter, and that sleepless night would prove very important. Thus, the real answer for Esther’s delay is likely the providence of God working to see his plans accomplished.

Verses 9-14

9 And Haman went out that day joyful and glad of heart. But when Haman saw Mordecai in the king’s gate, that he neither rose nor trembled before him, he was filled with wrath against Mordecai. 10 Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home, and he sent and brought his friends and his

wife Zeresh. 11 And Haman recounted to them the splendor of his riches, the number of his sons, all the promotions with which the king had honored him, and how he had advanced him above the officials and the servants of the king. 12 Then Haman said, "Even Queen Esther let no one but me come with the king to the feast she prepared. And tomorrow also I am invited by her together with the king. 13 Yet all this is worth nothing to me, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate." 14 Then his wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, "Let a gallows fifty cubits high be made, and in the morning tell the king to have Mordecai hanged upon it. Then go joyfully with the king to the feast." This idea pleased Haman, and he had the gallows made.

Verse 9 tells us that Haman went out that day joyful and glad of heart. Again, unlike others in the book, we are told exactly how Haman was feeling. Everything seemed to be going his way, and he was very happy. We can learn a lesson from the happiness of Haman – it depended solely on Haman's current circumstances. In this country, one of our unalienable rights is the pursuit of happiness – and we pursue it with abandon, which likely explains why the dominant emotion in our day is disappointment. Earthly happiness is a fickle friend, and, as Haman would soon discover, it comes and goes with the tides.

Haman's defining characteristic was his pride. We see his vast and tender ego on display all throughout this book. Peter Kreeft has said that "nothing distinguishes Christian morality from pagan morality more sharply than their opposite attitudes toward pride." Aristotle, for example, said that pride was a virtue. Haman is a perfect example of that pagan pride. Here is how C.S. Lewis described pride in his book *Mere Christianity*:

There is one vice of which no man in the world is free; which everyone in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else; and of which hardly any people, except Christians, ever imagine that they are guilty themselves. ... There is no fault which makes a man more unpopular, and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it ourselves, the more we dislike it in others. ...

[Pride] is the complete anti-God state of mind. ...

Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-

looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others. ...

[P]ower is what Pride really enjoys: there is nothing that makes a man feel so superior to others as being able to move them about like toy soldiers. ... If I am a proud man, then, as long as there is one man in the whole world more powerful, or richer, or cleverer than I, he is my rival and my enemy. ...

Pride always means enmity—it is enmity. And not only enmity between man and man, but enmity to God. ...

In God you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. ... As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you. ...

Pride is spiritual cancer: it eats up the very possibility of love, or contentment, or even common sense.

Pride violates the first and greatest commandment because pride loves self rather than God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. Pride is behind every other sin because every sin says to God, “*my* will be done.” Hell’s theme song is “I did it my way!”

And once again Haman’s pride meets Mordecai, and as usual, Mordecai does not disappoint. Apparently Haman had to pass by Mordecai on his way home, and Mordecai neither rose nor showed any fear when the great Haman passed by. This was even more of an affront than when Mordecai refused to bow down. So naturally, Haman takes the only reasonable course of action – he runs home and cries to his wife! (But first, verse 10 tells us, he “restrained himself.” You can just picture him feigning indifference at the slight while seething and plotting revenge inside.) He complains to his wife that nothing – not even his riches, his power, or his honor from the Queen – gives him any satisfaction so long as he sees Mordecai sitting at the king’s gate. It has been rightly said that a person of good character overlooks slights against himself, but one of inferior character magnifies them. Here is how Pascal described such a person:

[T]he same man who spends so many days and nights in fury and despair at losing some office or at some imaginary affront to his honor is the very one who knows that he is going to lose everything through death but feels neither anxiety nor emotion. It is a monstrous thing to see one and the same heart at once so sensitive to minor things and so strangely insensitive to the greatest. It is an incomprehensible spell, a supernatural torpor.

We see such a person in Haman. He is obsessed with Mordecai's opinion of him, while giving hardly a thought to his own attempted genocide of an entire people. He is propelled along by slights to his honor, whether real or imaginary. His focus is on how others saw him, and we see him giving no thought at all to what sort of person he really was. Haman's focus was totally external – which makes it doubly interesting that he is the only person in Esther whose inner thoughts are laid open for our examination.

There is a very subtle irony in the picture of Haman constantly running home to ask his wife how to solve his problem. Remember how this book started out? The king and his advisors were concerned that the Vashti incident would somehow undermine the male leadership in their society! Who do we see taking charge in this book? Esther and Zeresh – Xerxes' wife and Haman's wife!

With Haman and his wife Zeresh, we see a parallel with King Ahab and his wife Jezebel. Like Haman, Ahab was rebuffed by Naboth and then ran home sulking to his wife – and like Jezebel, Zeresh has a simple yet evil solution to the problem. Like Haman, Ahab also seemingly had everything – and yet he wanted just one more thing to be happy. How many have run their ships aground while searching for that one more thing! The key to contentment is to give up that never ending searching for just one more thing because whatever that one thing is, there will be another “just one thing” waiting in line behind it. You will never have enough.

Haman's wife proposes a public humiliation for Mordecai, so Haman builds a gallows that is as tall as his own pride – 75 feet! Critics have complained that no gallows would have been this tall – about the height of a 7-story building. But it is certainly not impossible, and it is also possible that it was built on top of a hill or a building. Haman wanted everyone to see Mordecai – and he is about to get his wish! Haman's plans are about to run head first into the providence of God.

It is often said that Jesus can be found on every page of the Old Testament. Is that true of Esther? Notice how Chapter 5 begins – “On the third day.” Can we not think of another, infinitely greater, champion of God’s people who arose to save them from certain death on the third day?

Esther 6

Verses 1-3

1 On that night the king could not sleep. And he gave orders to bring the book of memorable deeds, the chronicles, and they were read before the king. 2 And it was found written how Mordecai had told about Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king’s eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, and who had sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. 3 And the king said, “What honor or distinction has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?” The king’s young men who attended him said, “Nothing has been done for him.”

One commentator says that Chapter 6 is “arguably the most ironically comic scene in the entire Bible” (although Chapter 7 seems funnier to me). While Haman plots Mordecai’s death on a 75 foot gallows, the king plans to honor Mordecai for his faithful service. The unsuspecting Haman enters the king’s court, thinking the king must be planning to honor him – thinking to himself, “Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?” in verse 6. “If ever there was a picture of pride going before a fall, Haman is it.” As one commentator noted, “Here the early bird is gotten by the worm!”

We begin to see here the series of seeming coincidences that we discussed in the introduction as Haman’s plan spirals out of control. The king just happens to have a sleepless night (although, as we have suggested, it might have been because of Esther’s delay in answering his question). The king just happens to have the chronicles read to him, and the service of Mordecai just happens to come to his attention at the moment Haman is plotting his death. Haman just happens to show up early and be there when the king asks for an advisor, and the king just happens to ask Haman for advice without initially mentioning Mordecai by name. Those who read the book with the eye of faith cannot miss seeing God in its pages, even though he is never named. As one commentator stated, these coincidences are the author’s cipher for “divinely arranged.” We cannot fail to see the hand of divine providence in such a series of events.

Asking for the chronicles to be read would be similar to asking today for the Congressional Record to be read – and each could provide a quick cure for insomnia.

It was important for a Persian king to reward those who were loyal as a way of promoting his own safety and security on the throne. Thus, the king was understandably upset to learn that Mordecai had never been honored for foiling the assassination plot against him five years earlier. Mordecai had no doubt been disappointed himself, and his apparent willingness to overlook it may tell us something about his character.

And why did the king fail to honor Mordecai? Once again I think we see the providence of God at work. It was important for God's plan that Mordecai be honored at the right time. Perhaps we need to look for God's providence in our own lives when things do not operate according to our own carefully arranged time schedule.

Verses 4-14

4 And the king said, "Who is in the court?" Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the king's palace to speak to the king about having Mordecai hanged on the gallows that he had prepared for him. 5 And the king's young men told him, "Haman is there, standing in the court." And the king said, "Let him come in." 6 So Haman came in, and the king said to him, "What should be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?" And Haman said to himself, "Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?" 7 And Haman said to the king, "For the man whom the king delights to honor, 8 let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn, and the horse that the king has ridden, and on whose head a royal crown is set. 9 And let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble officials. Let them dress the man whom the king delights to honor, and let them lead him on the horse through the square of the city, proclaiming before him: 'Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.'" 10 Then the king said to Haman, "Hurry; take the robes and the horse, as you have said, and do so to Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Leave out nothing that you have mentioned." 11 So Haman took the robes and the horse, and he dressed Mordecai and led him through the square of the city, proclaiming before him, "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor." 12 Then Mordecai returned to the king's gate. But Haman hurried to his house, mourning and with his head covered. 13 And Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends everything that had happened to him. Then his wise men and his wife Zeresh said to him, "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the

Jewish people, you will not overcome him but will surely fall before him.” 14 While they were yet talking with him, the king’s eunuchs arrived and hurried to bring Haman to the feast that Esther had prepared.

As one commentator notes, the question in verse 6 “creates instant dismay in the reader: how unfortunate that the king should consult Haman, of all people, on the way to reward Mordecai!” Haman, no doubt, would turn the king’s opinion against Mordecai or perhaps suggest some meaningless and unobservable honor. But the king does not mention Mordecai’s name when he asks the question, which allows Haman’s pride to take center stage once again just at the right time, and he asks himself a question in verse 6 that creates one of the funniest scenes in the Bible – “Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?” Whom indeed!

Haman can’t ask for a promotion for himself because he is already second only to the king. Haman selects a reward (wearing the king’s own robe and riding on the king’s own horse) that would reinforce his relation to the king in the eyes of the people. Today, it would be similar to the president allowing someone to use Air Force One – and I’m sure Haman was already looking forward to the trip! In fact, this great honor has made him forget about Mordecai for a short time – a very short time!

Rather than asking for wealth or power, Haman asks for honor and recognition – and here we see the driving force in his life: what do others think about him? Do they all know how wonderful he truly is? Haman is guided throughout this book by one overriding concern – how would others see him. He wanted nothing more than that others would see him as powerful and prestigious. Vashti, Esther, and Mordecai’s motivations come from inside – and the book tells us nothing about what they are thinking. Haman’s motivations, by contrast, are external – and the book tells us all that is on his mind.

Haman sees himself only through the eyes of others, and his happiness depends solely on how they see him. In Luke 6:26, Jesus said, “Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.” Our goal should never be to have everyone speak well of us – because many will do that only when we are wallowing in sin with them. If we are living for Jesus, then we should expect that many (and perhaps most) will not speak well of us. “For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.” (Galatians 1:10)

To fully appreciate verse 10, you have to picture Haman's face as the king finally identifies the one to whom this special honor will go – none other than the despised Mordecai! And to make things funnier, Haman has no idea why the king would suddenly decide to honor this man that Haman was planning to kill. Talk about a reversal! And the reversal was far from over for poor Haman!

Notice that the king does not just tell Haman to honor Mordecai, he tells Haman to honor “Mordecai *the Jew*.” In addition to rubbing salt in Haman's wound, the reference by the king to Mordecai's nationality raises an interesting question. Did the king even know that he had condemned all the Jews to death? Remember that Haman never mentioned the Jews by name to the king.

In verse 11, Haman takes the robes and the horse, and he dresses Mordecai in them and leads him through the square of the city, proclaiming before him, “Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.” If I had written the book of Esther, I would have turned verse 11 into an entire chapter. Elsewhere we are told exactly what Haman was thinking – what was he thinking here? How did Mordecai react to the sudden reversal?

“Only an author with a sure hand and confidence in his reader would allow this climax in the bitter relationship between the two protagonists to pass with so few words and leave so much to the audience. A skilled author knows when not to say too much.”

And can't we picture the scene as they march all through the city in grim silence with the only words being Haman's proclamation, “Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.” Can't we picture their faces? Just another example of why the book is always better than the movie!

Mordecai returns to the King's Gate, and what does Haman do next? What else? He runs back home to his wife! She and his friends seem to see the handwriting on the wall, and they begin to distance themselves from Haman – saying “you” (not “we”) will surely come to ruin! How did they know? Either God placed a word of prophecy on their tongue, or perhaps they knew about the ancient prophecy regarding the Agagites. Either way, they tell Haman the truth – he will soon come to ruin.

We usually focus on Esther's role in Haman's downfall, but note that his downfall was already inevitable by the end of this chapter—*before*

the confrontation with Esther. That is why most commentators point to the king's sleepless night as the pivot about which this book turns.

Yes, Haman is in trouble, but he has no time to worry about that because it is time to head for the feast with the Queen. Maybe that will take his mind off his troubles! Maybe that will lift his spirits! (Well, it will lift something!)

Esther 7

Verses 1-2

1 So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. 2 And on the second day, as they were drinking wine after the feast, the king again said to Esther, "What is your wish, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled."

As we mentioned in the introduction, feasting is a central theme in Esther. The book of Esther begins and concludes with pairs of feasts, with other pairs of feasts occurring in between. In Chapter 1, Xerxes gave two consecutive feasts, and Chapter 9 will show the Jews observing two consecutive feasts to celebrate their deliverance. In Chapter 5 and Chapter 7 we see another pair of feasts, with Haman's downfall having begun to occur in between the two.

The author of Esther is recounting these events using two literary devices – peripety and chiasm. (Or perhaps we should say that God used these devices in causing the events to occur as they did.) The first refers to a sudden turn of events that reverses the intended and expected action, and the second is a device in which elements in the story have corresponding parallels that occur in reverse order. (See the handout from our introductory class on Esther.) Many see the pivot point in this structure as being the king's sleepless night. If so, then choosing such a seemingly insignificant pivot highlights God's providential role in the events and takes the focus away from human actions. These reversals are not occurring by accident, but they are also not occurring due to the work of man.

As Christians, we have experienced the ultimate reversal of fortune – none could be greater! Although once formerly in exile, apart from God and expecting nothing but death, we experienced a reversal. And the pivot for that reversal was a seemingly insignificant event – the birth of a baby in Bethlehem and his later execution on a cross. To the world it seems foolishness – but to us it is the power of God!

And what about those outside of Christ? They are following the path of Haman, and like him they are heading for a huge reversal in fortune. And like Haman, they will discover that they were caught in a web of their own making. “There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’” (C. S. Lewis)

In Chapter 7, the King asks Esther for the third time what she wanted him to do. Esther was in a delicate position because she somehow needed to accuse Haman without also accusing the king who had permitted Haman to act with his approval and authority. Esther knew better than anyone the weak and unstable despot she was dealing with. To be successful she must never act as if she is bringing a charge directly against the king.

Verses 3-7

3 Then Queen Esther answered, “If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be granted me for my wish, and my people for my request. 4 For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have been silent, for our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king.” 5 Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, “Who is he, and where is he, who has dared to do this?” 6 And Esther said, “A foe and enemy! This wicked Haman!” Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen. 7 And the king arose in his wrath from the wine-drinking and went into the palace garden, but Haman stayed to beg for his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that harm was determined against him by the king.

The king asked two questions in verse 2 – What is your wish? What is your request? – although he was likely seeking just a single answer. Esther, however, gives him two answers in verse 3. She asks for her own life as her wish, and for the life of her people as her request. By that answer she is tying her own life to the life of her people, and at last she is telling the king that “her people” are not the same as his people. She is bringing herself under an irrevocable edict of death.

Compare Esther’s statement in 7:3 (“If I have found favor in your sight, O king...”) with her earlier statement in 5:8 (If I have found favor in the sight of the king...). Do you see the subtle difference? In the statement from Chapter 5, Esther addressed the king in the third person, which would have been the normal court protocol (*e.g.*, your majesty, your royal highness). But here in Chapter 7, she addresses the king in the second person – “If I have found favor with you, O

King.” Esther had a special relationship with the king that was closer even than that of Haman, the king’s closest advisor.

Esther next quotes the words used in Haman’s edict – “For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated” – but she uses the passive voice to delay mentioning Haman’s name or mentioning that the king had been a party to the sale of her people. This tactic reminds us of Nathan’s confrontation of David in 2 Samuel 12. The result in verse 5 is the same – the king asks, “Who is he, and where is he, who has dared to do this?” (Apparently the edict had made so little an impression on the king that Esther’s quotation from the edict does not even ring a bell!)

We might ask whether the king even knows yet that Esther is Jewish. Haman never mentioned the Jews by name when he convinced the king to issue the edict, and Esther does not mention the Jews by name here. The King knows that Mordecai is a Jew (6:10), but he does not yet know that Esther and Mordecai are related. That fact is not revealed to him until 8:1. Just how clueless was this king? Did he even now know that Queen Esther is Jewish? He did if he had bothered to read his own edict against her people (3:13), but had he?

Esther finally reveals the villain in verse 6, but even then she delays mentioning his name until the very last word – “A hateful man and an enemy! This vile Haman!” We can almost see her emphasizing each word with a stabbing finger pointed straight at Haman.

Have you ever had a bad day? I mean, a *really* bad day? It has probably never been as bad as the day Haman was now having. Remember that he had just returned from leading Mordecai horseback through the city, and now he learns that the Queen is Jewish and thus subject to his edict of death. Can things can any worse? Yes! (You should never ask that question!)

The king is clearly suffering from information overload, and so he heads out to the garden to think. Is he finally going to be forced to make a decision all on his own? Will his brain be able to stand the strain? Can he punish Haman for a plot that he approved? If so, won’t he have to admit his own fault? And how can he revoke an irrevocable law?

Meanwhile Haman has moved to Plan B. He begs Esther for his life. Court protocol dictated that no one but the king could be alone with a woman from the king’s harem. (We don’t know if Harbona in verse 9 was with the king in the garden or remained behind with Esther.) But

Haman should have left the queen's presence when the king left the room. But wouldn't that make him look guilty?

Even in the presence of others, no other man (who either wasn't a eunuch or didn't want to quickly become one) was allowed to come within seven steps of a woman from the king's harem. Haman forgets this rule as he falls on the couch where Esther was reclining. This was so unthinkable that some early Jewish commentaries said that Haman fell on the couch only because the angel Gabriel had given him a firm shove!

Haman knew that the real power in this situation lay not with King Xerxes. He turned instead to Queen Esther, not realizing that the real power behind his downfall was due to the God of Israel. But the King had made a promise to Queen Esther, and so in Haman's mind she was the only one who could save him now.

Lesson 9: Esther 7:8 – 9:4

Verses 8-10

8 And the king returned from the palace garden to the place where they were drinking wine, as Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was. And the king said, "Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?" As the word left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman's face. 9 Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, "Moreover, the gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, is standing at Haman's house, fifty cubits high." 10 And the king said, "Hang him on that." So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the wrath of the king abated.

Remember when we asked whether things could get any worse for poor Haman? They do in verse 8 with yet another remarkable coincidence. The king walks back into the room at the very moment that Haman falls on the couch, causing the king to ask, "Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?"

The king must have known that Haman had not seen this time as the perfect opportunity to assault the queen. Instead, the king interprets Haman's actions that way so that he can condemn Haman without implicating himself in Haman's plot against the Jews. Haman's apparent "assault" will allow the king's own complicity to remain hidden and unexamined. Even though he is guilty of many crimes, Haman is about to be executed for a crime he did not commit!

Is it possible for things to get even worse for Haman? Yes! One of the eunuchs speaks up and tells the king that Haman had built a giant gallows for the purpose of killing Mordecai—the very person who had saved the king's life and who had just been honored by the king. The king no doubt saw this revelation as a threat to his own life by the villainous Haman, who must, the King likely reasoned, have secret sympathies for the attempted assassins.

And so in verse 10 Haman is executed on the very gallows on which he had planned to kill Mordecai. Once again, the author is very brief – telling us nothing about what Haman is thinking and failing to describe him as he is lead away to the gallows. Herodotus and archaeologists tell us that a Persian gallows consisted of wooden stakes on which the victims were impaled. Darius, Xerxes' father, was known to have impaled 3,000 men.

Of all of the reversals in the book, Haman's reversal may be the greatest and most sudden. One day he was on top of the world, and the next day he is standing at the top of his own gallows. Overnight the tables had turned, and he did not see it coming. That same reversal awaits all who have plans opposed to the plan of God.

This entire scene is steeped in irony. Both Esther and Haman plead for their lives in this chapter. Mordecai the Jew initiated the conflict by refusing to bow before Haman the Agagite, but here we see Haman the Agagite falling down before a Jewish woman. And in the end his fate is sealed by something as insignificant as the king's sleepless night.

Those who are inclined to think ill of Esther often wonder why she didn't tell the king that Haman was really not trying to molest her. One writes that Esther's "character would have been more attractive if she had shown pity toward a fallen foe." But that author makes a crucial error – Haman is a *falling* foe rather than a *fallen* foe. He could do much damage while he remained alive. And are they really asking Esther to follow the example of King Saul, who years earlier had spared the life of another Agagite against God's explicit command? Esther had finally succeeded where Saul had failed – and Esther, like Saul, was acting with royal authority. In fact, what had Mordecai said to her in 4:14? "Who knoweth whether thou art come **to the kingdom** for such a time as this?" As Queen of Persia, Esther was now Queen of the Jews, and she was carrying out a royal sentence on this great enemy of God's people. Showing pity to Haman would have been wrong, just as King Saul's pity toward Haman's ancestor was wrong and disqualified Saul from being king. Esther killed Haman with her cunning just as Saul should have killed Agag with his sword. What was at stake here was God's plan of redemption! There was only one way for Haman to exit, and Esther showed him to that door! Those who argue that Esther should have forgiven Haman don't know the first thing about forgiveness! The concept of unconditional forgiveness is foreign to scripture—just read John 3:16, for example. God loves the entire world, but God does not forgive the entire world.

Haman dies in his own trap. "The righteousness of the upright delivers them, but the treacherous are taken captive by their lust." (Proverbs 11:6) And the same is true today. Many are caught in a trap of wickedness and deceit, and for many that trap was their own creation. They thought they could control it and use it on others, but in the end they were the ones captured by it.

Although one might expect the book to end with Chapter 7, a very serious problem still remains. How can we revoke an irrevocable law? Although Haman is dead, his edict against the Jews lives on. The death of Haman is *not* the major climax of the book.

Esther 8

Verses 1-2

1 On that day King Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her. 2 And the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.

Herodotus indicates that in the Persian Empire the goods and property of condemned criminals were taken over by the king. That appears to have happened here as Esther is given the house of Haman. The Hebrew word translated “house” may have also included Haman’s family.

Verse 1 tells us that Esther had told the king of her relation to Mordecai, but we are not told how much time had elapsed since that revelation. There were 2 months and 10 days between Haman’s edict in 3:7 and the edict that is about to be made in 8:9. Certainly by now the king knew that Esther was a Jew and that his edict had been against the Jewish people.

Esther told the king what Mordecai was to her, which means likely means she told the king more than that they were related, but also that he was her advisor and protector.

Mordecai’s relation to Esther further increased his status in the eyes of the king. In verse 2, Mordecai takes over in the position recently vacated by Haman, and Esther sets Mordecai over the house of Haman.

Haman had sought to publicly humiliate and kill Mordecai, but now ironically Haman is dead and Mordecai has taken his place both in the palace and in Haman’s own home.

At the beginning of the book, Mordecai was the cause of Esther’s advancement, and now Esther does the same for Mordecai.

Verses 3-6

3 Then Esther spoke again to the king. She fell at his feet and wept and pleaded with him to avert the evil plan of Haman the Agagite and the plot that he had devised against the Jews. 4 When the king held out the golden scepter to Esther, 5 Esther rose and stood before the king. And she said, "If it please the king, and if I have found favor in his sight, and if the thing seems right before the king, and I am pleasing in his eyes, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, which he wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the provinces of the king. 6 For how can I bear to see the calamity that is coming to my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?"

Esther once again goes before the king. Some understand these verses as describing a second time at which Esther risked her life by approaching the king unrequested – and we do see the king hold out his scepter to her again in verse 4. Others, however, see verse 3 as a continuation of the scene in verses 1-2, which would mean that the scepter here was just an encouragement by the king for Esther to rise and speak. This latter view seems better because, unlike verse 1, verse 3 does not provide a timeframe ("on that day"), and verse 3 says "Esther spoke" rather than "Esther entered."

Although Esther had saved the Jews from Haman, Haman's handiwork remained in the form of an irrevocable sentence of death against the Jews. She fell at the king's feet and pleaded with him to avert Haman's evil plan.

Esther was safe, and Mordecai was safe – but Esther's people were not safe. This second appeal to the king may have taken more courage than the first. The king had a personal interest in the first appeal (the life of his queen and the reward to Mordecai for saving his life), but he had no personal interest in saving the other Jews. In fact, Xerxes had reversed the policies of religious tolerance of his predecessors and destroyed many temples of Marduk in favor of his own Zoroastrian philosophy. Why would he help the Jews?

Esther asks the king in verse 5 to issue an order revoking the letters issued by Haman. Notice that Esther did not use the word "law" but rather the word "letters," perhaps hoping that the king might determine that the edict against the Jews was not really a royal edict at all and thus revocable.

Verses 7-8

7 Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, "Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and they have hanged him on the gallows, because he intended to lay hands on the Jews. 8 But you may write as you please with regard to the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king's ring, for an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked."

The law had been sealed with the king's ring and thus could not be revoked. So what then could be done? Another edict could be written, and in this one they could write as they pleased with regard to Jews. We are about to see a parallel to what happened in Chapters 3 and 4, but here the tables are turned. Now the Jews will destroy their enemies rather than be destroyed by them.

As before, the king turned the writing of the edict over to someone else – but this time it was Mordecai rather than Haman.

One commentator says that the Hebrew words used in verse 7-8 "strongly suggest that the words are spoken in a sharp and exasperated tone of voice." Most of that tone is lost in the English translation. A better translation might be, "Now look here. I have given Esther the house of Haman. You, you write about the Jews as you like," or "Look! This is what I have done for you! Not only can you not expect me to do more, but I cannot do more!"

Xerxes' reaction fits well with what we know about him. For starters, he wants the entire thing buried so that his own role will not be uncovered. Also, he does not like being in the position where he is bound by what Haman did and unable to change it. So, as usual, he turns the entire problem over to someone else. Xerxes may have failed in many areas – but he certainly knew how to delegate! But the king does not offer any advice on how the irrevocable edict can be undone. He does not tell them to write another edict; he simply tells them to write whatever they please. In short, he washes his hands of the matter.

Verses 9-10

9 The king's scribes were summoned at that time, in the third month, which is the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third day. And an edict was written, according to all that Mordecai commanded concerning the Jews, to the satraps and the governors and the officials of the provinces from India to Ethiopia, 127 provinces, to each province in its own script and to each people in its own language, and also to the Jews in

their script and their language. 10 And he wrote in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed it with the king's signet ring. Then he sent the letters by mounted couriers riding on swift horses that were used in the king's service, bred from the royal stud,

"On the twenty third" day was 2 months and 10 days after Haman's edict in 3:12. This time span tells us that the events recounted in Esther have been condensed.

For those who keep track of such things, verse 9 is the longest verse in the Bible.

What we are seeing in these final chapters parallels and reverses what we saw in the opening chapters. There is, however, one exception in verse 9. The second edict was translated into the language of the Jews, whereas Haman had no such concern with the first edict.

The terms describing the types of horses used to distribute the edict in verse 10 are difficult to translate. In fact, the Hebrew writer simply transliterated the Persian terms into Hebrew characters. Various translations include "race horses," "swift dromedaries," and "post horses." Taken together, the words likely mean that the very best royal-bred horses were used.

Verses 11-13

11 saying that the king allowed the Jews who were in every city to gather and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, children and women included, and to plunder their goods, 12 on one day throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. 13 A copy of what was written was to be issued as a decree in every province, being publicly displayed to all peoples, and the Jews were to be ready on that day to take vengeance on their enemies.

"Destroy, kill, and annihilate" is the same phrase found in Haman's original decree, but here the Jews are the ones doing the destroying rather than the target of the destruction. They were being allowed by the king to defend themselves against any that might attack them. The two decrees operated together to create a legalized civil war between the Jews in Persia and the Persians hostile to the Jews.

In verse 11, the Jews are allowed to stand up for themselves, which is stated in terms used for positioning an army to defend against an attack.

As before, the decree is publicized throughout the empire. Anyone who might be tempted to follow the first edict would now know that the Jews had permission and would be ready to defend themselves.

Who are the children and the women in verse 11? Are they the children and women of the Jews, or are they the children and women of those who would attack the Jews?

Some argue that the “women and children” are part of the compound direct object of the verb “attack,” which would mean that the decree is giving the Jews permission to destroy any armed forces that would attack the Jewish women and children. But apparently that is a minority view among Hebrew scholars, with most arguing that the text gives the Jews permission to destroy the women and children of any who would attack them. This second view (which has been called the “almost unanimous” and “standard, almost universally accepted” view) makes more sense from the context because then the second edict would be giving the Jews the same power that had been pronounced against them in 3:13. It is this literary structure more than anything else that supports the majority view. “The text needs to be interpreted as it stands, rather than be watered down to accommodate modern moral standards.”

But should we be troubled by the fact that the Jews were given permission to kill women and children?

First, having permission to do so and doing so are two different things, and later, when the body count is given, only “men” are mentioned (9:6, 15). (Although, the final count of 75,000 dead in 9:16 refers more generally to “enemies.”) Mordecai’s decree also gave the Jews permission to keep the plunder, but will be told three times in Chapter 9 that the people did not take any plunder.

Second, remember that Haman had authorized the Persians to kill the Jewish women and children in 3:13. That is, Haman the Agagite tried to destroy the Jews in the same manner that the Jews had been commanded by God to destroy them. Haman’s decree had attempted to reverse God’s own decree of destruction against the Amalekites. Will God himself be reversed in this book of reversals?

We need to remember the historical basis for this conflict with Haman the Agagite. God’s command to King Saul in 1 Samuel 15:3, “Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man **and woman, infant and suckling,** ox and sheep, camel and ass.”

Did God really order Saul to kill the women and the children? Yes – and Saul was punished when he disobeyed that order. And if Saul had obeyed, Haman might not have been around to cause trouble for God’s people hundreds of years later. And this situation is not unique—women and children also perished in the flood. We may not be able to see it or understand it at the time, **but what God does is good** – *by definition*. It is only from God that we know what goodness is. Did God kill women and children? Yes—and he also created them. People who contrast the God of love in the New Testament with the God of wrath in the Old don’t know the first thing about the love of God or the wrath of God. Remember how Jesus is described in Revelation 6:16 – the wrath of the Lamb! You could think about that short phrase for the rest of your life and still not come close to plumbing the depth of what it means. The wrath of the Lamb!

Do I understand all there is to know about the commands by God in the Old Testament to kill women and children? No, I do not, and I don’t think anyone else does either. But there is one thing I understand perfectly and completely about such commands – they can be understood only in light of Jesus Christ. If God commanded it, then it was good and it was part of his plan to bless the entire world through Jesus Christ. That much I know with absolute certainty. Again, I quote Pascal:

Not only do we only know God through Jesus Christ,
but we only know ourselves through Jesus Christ; we
only know life and death through Jesus Christ. Apart
from Jesus Christ we cannot know the meaning of our
life or our death, of God or of ourselves.

So if you are struggling to understand something about God in the Old Testament, your answer lies in the New Testament. “For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.” (2 Corinthians 1:20) Not only did Jesus rise from the death—he changed the meaning of death. Trying to understand death and suffering in the Old Testament apart from Jesus in the New Testament is a hopeless effort.

Why the command to kill everyone in 1 Samuel and why the same command here in Esther? (Although here in Esther it applies only to those who attack the Jews.) In both cases, the continuance of God’s plan of redemption was at risk. God was working to bring a worldwide blessing through the Jewish people, and no one and nothing could be allowed to stop that plan. God saw the Amalekites

as a threat, and God commanded their total destruction. That command was not obeyed, and, as a result, God's people were once again on the brink of extinction due to the Amalekites.

The ancient enmity between the Jews and the Amalekites is an underlying theme throughout this book. As I mentioned, the simple identification of Haman as an *Agagite* may be the most important word in the book when it comes to explaining why this all happened. We may look at that enmity with disdain – there they go again fighting a war that is centuries old. But doesn't the church have its own ancient enemies? Aren't we also surrounded by Agagites? The ancient Amalekites wanted nothing more than to wipe God's people off the face of the earth—aren't there people today with exactly the same desire? Sometimes I fear we have forgotten that while on this earth we are the church *militant*! We are at war!

For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, and being ready to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled. (2 Corinthians 10:4-6)

If we have become ineffective, it may be because we have laid our weapons down and left the battlefield.

Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. (Ephesians 6:11-13)

I fear that sometimes we forget that we have a job to do. Satan would love nothing more than to convince us that there is nothing we can do. Nothingness is one of his greatest tools. As usual, C.S. Lewis said it best:

“Nothing is very strong,” says Screwtape, “strong enough to steal away a man's best years not in sweet sins but in a dreary flickering of the mind over it

knows not what and knows not why ... in drumming of fingers and clicking of heels, in whistling tunes he does not like.”

Esther had a job to do, and she did it. Mordecai had a job to do, and he did it. We have a job to do, and?

Verses 14-17

14 So the couriers, mounted on their swift horses that were used in the king’s service, rode out hurriedly, urged by the king’s command. And the decree was issued in Susa the citadel. 15 Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown and a robe of fine linen and purple, and the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced. 16 The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honor. 17 And in every province and in every city, wherever the king’s command and his edict reached, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday. And many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them.

Mordecai is greatly honored by the king, and the Jews rejoice everywhere that this second edict is announced. They must have been very worried about the first edict, and we can imagine their relief when the second edict was read. They may have thought that the second edict meant that no one would attack them, but if so they were about to be disappointed.

The “crown” in verse 15 was really a turban, and along with the other clothes showed Mordecai’s important position in the government. The author is making the point that the honor Mordecai received went far beyond anything that Haman ever received.

The chiastic structure of Esther is really on display here. The original decree had caused great mourning among the Jews, but the second decree causes great rejoicing. After the original decree, Mordecai was clothed with sackcloth and could not come before the king. With the second decree, Mordecai wears royal garments and comes from the presence of the king.

The four words in verse 16 – happiness, joy, gladness, and honor – are the antithesis of the four words found in 4:3 – mourning, fasting, weeping, and wailing. God’s people have experienced a turn around!

Verse 17 tells us that many Persians “declared themselves Jews” or “became Jews.” The Hebrew word used here occurs nowhere else in the Bible, and its meaning has been debated. (The Septuagint adds “and were circumcised” without justification—but if true that would seem to settle the question of their sincerity.) What does it mean?

God’s promise to Abraham had been that of a worldwide blessing, and other Gentiles had declared themselves Jews prior to this time. We can read about this elsewhere in the Old Testament, and we can also see it from a careful study of the genealogical lists. Why did it happen here? Most likely they had seen the dramatic reversals in these events as coming from a divine source – the very fact that the reader of this book has been invited to see over and over. Perhaps these Persians had simply had “a public perception of divine involvement,” as one commentator noted.

The Persians certainly knew at least two things – they had a first edict from Haman, who was now dead, and they had a second edict from Mordecai, who was very much alive and powerful. “It is surely, rather, the dread of the superior political and military power now wielded by Mordecai and the Jewish community that prompts their profession.” You may recall that we saw similarly motivated conversions in our study of Revelation.

Esther risked death when she chose to identify herself with the Jews. But here, perhaps, the Persians identify themselves with the Jews because they see personal gain in doing so. Although persecution is horrible, it does have a purifying effect. How large would our attendance be if we were meeting here today under threat of death or imprisonment? Many today identify themselves with a congregation that suits their social status or gives them a business or financial advantage. The early church remained relatively pure during the days of persecution. The great apostasy did not begin until it suddenly became fashionable to be a Christian and when the church began to look for safety and security from the government rather than from God.

Another possible reason for their conversion, however, is that they had seen in Esther and Mordecai a faith and trust in one God—and that faith and trust stood in stark contrast with the vanity and misery of their own polytheism. We see the same thing in the New Testament where pagans were drawn to the power of the gospel. Pagan religions brought nothing but disappointment and disillusionment then—and the same is true today.

I fear that sometimes we think paganism is a thing of the past—an ancient false religion that is no longer a problem in our modern world. Nothing could be further from the truth. Satan would love for us to believe that paganism is dead—but it is alive and well. Men worship nature more today than they ever did in the past. They might not admit it or ever recognize it, but men worship more false gods now than ever before. Paganism is alive and well today!

God's word is a beacon in that darkness, and those in darkness will be attracted to that light. Our job is to shine that light so that they can see it. Esther and Mordecai did, and you can see the result in verse 17.

Esther 9

Verses 1-4

1 Now in the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's command and edict were about to be carried out, on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, the reverse occurred: the Jews gained mastery over those who hated them. 2 The Jews gathered in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on those who sought their harm. And no one could stand against them, for the fear of them had fallen on all peoples. 3 All the officials of the provinces and the satraps and the governors and the royal agents also helped the Jews, for the fear of Mordecai had fallen on them. 4 For Mordecai was great in the king's house, and his fame spread throughout all the provinces, for the man Mordecai grew more and more powerful.

The day for the attack against the Jews finally came. Haman had casts lots almost a year ago to choose the day—and now Haman was gone, but his edict remained. That edict was not alone, however. A second edict had gone out giving the Jews permission to defend themselves.

You circle a key phrase in verse 1 – “the reverse occurred.” (The NIV translated it as “the tables were turned.”) There in a nutshell is the theme of the entire book. The Hebrew word is emphatic and denotes a complete turnaround of fortunes such as when a curse becomes a blessing (Deut. 23:5 and Neh. 13:2).

Who caused the reversal? We are not told—but there can be no doubt in the mind of any child of God who has read the book up to this point. Although not mentioned by name, God is present on every page.

Verse 2 shows that the Jews as a whole had, like Esther, undergone a transformation. No one could stand against them because the fear of them had fallen on all peoples. The Jews must have also seen the hand of God at work in these events, and they were emboldened and encouraged.

If we are timid and fearful, what does that say about us? “For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline.” (2 Timothy 1:7) If we have a spirit of timidity, it is not from God. So where do you suppose it came from? God does not need a timid people! He needs a bold and courageous people. He needs people who takes risks on his behalf. Esther and Mordecai were risk takers – what would have happened if they had been timid? God risked everything for us – what are we risking for him?

Verse 3 tells us that the Persian officials helped the Jews because they feared Mordecai, who was growing more and more powerful. And, unlike Haman, the Persians apparently needed no order from the king to fear Mordecai. It is amazing, both then and now, how fast the political winds can change. And then, as now, power draws politicians like moths to a flame. These same officials had, no doubt, been Haman’s greatest admirers not too long ago.

Lesson 10: Esther 9:5 – 10:3 & Ezra 7:1-5

Verses 5-15

5 The Jews struck all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them. 6 In Susa the citadel itself the Jews killed and destroyed 500 men, 7 and also killed Parshandatha and Dalphon and Aspatha 8 and Poratha and Adalia and Aridatha 9 and Parmashta and Arisai and Aridai and Vaizatha, 10 the ten sons of Haman the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews, but they laid no hand on the plunder. 11 That very day the number of those killed in Susa the citadel was reported to the king. 12 And the king said to Queen Esther, "In Susa the citadel the Jews have killed and destroyed 500 men and also the ten sons of Haman. What then have they done in the rest of the king's provinces! Now what is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what further is your request? It shall be fulfilled." 13 And Esther said, "If it please the king, let the Jews who are in Susa be allowed tomorrow also to do according to this day's edict. And let the ten sons of Haman be hanged on the gallows." 14 So the king commanded this to be done. A decree was issued in Susa, and the ten sons of Haman were hanged. 15 The Jews who were in Susa gathered also on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and they killed 300 men in Susa, but they laid no hands on the plunder.

Verses 5-15 are the climax of the book of Esther. The reason that the events in this book occurred was that the Jewish people could survive, and these verses present the details of their survival.

Verse 5 tells us that the Jews did as they pleased. That phrase is important because it highlights the reversal between this outcome and the original edict by Haman. Haman had been told by the king that he could do as he pleased with the Jews (3:11), but in the end it was the Jews who did as they pleased with the Persians who attacked them.

That only 500 men in Susa were killed by the Jews tells us that most Persians (at least in Susa) did not attack the Jews. (A total of 500 was not a large percentage of the population, but later we will see that 75,000 were killed elsewhere.) These 500 may have been led by the 10 sons of Haman who are named in verses 7-9, and who were also killed by the Jews.

In the earliest Hebrew texts, the sons of Haman are listed in two parallel columns, and rabbis and commentators have speculated

about it ever since. Some suggest that was the way they were hanged on the gallows. Others suggest it shows that God's enemies had been set apart for destruction. A similar arrangement of names is found in the list of conquered Canaanite kings in Joshua 12:9-24. "It is as if the author wants the reader to ponder each name, for with each death comes the final blow to Haman's pride."

The author unexpectedly tells us three times that the Jews did not lay their hand on any plunder. (It is unexpected because the edict—written by Mordecai(!)—specifically allowed for it.)

But it was very important to the author that the Jews did not take any plunder. Why? First, it was important for the Persians to know that the Jews were simply defending themselves – they, unlike Haman, were not motivated by material gain. In short, it would show that God's people were distinctive – something that God's people today would be wise to seek as well.

"The deliberate decision not to enrich themselves at the expense of their enemies would not go unnoticed in a culture where victors were expected to take the spoil. The very novelty of such self-denial would be remarked upon and remembered and taken as proof of the upright motives of the Jewish communities."

Second, in not taking plunder the Jews were fulfilling God's command to Saul regarding the Amalekites, and, unlike Saul, they would not disobey that command by taking plunder. You can also read about Achan in Joshua 7 and how he brought destruction on the people by keeping plunder. The Jews were learning from their past mistakes – something else God's people today would be wise to do. The Jews of Persia obeyed where King Saul had disobeyed.

The king informs Esther about the 500 deaths in Susa and the deaths of Haman's 10 sons, and he wonders what must have taken place in other provinces. He also asks Esther what she wants now – although this time there is no mention of half his kingdom. Some suggest the king's question should be read, "Surely in light of what you have achieved, you can't want anything more!" But she does.

Esther's response has caused some controversy among commentators. She asks the king to let the fighting continue for another day, and she asks that the bodies of Haman's 10 dead sons be hanged on the gallows for all to see. One very harsh commentator writes that "for this horrible request no justification can be found."

Another almost equally harsh writes that her request here is primarily responsible for her reputation as “a deceitful and bloodthirsty woman” and that “such a reputation certainly has some justification.”

After all, under Haman’s original decree the Persians could not lawfully have attacked the Jews on the second day, and so the Jews did not need to defend themselves on that day. Why did Esther request that the fighting continue?

Had Esther turned vindictive? She provides no justification to the king for the request, and she makes no mention of the welfare of her people. Mordecai is not mentioned as being in on this request, which suggests Esther was acting on her own. Had the power gone to her head? What was Esther thinking? As usual, we are not told.

One commentator suggests that Esther was simply being a wise and prudent leader and that her second day request was “punitive and precautionary, eliminating opponents who might cause problems in the future.”

Those who believe Esther is a work of fiction argue that the second day of killing serves merely to explain the second day of the Purim feast. But if that were true, why would the author choose an explanation that to many seems to impugn Esther and cast the Jews in as bad a light as the Persians? On the other hand, if it was widely known that Queen Esther had ordered a second day of fighting, then the author could hardly have left it out.

Most likely Esther’s second day of fighting had an explanation that has not been revealed to us. Haman had been a very powerful person in the empire, and he may yet have had allies in the empire just waiting for their opportunity to carry out his evil plans. It may be telling that part of her request was that the bodies of the 10 sons of Haman be publicly exposed to serve, no doubt, as a warning to others.

One thing is for certain—Esther hated what God hated. And there might be a good lesson in that for us. Yes, there are things that God hates. And, yes, as the children of God, we should hate them as well. To love what God hates is the worst sort of disloyalty.

On the second day of fighting, 300 additional men are killed in Susa. This second day of fighting explains why the feast of Purim is celebrated on two consecutive days. During the time between the testaments, the Jews referred to this second day as “Mordecai Day” (which is odd because Esther was the one who requested it!).

Verses 16-17

16 Now the rest of the Jews who were in the king's provinces also gathered to defend their lives, and got relief from their enemies and killed 75,000 of those who hated them, but they laid no hands on the plunder. 17 This was on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and on the fourteenth day they rested and made that a day of feasting and gladness.

The king's question in verse 12 is answered in verse 16 – 75,000 Persians were killed by the Jews in all the king's provinces. That number seems very high. It is possible that the word translated “thousands” may have meant families or clans, which, if so, would mean that the total number was much less than 75,000. Also, the Septuagint has 15,000 in place of 75,000.

God's people have been saved, and yet God is not mentioned anywhere in the book. The author invites the reader to consider not only *how* God has done it, but *if* God has done it. Yes, the outcome is consistent with God's ancient edict regarding the Agagites, but what was God's role in these events? That is left for the reader to decide. One commentator suggests that not even the author of Esther is certain about God's role in these events. When we consider our own questions about God's providence in our lives and his role in the world around us, we begin to see why Esther is such a modern book. Esther invites us to ponder the nature of faith in a world where God is unseen. It is faith that allows us to see the unseen reality behind the visible events of our day. (Hebrews 11:1) We walk by faith, not by sight. (2 Corinthians 5:7)

The day of feasting and gladness in verse 17 is the first Purim celebration. A day of rest had become a day of feasting and joy. In other contexts, God is identified as the giver of rest to his people, but no such credit is given here.

Verses 18-22

18 But the Jews who were in Susa gathered on the thirteenth day and on the fourteenth, and rested on the fifteenth day, making that a day of feasting and gladness. 19 Therefore the Jews of the villages, who live in the rural towns, hold the fourteenth day of the month of Adar as a day for gladness and feasting, as a holiday, and as a day on which they send gifts of food to one another. 20 And Mordecai recorded these things and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, 21 obliging them to keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same, year by year, 22 as the days on which the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the

month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and gifts to the poor.

One reason why Esther was written was to explain the origins of the feast of Purim, and these verses explain when and how that feast was to be celebrated. At this point, the author is looking back on the events in Esther as past history to explain why they practice the feast of Purim as they do. Mordecai and Esther have lived and died, and the great king Xerxes has been assassinated in his bedroom.

One reason that Mordecai wrote the letters in verse 20 was to commend the celebrations and encourage their continuance each year. In the rural towns the Jews celebrated on the 14th day, but in Susa they feasted on the 15th day because they had taken a second day of vengeance.

In verse 20, Mordecai makes a written record of what has happened. We see something similar with regard to the ancient Amalekites. In Exodus 17:14, God said to Moses, "Write this for a memorial in a book, and rehearse it in the ears of Joshua: for I will utterly put out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven." Here God is not mentioned, but the written record likewise is done for remembrance and for a memorial.

Verse 22 provides the two main reasons for the feast – relief and reversal. The Jews received relief or rest from their enemies' plans against them, and they experienced a reversal as sorrow became gladness and mourning became a holiday.

In verse 22, we also see that in addition to all of the feasting and gift giving, the Jews gave gifts to the poor. Is there a book in the Bible in which we do not see God's care and concern for the poor? Even here, where God is not mentioned, the poor are remembered. Do we have that same care and concern for the poor?

Verses 23-28

23 So the Jews accepted what they had started to do, and what Mordecai had written to them. 24 For Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast Pur (that is, cast lots), to crush and to destroy them. 25 But when it came before the king, he gave orders in writing that his evil plan that he had devised against the Jews should return on his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows. 26 Therefore they called these days

Purim, after the term Pur. Therefore, because of all that was written in this letter, and of what they had faced in this matter, and of what had happened to them, 27 the Jews firmly obligated themselves and their offspring and all who joined them, that without fail they would keep these two days according to what was written and at the time appointed every year, 28 that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, in every clan, province, and city, and that these days of Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants.

These verses give a summary of the events that lay behind the feast of Purim. With this book, Purim joined the five Jewish feasts that were commanded by Moses. By the time of Jesus, Hanukkah had also been introduced to mark the deliverance of the Jews from the threatened religious and cultural annihilation by the Greeks under Antiochus Epiphanies in the second century BC.

The summary in verses 24-25 is interesting, and verse 26 suggests that it was likely included in the letters that Mordecai wrote in verse 20 or in subsequent letters. It is interesting because it is written from a purely Persian perspective. Neither Esther nor Mordecai play a part. Instead, it is the king who saves the day by writing the orders that leads to Haman's downfall and the end of his evil plot. There is no mention of the Jew's military efforts to secure their safety.

The word "purim" in the Old Testament occurs only in Esther. It came into Hebrew as a loanword from the Persians to which the Hebrew plural suffix "im" was added. The first time it was used was in 3:7, where the author also gave the Hebrew equivalent of the word (*goral*). This addition suggests that when Esther was written, the author did not expect all of his readers to be familiar with the word "purim."

Why is the feast called "purim"? Most believe there is a double meaning – which fits well with all of the double events we saw in this book! First, the name is a reminder that the fate of God's people was not to be decided by some pagan's random toss of the dice before his false gods. Second, in Psalm 16:5-6, David said that God had made is lot (*goral*) secure. Thus, the name of the feast recognizes that the fate of God's people is in God's hands – and he makes their way secure.

The Purim festival today is more of a Purim season. It begins with a special Sabbath of Shekels (Shabbat Shekalim) right before the start of the month of Adar. On that day, the readings are focused on the

giving of money. Next, there is the Sabbath of Remembrance (Shabbat Zachor) immediately before the 14th of Adar. On that day, the Jews remember the enmity between themselves and the Amalekites. On the 13th day of Adar, the Jews fast to remember the risk that Esther took on behalf of her people. At the conclusion of the fast, on the eve of Purim, the book of Esther is read in its entirety. On the morning of Purim, the Esther scroll is read again, but this time the mood is much lighter. The children dress up as characters in the event, jokes are told, and songs are sung. Whenever Haman's name is mentioned, children make a loud noise using home-made noisemakers. Two types of gifts are sent: food to family and friends, and charitable donations to the poor. The Talmud prescribes drinking and celebrating on Purim until you can no longer tell the difference between "Mordecai be blessed!" and "Haman be cursed!"

Today, it is only in Jerusalem (a walled city) that Purim is celebrated on the 15th day of Adar. All other Jews celebrate it on the 14th day.

The point of the feast is to serve as a reminder that unexpected reversals do happen in history – and they are more common than not for the people of God. Our fate is not determined by the casting of dice. We are a part of God's eternal plan and eternal purpose, and our fate is in his hands.

The reference in verse 27 to "all who joined them" is another reference to the Persians who became Jews in response to all that they had seen.

Verses 29-32

29 Then Queen Esther, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew gave full written authority, confirming this second letter about Purim. 30 Letters were sent to all the Jews, to the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, in words of peace and truth, 31 that these days of Purim should be observed at their appointed seasons, as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther obligated them, and as they had obligated themselves and their offspring, with regard to their fasts and their lamenting. 32 The command of Queen Esther confirmed these practices of Purim, and it was recorded in writing.

Queen Esther was last mentioned back in verse 13, where she ordered a second day of killing. Verse 29 shows Esther and Mordecai acting with full authority – quite a reversal from how the book began. Esther's importance to her people is not as a mother, but as a queen.

Verse 32 tells us that the command of Queen Esther was recorded in writing. Think back over all of the writings we have seen in this book. In fact, there is a distinct emphasis in Esther on the written word – which is another interesting parallel with our modern world in which God speaks to us only through his written word.

This writing in verse 32 likely also included the writings of Mordecai from verse 20, and was likely either the book of Esther or was used as a source by the author of Esther (who may have been Mordecai himself).

Esther 10

Verses 1-2

1 King Ahasuerus imposed tax on the land and on the coastlands of the sea. 2 And all the acts of his power and might, and the full account of the high honor of Mordecai, to which the king advanced him, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia?

The book of Esther ends with a short chapter that is focused on the greatness of Mordecai, without a word being said about Queen Esther. As one commentator said, “it is Mordecai who gets the last word.”

In the ancient Greek versions of the book, Mordecai’s role in the text is amplified and Esther’s is diminished – which is additional evidence that the early version was inspired by God while the Greek additions (which do not appear in our Bibles) were not. God has no problem making a woman the hero in the event, but the male editors who came along later did have a problem with that! There is a parallel in the gospels. Who first saw the resurrected Christ? A woman. But when the apocryphal versions appeared later, Christ was seen first by men. I ask again, does the Bible denigrate women? Hardly!

Earlier we saw a tax holiday from the king, but not surprisingly the taxes are back again at the end of the book. Why is it mentioned? Perhaps Mordecai had something to do with it, or perhaps it showed God’s blessings on this pagan king for his role in preserving the Jews (although he very nearly wiped them out due to his inept leadership). It may also be a subtle reminder that the king had first tried to enrich himself by selling the people of God to Haman.

Verse 1 emphasizes the vastness of the king’s reign, and in fact does so using the same phrase Isaiah uses in 42:4 and 10 to describe the

extent of the servant's rule. Just as Joseph's presence had blessed Pharaoh, Mordecai's presence has blessed Xerxes. As the eunuch in 7:9 said, Mordecai was someone who spoke up to help the king.

Those who argue this book is fiction have some trouble with verse 2. The author is telling his readers that they can consult the official government records to confirm the truthfulness of the full account.

Verse 3

3 For Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Ahasuerus, and he was great among the Jews and popular with the multitude of his brothers, for he sought the welfare of his people and spoke peace to all his people.

Verse 3 contrasts Mordecai with Haman. In Chapter 3, it was Haman who held the seat of honor higher than all the other nobles – and now Haman is on a gallows higher than all of the other gallows, and Mordecai is in his place before the king. Haman had been self-centered and self-indulgent, but Mordecai seeks the welfare of others. Haman was committed to evil and destruction, whereas Mordecai was committed to goodness and peace.

Why was Mordecai so highly esteemed? Two reasons are given – “he sought the welfare of his people and spoke peace to all his people.” First, Mordecai worked for the welfare of God's people. He was not focused on his own welfare or that of his physical family, but he was focused on the welfare of his spiritual family. Second, Mordecai spoke peace to all his people. He was not afraid to stand up and speak on behalf of his people and to his people. God needs more Mordecai's today!

Mordecai combined service to the king with service to his people, and he was able to do both without compromise. Mordecai could serve as a mediator between the king and his people, and it is just as good today as it was then to know that there is someone with the ear of the king who has our best interests at heart.

Conclusion

Few books in the Bible are more relevant to life in a society hostile to the gospel than the book of Esther. As we said in the introduction, in many ways it is the most modern book in the Old Testament. God provides for his people in Esther as he provides for his people today – through his loving providential care. We do not see angels or miracles, but the hand of God is unmistakable to those who see with the eyes of faith.

But, if we look closely, we might even glimpse the gospel in Esther. Much of what happens in Esther is driven by the irrevocable nature of the Persian edicts. In place of the first irrevocable edict, a second edict is issued to counteract it. Can we not see a gospel parallel there? Because of our sin, an irrevocable decree of death was pronounced in the garden. How can it be undone? Through a second decree, the gospel.

Like the Jews of Persia, all men are under an irrevocable decree of death. And like the Jews of Persia, the people of God have a mediator who works on their behalf. And like God's people in Esther, we can rejoice that there is a second decree that counteracts the first decree.

The book of Esther prefigures our own redemption through the gospel. The theme of Esther is reversal, and our hope in the gospel depends on the greatest reversal of all time – the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. “Because I live, you also will live.” (John 14:9) All of history revolves around that event. Like the Jews of old, we too will someday find ourselves alive and well after the day of death has come and gone.

Ezra 7:1-5

Finally in Ezra 7 we meet the man from whom the whole book has taken its name. Chapters 7 and 8 will introduce the scholar-priest Ezra, his task, and his expedition. Chapters 9 and 10 will show the moral disarray that he found at Jerusalem when he returned and the strict countermeasures he applied. Much of the account is written by Ezra in the first person.

There is a lapse of about 57 years between Ezra 6 and Ezra 7. It was during that time that the events in Esther occurred. We know almost nothing about what happened to the former exiles in Judah during that period.

The only reference we have to what happened is from Ezra 4:6-23, where the hostility of the Samaritans is described. What we can deduce from that description is that the Jews were most likely subjected to similar hostility from their neighbors throughout much of that intervening period.

Also, being surrounded by people with a different way of life seems to have a negative effect on the Jews, as we will soon see. Likewise today, being surrounded by people with a different outlook on life can have a negative effect on our own purity and godliness. Some of the Jews here appear to have lived like their neighbors in order to be at peace with them and be accepted by them.

Ezra 7

Verses 1-5

Ezra 7:1 Now after this, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra the son of Seraiah, son of Azariah, son of Hilkiah, 2 son of Shallum, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub, 3 son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Meraioth, 4 son of Zerahiah, son of Uzzi, son of Bukki, 5 son of Abishua, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the chief priest—

Chapter 7 opens with a genealogy that shows Ezra's connection to Aaron. It begins with Ezra and walks back through history to Aaron, the first high priest.

The genealogy here is presented in an abbreviated form, which we can see when we compare it with the genealogy in 1 Chronicles 6. The two lists agree up to Meraioth, but from there on some of the names are left out of the list here in Chapter 7, and at the end Ezra's name is added.

Should it bother us that some names are left out? Not at all. It is common in the Bible, where we know from other studies that the phrase "the son of" does not necessarily imply a direct father/son relation, but sometimes passes over generations and simply means "a descendant of." We know that happens at least one place in this genealogy because Ezra is identified as the son of Seraiah. Seraiah was High Priest at the time of Zedekiah and was killed by Nebuchadnezzar. (See 2 Kings 25:18-21.) That happened nearly 130 years before these events, so we know that one or more generations must have been omitted from the list.

Some argue that six names were dropped from the genealogy through a copyist's error. They point specifically to the similarity between *Amariah* and *Azariah*, where the break in names occurs.

Here is 1 Chronicles 6:3-15 compared with Ezra 7:1-5—

<p>The sons of Aaron: Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar. 4 Eleazar fathered Phinehas, Phinehas fathered Abishua, 5 Abishua fathered Bukki, Bukki fathered Uzzi, 6 Uzzi fathered Zerahiah, Zerahiah fathered Meraioth, 7 Meraioth fathered Amariah, Amariah fathered Ahitub, 8 Ahitub fathered Zadok, Zadok fathered Ahimaaz, 9 Ahimaaz fathered Azariah, Azariah fathered Johanan, 10 and Johanan fathered Azariah (it was he who served as priest in the house that Solomon built in Jerusalem). 11 Azariah fathered Amariah, Amariah fathered Ahitub, 12 Ahitub fathered Zadok, Zadok fathered Shallum, 13 Shallum fathered Hilkiah, Hilkiah fathered Azariah, 14 Azariah fathered Seraiah, Seraiah fathered Jehozadak; 15 and Jehozadak went into exile when the LORD sent Judah and Jerusalem into exile by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar.</p>	<p>Now after this, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra the son of Seraiah, son of Azariah, son of Hilkiah, 2 son of Shallum, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub, 3 son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Meraioth, 4 son of Zerahiah, son of Uzzi, son of Bukki, 5 son of Abishua, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the chief priest.</p>
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I think that idea makes sense and would explain why we are now missing the middle part of the list. Under that theory, the original

copy had the complete list, but somewhere a copyist dropped some of the names. But it is also possible that the author intentionally shortened the list, which we know he did when it comes to the gap between Seraiah and Ezra.

The name Azariah is at the center of genealogy. It means “The Lord Has Helped,” and Ezra is a shortened form of that same name. Hilkiah was the High Priest in the time of Joash. (2 Kings 22) Zadok was the High Priest who replaced Abiathar, the last descendent of Eli to occupy that position. (1 Kings 2)

All very interesting, but any time we see a genealogy in the Bible we should immediately ask *why* it was included. What was the point? (And there is *always* a point!)

On point can be seen just from the length of the genealogy, which prepares us to meet someone of considerable importance. The 16-ancestor genealogy introduces Ezra with fanfare and establishes him as the most prominent person in the book. It also “signals that something momentous is to come and that Ezra is at the center of it.”

In Jewish tradition, Ezra is regarded as a second Moses. It was perhaps Ezra more than any other person who stamped Israel with its lasting character as a people of the book. Some commentators go too far with this point and suggest that Ezra actually wrote or perhaps rewrote much of the law we find in the books of Moses. But as we read his book, we see that the law was something Ezra received rather than something Ezra created.

So, one point of the genealogy is to let us know we are about to meet someone important. But the main point of the genealogy is to show that Ezra is a direct descendent of Aaron, and thus Ezra has the right to act as priest and the right to introduce reforms. The purpose is to show that Ezra came from a line of High Priests, although Ezra himself was not a High Priest. Ezra was thus acting with authority both from the Persian king and also from his Jewish ancestry as part of the High Priestly family. It was important that the people respect him and respect his position, because absent respect it is very difficult to lead or accomplish anything.

Lesson 11: Ezra 7:6 – 8:34

Ezra 7:6

6 this Ezra went up from Babylonia. He was a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses that the LORD, the God of Israel, had given, and the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him.

We are told in verse 6 that Ezra came from Babylon. Nehemiah, by contrast, came from Susa, which is where we found Queen Esther. Coming from Babylon meant that Ezra had lived with the great majority of exiled Jews, who seem to have concentrated in Babylon and the surrounding areas. (Although we know from the Elephantine Papyri that an entire colony of Jews lived in the south of Egypt.)

We are told that Ezra was a secretary skilled in the Law of Moses. The word “secretary” could refer to a Persian office or could simply refer to Ezra’s position as a priest and scribe among the Jews. If the former, it must refer to the position to which Ezra was appointed by King Artaxerxes when he was given the specific tasks we are about to see.

Not only was Ezra a secretary, he was a secretary “versed” or “skilled” in the law of Moses, or as the KJV reads, “a ready scribe in the law of Moses.” The Hebrew word translated “versed” or “ready” refers to a person of the highest efficiency or a professional of the highest order. The word “skilled” literally means “rapid.” Its use here suggests a quickness of grasp and an ease of movement through complex and complicated material.

We are also told in verse 6 that the favor of the Lord or the hand of the Lord was upon Ezra, which means that God had given his special favor to that person. This description also suggests that God had influenced the Persian king to act in sending Ezra back to Judah and granting all his requests. We are not told what Ezra requested, but likely he requested some or all of the things granted to him in the letter of Artaxerxes we are about to read.

Beginning with Ezra there arose in Israel a class of specialists (called scribes) who were teachers of the law. They studied, interpreted, and copied the scriptures, and came to be greatly revered by the people.

The prophets condemned those who handled the scriptures but did not know God (Jeremiah 2:8). Sadly that situation eventually came to be true of the scribes that followed Ezra. Prior to the exile, the priests were regarded as the guardians of the law, but after the exile that role

moved to the scribes. According to Jewish tradition, Ezra marked the point of this transition. By the time of Christ, the scribes had drifted far away from the model that Ezra left for them. In fact, they had drifted so far that when their long awaited Messiah arrived, they did not recognize him. Here is what they were like in Jesus' day:

“Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.” (Luke 20:46-47)

That is *not* how they started. They had fallen far away from the standard that Ezra set for them.

Verses 7-9

7 And there went up also to Jerusalem, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king, some of the people of Israel, and some of the priests and Levites, the singers and gatekeepers, and the temple servants. 8 And Ezra came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. 9 For on the first day of the first month he began to go up from Babylonia, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, for the good hand of his God was on him.

Ezra did not return to Jerusalem by himself, but instead he was accompanied by a group of Jews, including some from groups that we studied earlier—priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and temple servants. The names of many of the returnees are given in Ezra 8.

Verses 7-8 tells us that the return occurred during the seventh year of Artaxerxes' reign, which was 458 BC, and verse 9 tells us that the journey lasted about three and a half months. A direct path from Babylon to Jerusalem was about 500 miles, but they likely took a longer route through Northern Syria to avoid the desert (which is further suggested by their arrival in mid-summer). The trip by the longer route could have been 800 to 900 miles. Covering that distances in 3½ months meant they averaged about 10 miles per day, which is about half the usual rate of 15 to 20 miles a day. The slower rate of travel was likely due to the children and elderly in their number as well as to the large amount of gold and silver they were carrying with them.

The journey would have been dangerous, particularly at this time due to the revolt that was occurring in Egypt and the general lawlessness

that accompanied the revolt. But they returned safely because, as verse 9 tells us, the good hand of God was on Ezra.

Verse 10

10 For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.

Verse 10 is a key verse in Ezra, and a key verse in the entire Bible. “For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.” All of Ezra’s actions in the remainder of this book that bears his name must be interpreted in light of this verse. Verse 10 shows us the secret of Ezra’s lasting influence.

The word “heart” in verse 10 means the whole of one’s being. Religion was not just a hobby to Ezra. Instead, Ezra had concentrated his whole life on the study of God’s law. But it was more than just study; verse 10 tells us that Ezra also practiced the law and taught the law.

“[Ezra] is a model reformer in that what he taught he had first lived, and what he lived he had first made sure of in the Scriptures. With study, conduct, and teaching put deliberately in this right order, each of these was able to function properly at its best: study was saved from unreality, conduct from uncertainty, and teaching from insincerity and shallowness.”
(Kidner)

In this one verse we have our own tasks when it comes to God’s word – we must study it, we must do it, and we must teach it. Those are the legs of a three-legged stool, and if we neglect any one of them, then the stool will topple. Or, as Revelation 2-3 describes it, our candlestick will be removed.

Many today fail to study the word at all, and sadly that is not just true of those out in the world but is increasingly true in the Lord’s church. We were once known as a people of the book, but I fear we are losing that reputation. What does it mean to be a people of the Book?

- It means that we love the word of God.
- It means that we live the word of God.
- It means that we study the word of God.

- It means that we know the word of God.
- It means that we teach the word of God.
- It means that we proclaim the word of God.
- It means that we delight in the word of God.
- It means that we memorize the word of God.
- It means that we instruct our children in the word of God.
- It means that we respond to temptations by recalling and by quoting the word of God.
- It means that we understand the power and relevance of the word of God in our modern world. We know it is not a dead letter.
- It means that our preachers and our leaders and our teachers are Bible scholars.
- It means that we quote the Bible in our speech and quote it on our signs.
- It means that the word of our God is our standard in everything that we do.
- It means that we put the word of God ahead of our own popularity. (Ezra certainly did that, as we will see in the closing chapters of this book.)
- It means that we, like the noble Bereans, compare all that we hear (or sing!) with the word of God.
- It means that if the price of peace is compromising the word of God, then that price is too high.
- It means that our sermons are not about football or television shows, but rather begin with the phrase “Please open your Bibles to...” and are focused on the word of God.
- It means that our list of Bible classes is a list of Bible books.
- It means that our pulpits and classes ring with the word of God rather than ring as “sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.”

That is what it means to be a people of the Book! The denominations have largely cast the Bible away – but that must never be true of the Lord's church.

“Therefore as the fire devoureth the stubble, and the flame consumeth the chaff, so their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust: **because they have cast away the law of the LORD of hosts**, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.” (Isaiah 5:24)

“My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. And since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.” (Hosea 4:6) What you don't know can destroy you!

Many who study, fail to do what the word commands them to do. “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments.” (1 John 5:3) “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” (John 14:15) Obedience is what happens when study and love come together.

Ezra loved God's word and he loved God's people. And because he loved both, Ezra told God's people what they needed to hear. “Much is said about preaching the truth in love and so it should be preached. But in love of what? The preacher should so love the truth that he will not sacrifice any of it nor pervert it, and he should so love people that he will not withhold from them even one unpleasant truth. He that does either of these things loves neither the truth nor the people.” (R. L. Whiteside)

What must our own attitude be toward God's word? Ezra 7:10 tells us. We must set our heart to study it, and to do it, and to teach it. God's word cannot be just an afterthought to us or a weekend hobby to us. Our entire life – both individually and as a congregation – must be centered on the word of God. When we move away from God's word, we move away from God. When we neglect God's word, we neglect God. When we fail to love God's word, we fail to love God.

If we are no longer seen as a people of the book, then what is the answer to that problem? Verse 10 gives us the answer – “Ezra had set his heart.” The answer is **focus**! Ezra had devoted himself to God's word – to studying it, to obeying it, to teaching it. In short, Ezra was focused on God's word! Absent focus we will accomplish nothing, and that is not just true in our service to God. Excellence and achievement in any area demand focus.

We live in the Age of Distraction, and it shows. If we are mediocre and lackluster in our service, then it is likely because we are

distracted by other concerns. “As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.” (Matthew 13:22) “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (Matthew 6:21) If you want to know what is important to us, look at what we are focused on – if you want to know where our treasure is, look for our heart. (See additional verses on the handout.)

Ezra was focused on God. He was focused on his mission. He was focused on God’s word. And just look at what he accomplished for God and for God’s people. Let’s notice the focus of Ezra as we study these chapters.

Verses 11-26

Ezra 7:11 This is a copy of the letter that King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, a man learned in matters of the commandments of the LORD and his statutes for Israel: 12 “Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the Law of the God of heaven. Peace. And now 13 I make a decree that anyone of the people of Israel or their priests or Levites in my kingdom, who freely offers to go to Jerusalem, may go with you. 14 For you are sent by the king and his seven counselors to make inquiries about Judah and Jerusalem according to the Law of your God, which is in your hand, 15 and also to carry the silver and gold that the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, 16 with all the silver and gold that you shall find in the whole province of Babylonia, and with the freewill offerings of the people and the priests, vowed willingly for the house of their God that is in Jerusalem. 17 With this money, then, you shall with all diligence buy bulls, rams, and lambs, with their grain offerings and their drink offerings, and you shall offer them on the altar of the house of your God that is in Jerusalem. 18 Whatever seems good to you and your brothers to do with the rest of the silver and gold, you may do, according to the will of your God. 19 The vessels that have been given you for the service of the house of your God, you shall deliver before the God of Jerusalem. 20 And whatever else is required for the house of your God, which it falls to you to provide, you may provide it out of the king’s treasury. 21 “And I, Artaxerxes the king, make a decree to all the treasurers in the province Beyond the River: Whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the Law of the God of heaven, requires of you, let it be done with all diligence, 22 up to 100 talents of silver, 100 cors of wheat, 100 baths of wine, 100 baths of oil, and salt without prescribing how much. 23 Whatever is decreed by the God of heaven, let it be done in full for the house of the God of heaven, lest his wrath be against the realm of the king and his sons. 24 We also notify you that it shall not be lawful to

impose tribute, custom, or toll on anyone of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the doorkeepers, the temple servants, or other servants of this house of God. 25 "And you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God that is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province Beyond the River, all such as know the laws of your God. And those who do not know them, you shall teach. 26 Whoever will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be strictly executed on him, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of his goods or for imprisonment."

Verses 11-26 contain a letter from King Artaxerxes. As with the other letters by Persian kings that we have seen in this book, some question the authenticity of this letter. As before, they say that the letter is too Jewish to have come from the pen of a Persian king. They also complain that the letter gives powers to Ezra to that are much more extensive than one would expect. But, as before, the answer is simple – the king undoubtedly had some help in writing the letter. In fact, Ezra himself was likely responsible for much of this letter, and then the letter was later sanctioned by the king. We should also note that the letter is not entirely Jewish but also includes some Persian terms such as "king of kings" in verse 12 and "seven counselors" in verse 14 (the latter being something we also saw in Esther).

This letter does not just send Ezra off on a mission. Instead, the letter sends Ezra off on a mission with the funds and resources he needed to accomplish that task. The king's letter contains five stipulations: (1) It authorizes Ezra and those with him to go to Jerusalem to see that God's law was observed. (2) It provides a grant to buy sacrifices and temple vessels. (3) It commands the treasurers in the provinces to give supplies to Ezra. (4) It frees all the temple officials from taxation. (5) It authorizes Ezra to set up a judicial system.

Ezra, like Joseph many years before, had authority in a foreign government, and, like Joseph, that authority was part of God's providence in using Ezra to fulfill God's purposes for his people.

Why did the king send Ezra on this mission? We have already mentioned one reason—God wanted the king to send Ezra on the mission. But there may have also been a reason in the king's mind that had to do with what was going on elsewhere in his kingdom. As we have mentioned, there was a rebellion in Egypt at this time. Thus, Artaxerxes likely wanted to know what was going on in the neighboring area of Palestine, and he wanted to make the people there happy and satisfied with his reign to keep the rebellion from

spreading. Ezra was given these special powers so that he could accomplish that task.

The introduction to the letter in verse 11 is written in Hebrew, while the letter itself in verses 12-26 is written in Aramaic.

In verse 14, Ezra is told by the king to go to Judah to see if the Jews there are living according to the Law of God. No reason is given for this order, and most likely it originated from Ezra himself because that is what he wanted to do and that is what he knew God wanted him to do. Some suggests that Ezra may have received reports from Judah that distressed him and caused him to want to travel there and initiate reforms. Artaxerxes naturally saw Judah as an area that could be easily influenced by Egypt, and so he likely had concerns of his own that something nefarious was happening there.

The phrase “the law of your God which is in your hand” in verse 14 confirms that this was a written law, not just an oral law.

The sacrifices and offerings in verse 17 also most likely came from the pen of Ezra as he composed the letter on the king’s behalf. We should keep in mind that the exiled Jews were not able to keep these sacrifices while they were separated from the temple, and thus there was no doubt a large sacrifice whenever groups returned.

The vessels in verse 19 may have been some that were overlooked when the captured vessels were returned by Cyrus in Ezra 1. But it is also possible that these vessels were new.

In verses 21-24, the king addresses the treasurers whom Ezra would encounter on his trip to Judah. This letter would serve both as Ezra’s introduction to them and as a command to them from the king to give Ezra whatever he required.

The Babylonian “talent” in verse 22 was 60 minas, with a mina being 60 shekels. (The Babylonians used a Base-60 number system, the remnants of which we can still see today – 60 minutes in an hour, 360 degrees in a circle. How did they arrive at such a base? Most bases can be traced back to the human hand – our own Base-10 being the best example. But a single hand gives us Base-5, and the 3 joints on the 4 fingers of that hand give us Base-12. Most believe that Base-60 came from an early merger of two groups of people – one using Base-5 and one using Base-12.) A talent was about 75 pounds, so the 100 talents in verse 22 would have been nearly 4 tons of silver!

In verse 23, we see a concern by the king that the wrath of God not fall upon him, or his realm, or his sons. We have seen that concern before in this book expressed by a king, and it was common in the polytheistic world in which they lived. (Recall from 6:10 that Darius likewise asked for prayers for his well being and for that of his sons.) Thus the king was motivated by his own personal interest to see that the activities were done in the proper manner to avoid offending the God of Israel.

In verse 24, the exemption of the temple officials from taxation is known from other ancient sources to have been a Persian policy.

In verse 25, the king's attention returns to Ezra. The king instructs Ezra to teach the law to those who do not know it, and he also instructs Ezra to appoint magistrates and judges to enforce the law. We know that Ezra did not need a command to teach because verse 10 told us that Ezra had already set his heart to teach the law. We know from extra-Biblical sources that Persian kings were concerned that each of their subject peoples take seriously their own laws, presumably so that they would also take seriously the laws of Persia.

In verse 26, the king refers to both the law of God and the law of the king, and he prescribes severe punishments for those who disobey either law. This power to inflict penalties, and the confiscation in particular, was later invoked in the divorce proceedings we will see in Chapter 10. (See 10:8.)

The second Aramaic part of Ezra ends in verse 26, and the remainder of the book is in Hebrew.

Verses 27-28

27 Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king, to beautify the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem, 28 and who extended to me his steadfast love before the king and his counselors, and before all the king's mighty officers. I took courage, for the hand of the LORD my God was on me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.

With verses 27-28, we are suddenly made very much aware of Ezra the man as his own voice breaks into the narrative with, as one commentator said, "a grateful delight which time has done nothing to diminish." Ezra will take up the history himself in the first person until the end of Chapter 9. Nehemiah, like Ezra, will do much of his own narration in the next book.

Verse 27 tells us that God moved the king to beautify or adorn the temple. The Hebrew word for “adorn” is also found in Isaiah and in the Psalms, where each time God is the subject of the verb. In Isaiah 60:7, 13, the object of the verb is the temple, in Isaiah 55:5 and 60:9, the object is the people of God, and in Psalm 149:4 the object is the meek. The use of the word in Isaiah to refer to the temple are of particular interest here and have caused some to conclude that this return marked the event prophesied by Isaiah. But we know from our earlier study of Isaiah that those final chapters of Isaiah pointed to a later day than Ezra’s day in which the temple would be perfectly adorned by the servant.

Ezra 8

Verses 1-14

Ezra 8:1 These are the heads of their fathers’ houses, and this is the genealogy of those who went up with me from Babylonia, in the reign of Artaxerxes the king: 2 Of the sons of Phinehas, Gershom. Of the sons of Ithamar, Daniel. Of the sons of David, Hattush. 3 Of the sons of Shecaniah, who was of the sons of Parosh, Zechariah, with whom were registered 150 men. 4 Of the sons of Pahath-moab, Eliehoenai the son of Zerariah, and with him 200 men. 5 Of the sons of Zattu, Shecaniah the son of Jahaziel, and with him 300 men. 6 Of the sons of Adin, Ebed the son of Jonathan, and with him 50 men. 7 Of the sons of Elam, Jeshaiiah the son of Athaliah, and with him 70 men. 8 Of the sons of Shephatiah, Zebadiah the son of Michael, and with him 80 men. 9 Of the sons of Joab, Obadiah the son of Jehiel, and with him 218 men. 10 Of the sons of Bani, Shelomith the son of Josiphiah, and with him 160 men. 11 Of the sons of Bebai, Zechariah, the son of Bebai, and with him 28 men. 12 Of the sons of Azgad, Johanan the son of Hakkatan, and with him 110 men. 13 Of the sons of Adonikam, those who came later, their names being Eliphelet, Jeuel, and Shemaiah, and with them 60 men. 14 Of the sons of Bigvai, Uthai and Zaccur, and with them 70 men.

As with almost every list in the Bible, some commentators doubt the authenticity of this one. The reason for their doubt is that the list contains only 12 families, and they argue that means it was contrived to represent the 12 tribes of Israel. There are at least four problems with that argument. First, by their logic, had there actually been only 12 families, then the author would have had to alter the list, thereby making it unauthentic, to convince the critics that the list is authentic! Second, nowhere does the text say that the 12 families represents the twelve tribes. Third, if the symbol is intended, then Ezra likely chose

only 12 families to accompany him for that reason. Fourth, there are really more than 12 families mentioned because verse 2 includes an additional three families (although they are not listed by number as are the following 12).

We saw a similar list in Ezra 2 with regard to the first return under Cyrus, but there are a few differences. Here the priestly families (Phinehas and Ithamar in verse 2) are mentioned first, while in Ezra 2 the priestly families were mentioned last. Also, the priests here follow the Aaronite lineage, while the Ezra 2 priests follow the Zadokite lineage. Phinehas was the son of Aaron's third son, Eleazar, and Ithamar was Aaron's fourth son. (Exodus 6:23-25)

Another difference between this list and the one in Ezra 2 is that this list includes a descendant of King David in verse 2: "Of the sons of David, Hattush." From 1 Chronicles 3, we can deduce that Hattush was in the fourth generation after Zerubbabel. Dating Zerubbabel's birth around 560 BC, and taking a generation to be about 25 years, we get a date of around 460 BC, which is very close to 458 BC, the date of this return.

If we compare the family names in verses 4-14 with the names in 2:3-15, we find that almost all are present on both lists. What that means is that in most every case families are being reunited as exiles returning now are meeting family members and descendants of family members who had returned 80 years earlier.

Commentaries disagree about the meaning of the phrase "those who came later" or "those who are last" in verse 13. Most likely it simply means that these three family heads were the last ones from the family to migrate to Judah and that others had migrated earlier.

As for why this list is given, you can refer to our earlier comments about the list in Ezra 2. The Bible contains lists of honor and lists of shame. Here we see the former. In Chapter 10 we will see the latter.

Verses 15-20

Ezra 8:15 I gathered them to the river that runs to Ahava, and there we camped three days. As I reviewed the people and the priests, I found there none of the sons of Levi. 16 Then I sent for Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarib, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah, and Meshullam, leading men, and for Joiarib and Elnathan, who were men of insight, 17 and sent them to Iddo, the leading man at the place Casiphia, telling them what to say to Iddo and his brothers and the temple servants at the place Casiphia, namely, to send us ministers for the house of our God. 18 And by the good hand of our

God on us, they brought us a man of discretion, of the sons of Mahli the son of Levi, son of Israel, namely Sherebiah with his sons and kinsmen, 18; 19 also Hashabiah, and with him Jeshaiiah of the sons of Merari, with his kinsmen and their sons, 20; 20 besides 220 of the temple servants, whom David and his officials had set apart to attend the Levites. These were all mentioned by name.

Ezra 7:6-8 briefly mentioned Ezra's departure from Babylon, but here we are given more details. The returnees assembled at the Ahava River, which was most likely a canal of the Euphrates, and they camped there for 3 days, which is a common period of time when beginning or ending a journey. (See 8:32 and Neh. 2:11.)

One thing that happened during those three days was that Ezra reviewed the people, and what he discovers is that there were no Levites among them. As we discussed earlier in Chapter 2, the Levites may not have been very numerous at this time.

Ezra then sends 11 men (which, not being 12, should make the critics happy) to go find some Levites. The 11 men include 9 leaders or family heads and 2 interpreters. The leaders were no doubt intended to use their influence to convince some Levites to join them, whereas the interpreters (or men of insight) were likely meant to use the law to persuade the Levites to accompany them to Jerusalem. Ezra sent leaders and diplomats, and he told them what to say. Ezra knew this mission was important, and so he left nothing to chance.

Verse 17 mentions "Iddo, the leading man at the place Casiphia." Who was Iddo and where was Casiphia? Casiphia is related to the word "silver" and may have been named after a guild of silversmiths. Most likely a school was located there, and Iddo was the head of the school. As for Casiphia, it is curious that the text makes a point of calling it a "place." (Unless you are using the NIV, which for some reason failed to translate that word. Makes you wonder what else it dropped...) Some argue that the Hebrew word translated "place" actually refers to a sanctuary or a synagogue, which would further support the idea that this was a school.

Ezra's plan is successful, and verses 18-19 tell us that two independent Levitical families decide to accompany them to Jerusalem. The total number of returning Levites is given as 38, which further supports the idea that there were not many Levites in Babylon at this time.

Recall from our earlier lessons that the Levites were members of the tribe of Levi who were not also descendants of Aaron. They were prohibited from offering sacrifices on the altar. Because they had no land inheritance, they lived in 48 Levitical cities and were supported by tithes. They were butchers, doorkeepers, singers, scribes, teachers, and sometimes even temple beggars.

Verse 20 tells us that 220 temple servants also accompanied them. As we have discussed, the role of the temple servants was to assist the Levites, and having such a large number may have been a factor in convincing these Levites to join them on their return.

Ezra had a list of their names, but that list is not given here. The purpose of the list was two-fold – to serve as a roll call on the trip back, and the record and confirm the Jewish ancestries of those who returned.

Verses 21-23

Ezra 8:21 Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods. 22 For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king, “The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him.” 23 So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty.

Verses 21-22 describe the preparations for the journey. First, the people fast, and unlike the fasts we saw in Esther, this one is accompanied by a prayer. Specifically, the people ask God to grant them a safe journey, literally a “straight road.”

When the Pilgrims left England for America in 1620, Ezra 8:21 was the text of the last sermon they heard before departing on their voyage.

The word “children” in verse 21 reminds us that entire families were returning, but the Hebrew word can refer to anyone who was weak, including the aged.

The reference to “our goods” is a reminder that the road was unsafe due to bandits and the nearby Egyptian rebellion. This danger is highlighted in verse 22, where Ezra explains why he did not ask the king for a band of soldiers to accompany them. He had told the King that God would protect them, and so to ask for soldiers would have indicated a lack of faith on his part.

Would have asking for troops indicated a lack of faith on Ezra's part? Perhaps – but I am reminded of the story of the man who was in a flood, and stranded on the roof of his house, as the waters were rising. A man came by on a canoe and offered to help, but the man refused, saying, "God will provide." Another person came by in a boat and offered to help, but again the man refused, saying, "God will provide." Then a helicopter came by and offered to help, but for the third time the man refused, saying, "God would provide." The waters eventually rose above him and he drowned. In Heaven, he asked God, "Why didn't you help me? I had faith in you." God replied, "I sent you a canoe, a boat, and a helicopter ... what more did you want?"

In any event, God answered their prayers – and they arrived safely without the troops.

Some commentators try to pit Ezra against Nehemiah, and they point to these verses as a jab by Ezra against Nehemiah, who travelled with a military escort in Nehemiah 2:9. (And, if so, Nehemiah would likely have responded with a story similar to the one given above!) But the two missions were different. Ezra's mission was religious, whereas Nehemiah was sent as a political official, a governor, to Judah. He was likely given no choice about having a military escort.

Verses 24-30

Ezra 8:24 Then I set apart twelve of the leading priests: Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and ten of their kinsmen with them. 25 And I weighed out to them the silver and the gold and the vessels, the offering for the house of our God that the king and his counselors and his lords and all Israel there present had offered. 26 I weighed out into their hand 650 talents of silver, and silver vessels worth 200 talents, and 100 talents of gold, 27 20 bowls of gold worth 1,000 darics, and two vessels of fine bright bronze as precious as gold. 28 And I said to them, "You are holy to the LORD, and the vessels are holy, and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering to the LORD, the God of your fathers. 29 Guard them and keep them until you weigh them before the chief priests and the Levites and the heads of fathers' houses in Israel at Jerusalem, within the chambers of the house of the LORD." 30 So the priests and the Levites took over the weight of the silver and the gold and the vessels, to bring them to Jerusalem, to the house of our God.

A better translation of verse 24 is "twelve men as well as Sherebiah and Hashabiah and with them from their kinsmen, ten men" because it is clear from 8:18-19 that Sherebiah and Hashabiah were Levites. Thus, Ezra chose 12 priests and 12 Levites. This choice confirms Ezra

was fond of the number 12, which likely explains why he chose 12 families earlier.

Verses 25-27 describe a tremendous amount of wealth, and as usual some doubt its authenticity. But, as we have already seen, the Persian kings had tremendous wealth and enjoyed displaying it. Ezra carefully weighs the silver and gold to make sure that none of it was lost. The priests and the Levites were told to “guard them and keep them” until they were weighed again in Jerusalem.

This great wealth also reminds us of Ezra’s decision not to use a military escort – a decision that must have astonished the king and the other Persians in view of the great treasure they were carrying.

Verses 31-34

Ezra 8:31 Then we departed from the river Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go to Jerusalem. The hand of our God was on us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambushes by the way. 32 We came to Jerusalem, and there we remained three days. 33 On the fourth day, within the house of our God, the silver and the gold and the vessels were weighed into the hands of Meremoth the priest, son of Uriah, and with him was Eleazar the son of Phinehas, and with them were the Levites, Jozabad the son of Jeshua and Noadiah the son of Binnui. 34 The whole was counted and weighed, and the weight of everything was recorded.

Verse 31 helps us with the chronology. On the first day of the first month, the exiles assembled at the river. (This is the official beginning of the journey per Ezra 7:9.) They stayed there for 3 days while Ezra discovered the lack of Levites. They searched and found the Levites, and then arrived back at the river. On the 12th day of the first month, the caravan began its journey from the river to Jerusalem. Ezra 7:9 tells us they arrived on the first day of the fifth month.

Verse 31 tells us that they were delivered from enemies and ambushes along the way. The Hebrew used does not mean that unsuccessful ambushes occurred, but more likely means that God prevented the ambushes from happening at all. The 900 miles trek is described with only four words—“We came to Jerusalem.”

After resting for three days, the first thing they did was weigh the silver and the gold to confirm that none was missing.

Lesson 12: Ezra 8:35 – 10:44

Verses 35-36

Ezra 8:35 At that time those who had come from captivity, the returned exiles, offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel, twelve bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven lambs, and as a sin offering twelve male goats. All this was a burnt offering to the LORD. 36 They also delivered the king's commissions to the king's satraps and to the governors of the province Beyond the River, and they aided the people and the house of God.

With verses 35-36, the narrative switches back to the third person. ("I" and "we" become "those" and "they.") In 7:17, Artaxerxes commanded that certain offerings be made, and here in 8:35 we see that command being carried out.

The offering included 12 bulls, 96 rams, and 77 lambs. Why those numbers? Some say that the use of 12 is clearly symbolic, and 96 they note is divisible by 12. But why 77? Some argue that 77 should be 72, which is also divisible by 12, while others argue that 77 itself was symbolic for a large number. Most likely there were simply 77 lambs. (Or perhaps 77 was included just to give these commentators something to do!)

The plural "satraps" in verse 36 is seen by some as a problem because Trans-Euphrates or Beyond the River was a single satrap. Most likely the phrase also includes the Egyptian satrap, which was nearby and which also had a substantial Jewish population. We should also note that the phrase at issue is "to **the king's** satraps and to the governors **of the province** Beyond the River." That is, the text itself suggests that the satraps, unlike the governors, were not limited to the one province but were instead the king's satraps.

The final phrase in Chapter 8 is important: "they aided the people and the house of God." What that phrase shows is that Ezra's mission was not solely to discipline the people. His intention was constructive, although, as we will soon see, discipline was needed as well.

Ezra 9

Verses 1-5

Ezra 9:1 After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, "The people of Israel and the priests

and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. 2 For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost.” 3 As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled. 4 Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the faithlessness of the returned exiles, gathered around me while I sat appalled until the evening sacrifice. 5 And at the evening sacrifice I rose from my fasting, with my garment and my cloak torn, and fell upon my knees and spread out my hands to the LORD my God,

In verses 1-3, the officials approach Ezra to tell him about the problem of foreign marriages. Already Ezra’s campaign to teach people the Law was bearing “the characteristic fruit of reform.” Apparently, these same officials had not tried to solve the problem themselves (or perhaps been able to solve the problem) prior to Ezra’s arrival.

According to 10:9-11, where Ezra denounces the foreign marriages, the assembly of the exiles gathered on the 12th day of the 9th month. That is more than 4½ months after their arrival, which has caused some to wonder why it took so long for Ezra to notice the foreign marriages. In fact, he does not notice them himself, but rather is told about them in 9:1-2, and we can see his shock and dismay in verse 3.

What is the reason for the delay? The first few words in verse 1 may answer that question. The phrase “after things [that] had been done” in verse 1 may refer back to the weighing of the valuables or to the sacrifices. But another possibility is that it refers back to verse 36 and that Ezra needed some time to deliver the king’s orders to the governors and satraps. The most likely explanation for the delay is that Ezra had been travelling extensively after his arrival to visit the officials in the surrounding areas.

Marriages between the Israelites and certain foreign nations were prohibited under the Mosaic Law:

- **Exodus 34:11-16** “Observe what I command you this day. Behold, I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. 12 Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. 13 You shall tear down their altars and break

their pillars and cut down their Asherim 14 (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), 15 lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, 16 **and you take of their daughters for your sons,** and their daughters whore after their gods and make your sons whore after their gods.”

- **Deuteronomy 7:1-4** “When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than yourselves, 2 and when the LORD your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. 3 **You shall not intermarry with them,** giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, 4 for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly.”

Not only do these passages prohibit the foreign marriages, they supply the reason for the prohibition – the foreign marriages would turn the Jews away from following God. The influence of the foreign mother would turn the husband and the children to her foreign gods and would introduce the foreign worship and idolatry into the worship of God. And, of course, we see that very thing happening over and over again throughout the Old Testament. The issue was not that of race but rather that of religious purity.

But we also know that foreign marriages were not that unusual. Joseph had an Egyptian wife, Moses married a Midianite and a Cushite, and Ruth, a Moabitess, holds an honored position in Jesus’ genealogy. The danger remained, however, that foreign wives could lead the people away to foreign gods, particularly when, as here, the problem had become so widespread.

The peoples mentioned in verse 1 are similar to those listed in Exodus and Deuteronomy: the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. The Ammonites, Moabites, and Egyptians are included to bring the list up to date. While the Hivites are excluded, some of the

other ancient nations (Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Amorites) are retained, likely to confirm the link to the original prohibition under Moses, or possibly to remind the Jews that they too could cease to exist. The names may have changed, but the sin remained the same.

Verse 2 is telling: “And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost.” Why were the chief men so willing to overlook the sin? Because they and their families were the most involved in it. But we know that not all of the leaders were involved in the sin because some of the leaders had told Ezra about the sin in verse 1. Some of the leaders had integrity, but apparently many others did not.

We can see here a modern parallel with a problem faced by the people of God today. It is a sad fact in the church today, but one that has been frequently confirmed by experience, that you can sometimes determine an eldership’s view on the issue of marriage, divorce, and remarriage simply by looking at the divorces and remarriages in their own families. We are given a word for that in verses 2 and 4 – faithlessness. And Ezra will give us another word for it in 10:10 – treason! They have broken faith with God.

Verses 3-5 show the effect that the news of the people’s infidelity had on Ezra – he tore his garments, pulled out his hair, and sat dumbfounded (overcome or appalled). He was not blasé when it came to sin, and he wanted those around him to know that. He understood the seriousness of the situation. Such sin as this was the reason they had been exiled in the first place – and here they were doing it again! He must have wondered if they would ever learn!

We can see a big difference here between Ezra and Nehemiah. When Ezra hears about the sin, he pulls out his own hair in verse 3. In Nehemiah 13:25, here is how Nehemiah responded when he was faced with the same problem: “I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out **their** hair.” I suppose there is a time to pull out your own hair, and a time to pull out the hair of others! Maybe that should be added to the list in Ecclesiastes 3.

Ezra is upset. Ezra is overcome. Ezra is worried. So what does Ezra do? Ezra prays.

Verses 6-15

6 saying: “O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens. 7 From the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great
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guilt. And for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as it is today. 8 But now for a brief moment favor has been shown by the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant and to give us a secure hold within his holy place, that our God may brighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our slavery. 9 For we are slaves. Yet our God has not forsaken us in our slavery, but has extended to us his steadfast love before the kings of Persia, to grant us some reviving to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us protection in Judea and Jerusalem. 10 "And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken your commandments, 11 which you commanded by your servants the prophets, saying, 'The land that you are entering, to take possession of it, is a land impure with the impurity of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations that have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness. 12 Therefore do not give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good of the land and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever.' 13 And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, seeing that you, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved and have given us such a remnant as this, 14 shall we break your commandments again and intermarry with the peoples who practice these abominations? Would you not be angry with us until you consumed us, so that there should be no remnant, nor any to escape? 15 O LORD, the God of Israel, you are just, for we are left a remnant that has escaped, as it is today. Behold, we are before you in our guilt, for none can stand before you because of this."

Verses 6-15 give us Ezra's prayer, and that prayer is centered around the confession of sin and the importance of the remnant. We can compare this prayer of Ezra in Ezra 9 to that of Daniel in Daniel 9 and that of Nehemiah in Nehemiah 9.

We see the first confession of sin in verses 6-7. (We will see a second in verses 10-14.) Ezra uses two metaphors to describe their sin – "our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens."

The switch from the first person singular in verse 6 ("I am ashamed") to the first person plural in verses 6-7 ("our iniquities have risen" and "we have been in great guilt") is interesting. Ezra identifies himself with his people and with the sin of his people. He did not come into Jerusalem to accuse them as an outsider – he was instead standing with them and describing their sins as "our" sins and "our" guilt. This scribe was praying the Publican's Prayer!

In verse 7, Ezra looks back through their history – and he recognizes that it has been a history of sin and rebellion against God, and he understands that their exile had been caused by that sin and rebellion. “It is as if Ezra has realized that immediately in front of him are all the cumulative iniquities which have heaped up through history. What an extraordinary view of sin!”

Humiliation by foreign kings was nothing new for Israel and would continue to be nothing new. After the conquest by Babylon, the Jews were under the rule of the Persians, Alexander the Great, the Ptolemies, the Seleucids, the Romans, the Byzantines, the Arabs, the Turks, and the British. The Jews have enjoyed only two periods of independence since their exile by Nebuchadnezzar: their modern state (since 1948) and from 165 to 63 BC following the Maccabean Revolt.

In verses 8-9, Ezra comes back to their current situation under the Persian kings. During the time of the Babylonian kings, the Jews had no hope of returning to Judah, but that situation had changed when the Persian Empire took over. The “brief moment” in verse 8 was a period of about 80 years during which the people had been allowed to return to Jerusalem. Ezra understood that that window could close at any time. Yes, God opens doors, **but God also closes doors**. We should not presume those open doors will remain open forever, especially if we fail to walk through them. We know of one great open door that will close with a permanent thud on the final day of judgment, but that is not the only door that God will close.

In verse 8, Ezra also recognizes that they were a remnant, and that God had spared that remnant for a purpose. The Hebrew word means “escaped remnant,” which suggests that the remnant included only those Jews who had escaped from the exile and returned to Judah. That is, those Jews who remained behind were not considered part of this remnant, at least in the eyes of Ezra.

Verse 8 also mentions the “secure hold” or “foothold” that God had given the remnant. The literal Hebrew term is “tent peg,” and it refers to a place where a nomad could pitch his tent after a long journey.

“A little grace had been granted by God to his people; a small remnant had found its weary way back to its home and driven a single peg into the soil; a solitary ray of light was shining; a faint breath of freedom lightened their slavery.”

Finally, verse 8 says that their eyes were brightened and that they were revived in their slavery. The people were dead while in exile, but now they had been revived. The word “little” in “little reviving” is a reminder that many Jews remained in exile, which Ezra describes as slavery.

But verse 9 tells us that God had not forsaken them, even in their slavery, but had “extended to us his steadfast love before the kings of Persia.” God had demonstrated his love to them while they were in exile. Doesn’t this bring another verse to our minds? “But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8)

Verse 9 reminds us that this remnant had a purpose: “to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us protection in Judea and Jerusalem.” Some argue, based on this verse, that the temple had been destroyed during the reign of Xerxes and was rebuilt again during the time of Ezra. It all depends on how we interpret “we” and “our” in verse 9. We have already seen Ezra use those terms to refer to his people in the past as well as in the present (see verse 7). Thus, it seems most likely that the rebuilding in verse 9 refers to the earlier rebuilding under Cyrus and Darius (which all occurred during the “brief moment” of verse 8).

The word “protection” in verse 9 literally means “fence.” Some have argued from this word that when Ezra arrived the wall around the city must have already been constructed. From this they argue that Ezra must have arrived after Nehemiah built the wall, and they rearrange the chronology accordingly. The Hebrew word for “fence” used here, however, does not refer to a city wall, but rather refers to a stone fence that forms a border between property owners. It simply meant a protected area. In fact, we can see that from how it is used in verse 9 – “to give us protection **in Judea** and Jerusalem.” How could a city wall have been built around all of Judea?

Verses 10-12 are directed to Ezra’s listeners as well as to God, causing one commentator to describe the prayer as a “sermon prayer.” Ezra wanted the people to understand that all the disasters that had befallen them as a people had happened because of their disobedience to God’s commands, and so he uses the language of the Bible to help them understand. (Even today, we can often tell from a man’s prayer how well he knows and loves the Bible.)

Ezra also connected those commandments with the prophets who had warned the people about their peril. The citations in verses 11-12

come from Genesis, Deuteronomy, Leviticus, Lamentations, 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Isaiah, and Ezekiel, although the texts are not literally quoted. Despite all that had happened to the Jews, Ezra understood that they had been punished less than their iniquities deserved. They deserved death, but God had given them life. Where is the gospel in the Old Testament? A better question might be where isn't it!

In verses 13-15, Ezra returns to the remnant. The Jews could have been completely wiped out – as had happened to many of the peoples who had opposed the Jews – but they were not. Instead, God had spared a remnant and brought that remnant back to the promised land. This remnant was evidence of God's love and God's grace. But if that remnant sinned and rebelled, then it was in danger of being destroyed. God could find another remnant – there were communities of Jews scattered all around, even down in Egypt.

A clear message here is that remnants have responsibilities! The Lord's church is also a remnant. Do we understand what that means? Do we understand our own responsibilities? If the Lord's church turns its back on God's word, then what will be left? Will we cause God to look elsewhere for a faithful remnant? "Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8) It is our responsibility to make sure the answer to that question is yes!

Ezra 10

Verses 1-6

Ezra 10:1 While Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, a very great assembly of men, women, and children, gathered to him out of Israel, for the people wept bitterly. 2 And Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, of the sons of Elam, addressed Ezra: "We have broken faith with our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land, but even now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. 3 Therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God, and let it be done according to the Law. 4 Arise, for it is your task, and we are with you; be strong and do it." 5 Then Ezra arose and made the leading priests and Levites and all Israel take oath that they would do as had been said. So they took the oath. 6 Then Ezra withdrew from before the house of God and went to the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib, where he spent the night, neither eating bread nor drinking

water, for he was mourning over the faithlessness of the exiles.

Ezra 10:1 brings us back to the situation described in 9:3-5 and tells us what happened at the temple after Ezra's prayer. Notice that while Ezra 9 speaks of Ezra in the first person, Ezra 10 speaks of him in the third person. One commentary suggests that this back and forth shift is a literary device intended to let the reader see the events from different perspectives.

While Ezra prayed, he lay prostrate and weeping. "Casting himself down" in the Hebrew implies that Ezra kept "casting himself down" to the ground. This caused a crowd to gather, no doubt wondering what had caused this important official to behave in this manner. By the time the prayer was completed and the events in Chapter 10 began, we are told that a very large crowd had gathered.

Ezra's emotional state infected those around him, and by the end of verse 1 they were also weeping bitterly. Most had heard all or part of Ezra's prayer, so they knew what was causing his great distress.

Shecaniah speaks out in verses 2-4. He was likely a leader of the people, as well as someone who agreed with Ezra over the problem of intermarriage. (He also held Ezra in high esteem, calling him "my lord" in verse 3.) His father was Jehiel, and we also find a Jehiel in verse 26. If they were the same person, then Shecaniah was denouncing his own father here in verses 2-4.

Yes, Shecaniah says, we (note the first person) have sinned, and yes, the sin has been great ("we have broken faith with our God"), but there was still hope. It was not too late to repent and make things right with God. But how?

In verse 3, he tells them how. "Therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and their children." The marriages were illegal, and there was one and only one solution to an illegal marriage – it must be ended. Both the foreign wives and the children from the mixed marriage must be put away, presumably sent back to where the wife had come from in the first place.

To many and perhaps to most today, this solution seems very harsh. And there is a reason for that – it was very harsh, but something much more important was at stake. Had the intermarriage continued, the Jewish race and the Jewish religion would have become unrecognizable in just a few generations. God had a plan for the Jews, and that plan required that they maintain their purity and

their faithfulness to God's law. This small group of Jews was surrounded by a large group of hostile, polytheistic neighbors that threatened to consume them. Ezra also knew the devastating problems that had come from the foreign marriages of Solomon and the kings who followed him. Drastic measures were called for in such a situation, and drastic measures were taken. History tells us that other Jewish communities in exile gradually disintegrated – that happened, for example, to the Jews in Egypt that we have previously discussed.

“Ezra’s decision was at a watershed in the history of Judaism, when the future of monotheism was at stake. It was a matter of deep principle, not of ethnic exclusivism, to reject marital links with the people of the land.”

And for those who point to the departure of the children as being excessively harsh, perhaps they should have asked the departing mothers for their opinion. In ancient societies (as today), when marriages were dissolved the children typically went with the mother. The harshness of that edict was directed more to the fathers, who would likely never see the children again. But sin has consequences—then and now—and often those consequences affect the innocent along with the guilty—then and now.

Continuing to address Ezra, Shecaniah says in verse 4 what every leader wants to hear: “Arise, for it is your task, and we are with you; be strong and do it.” He recognizes the obvious (or at least what should be obvious) – that it is the task of the leader to lead, but he tells Ezra that the people are with him. And he encourages Ezra to “be strong and do it,” which is good advice for leaders in any generation. Sadly, rather than “be strong and do it,” leaders sometimes follow the opposite command: be weak and do nothing! And perhaps in situations like that, we, like Shecaniah, should stand up and encourage them to “be strong and do it” because “we are with you.”

Shecaniah was a man of action who recognized the urgency and seriousness of the situation. He knew what needed to be done, and he did what he could to see that it was done. He encouraged his leaders to act when action was required. We should pray that God will continue to raise up Shecaniahs!

In verses 5-6, the leaders and the people take an oath to do what had been said, and Ezra withdraws to a chamber to fast and mourn.

Earlier we mentioned that some commentators argue that Ezra arrived *after* Nehemiah rather than before Nehemiah. Verse 6 is often quoted as the best evidence for that position. Nehemiah 12:22 tells us that Johanan was the grandson of Eliashib, whom we also see in Nehemiah 3:1. They argue that the grandson of Eliashib could not have invited Ezra to use his chamber in 458 BC, but only much later. But that argument falls apart with the simple observation that Johanan was very common name, and particularly so once it had already been used in a family. That is, since we know that Eliashib had a grandson named Johanan, it is even more likely that Eliashib had a brother or a son named Johanan. As one commentator noted, “the proper name Johanan in those days is somewhat like Smith in our times.”

Verses 7-17

7 And a proclamation was made throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the returned exiles that they should assemble at Jerusalem, 8 and that if anyone did not come within three days, by order of the officials and the elders all his property should be forfeited, and he himself banned from the congregation of the exiles. 9 Then all the men of Judah and Benjamin assembled at Jerusalem within the three days. It was the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month. And all the people sat in the open square before the house of God, trembling because of this matter and because of the heavy rain. 10 And Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, “You have broken faith and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. 11 Now then make confession to the LORD, the God of your fathers and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives.” 12 Then all the assembly answered with a loud voice, “It is so; we must do as you have said. 13 But the people are many, and it is a time of heavy rain; we cannot stand in the open. Nor is this a task for one day or for two, for we have greatly transgressed in this matter. 14 Let our officials stand for the whole assembly. Let all in our cities who have taken foreign wives come at appointed times, and with them the elders and judges of every city, until the fierce wrath of our God over this matter is turned away from us.” 15 Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah opposed this, and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite supported them. 16 Then the returned exiles did so. Ezra the priest selected men, heads of fathers’ houses, according to their fathers’ houses, each of them designated by name. On the first day of the tenth month they sat down to examine the matter; 17 and by the first day of the first month they had come to the end of all the men who had married foreign women.

In verse 7, a message is sent out commanding all men to appear in Jerusalem within three days for an investigation. Those who failed to do so would have their property confiscated and would be banned from the community. From 7:25-26, we recall that Ezra had authority from the King to take such actions – and in fact had authority to take much more drastic actions than this. Ezra is restraining himself!

The Hebrew word translated “confiscated” originally meant that the property would be destroyed (Joshua 6:21), but by this time it meant that the property would be delivered to the priests (Ezekiel 44:29).

Exclusion from the community meant that they would not be allowed in the temple and might even lose their citizenship. They would not be allowed to participate in the daily sacrifices, and they would not be able to call upon their kinsmen for help. They would be regarded as foreigners by the Jews.

In verse 9, all the men from Judah and Benjamin gather in Jerusalem. As for Judah and Benjamin, we saw the same phrase back in 1:5, and it likely refers to a geographical area.

The 20th day of the 9th month was in midwinter, and we see in verse 9 that the people were trembling because of the cold and the rain. In the Hebrew, “the rain” uses a plural of intensity to tell us that these were heavy, torrential rains. At this time of the year, the temperature could have been in the 40’s, which along with the rain explains the trembling. But verse 9 tells us that they were also trembling because of the matter that was being discussed.

The bad weather prevented a long speech, so Ezra gives a short one – and it is amazing how much he manages to say in such a short speech. (Again, we see the focus of Ezra. He was prepared for the occasion. He was not just winging it!) He says: “You have broken faith and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. Now then make confession to the LORD, the God of your fathers and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives.” What more needed to be said? They had broken faith with God, and they needed to restore that broken relationship. Either they would do it, or they would not. There was no need for Ezra to repeat the same message 12 different ways in a longer speech.

And what was the key to restoring that broken relationship? Verse 11 tells us – separation. Separation from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives. And that is still God’s message today:

Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty. (2 Corinthians 6:17-18)

We cannot be right with God if we refuse to separate ourselves from that which is unclean. That was true then, and that is true now.

Here in Chapter 10, what that meant was that these men had to separate themselves from their foreign wives. But I thought that God hates divorce? Yes, that is what Malachi 2:16 tells us, but we need to look more closely at that prophecy. Malachi was most likely a close contemporary to the events described here in Ezra, perhaps prophesying in the early 5th century prior to Ezra's arrival. If we look at the context of Malachi 2:16, we will find that he fills in an important piece of the puzzle here. Let's start reading at verse 11:

Judah hath dealt treacherously, and an abomination is committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah hath profaned the holiness of the LORD which he loved, **and hath married the daughter of a strange god.** 12 The LORD will cut off the man that doeth this, the master and the scholar, out of the tabernacles of Jacob, and him that offereth an offering unto the LORD of hosts. 13 And this have ye done again, covering the altar of the LORD with tears, with weeping, and with crying out, insomuch that he regardeth not the offering any more, or receiveth it with good will at your hand. 14 Yet ye say, Wherefore? **Because the LORD hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously:** yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant. 15 And did not he make one? Yet had he the residue of the spirit. And wherefore one? That he might seek a godly seed. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth. 16 **For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away:** for one covereth violence with his garment, saith the LORD of hosts: therefore take heed to your spirit, that ye deal not treacherously.

What those verses tell us is that some of these men who were marrying foreign wives were abandoning their Jewish wives to do so.

Thus, the complaint (still heard today) that Ezra was destroying families would have and should have fallen on deaf ears – Ezra was not the home wrecker here! If anything, he was trying to put the homes back together.

Another reason behind the foreign marriages suggested by some commentators is that the men may have largely outnumbered the women among the returning exiles. And while that is a possibility, that is not an excuse to disobey God's word.

We might pause for a moment and consider what relevance, if any, these chapters in Ezra have with regard to current questions about divorce and remarriage. I would make just two quick points on that issue:

1. The question often arises today about whether a remarriage without scriptural grounds should continue or should be dissolved. Those who argue for its dissolution stress (rightfully) that one can hardly be said to have repented of a sin that one continues to engage in. And those who argue for the opposite view often say that God hates divorce, and so the marriage should continue, perhaps for the sake of the children. Ezra would seem to have something to tell us with regard to that point of view. God has our eternal destiny in mind, and we should as well.
2. Many sermons and lessons on divorce and remarriage have been preached and written from the pages of Ezra, but when I read such lessons I think of what Abraham told Lazarus in Luke 16:31 – “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.” To paraphrase, I would say, “If they do not hear Jesus in Mathew 19:9, they will not be convinced by Ezra.” “Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.” One has to work pretty hard to misunderstand that verse! It certainly needs no clarification from Ezra.

In verses 12-13, the people agree about what needs to be done, but they have three reasons why it should not be done right now. First, there are too many people here. Second, it is raining. Third, there are too many cases to be decided.

But they also had a proposed solution for those problems, and we see that in verse 14. (This shows that they were not just trying to delay and avoid fixing the problem.) Their proposed solution was for the officials to organize things locally, and then for those affected to come to Jerusalem with their local leaders and judges. They understood that these were very delicate matters, and they wanted things to be handled fairly. Ezra apparently agrees with the proposal because this is what they do in verses 16-17.

But in between verses 12-14 and verses 16-17, we have the opposition in verses 15: “Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah opposed this, and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite supported them.” (And there will always be a verse 15 between the problem and the solution!)

Verse 15 has been called “one of the most difficult verses in the whole book of Ezra.” To what do “this” and “them” refer? The most likely interpretation is that Asahel and Jahzeiah opposed the delay – they wanted to take immediate action. But it also possible that they opposed the drastic measures, perhaps because they themselves had foreign wives. And what about Meshullam and Shabbethai? Did they support the delay, or did they support the proposal for the delay? The Hebrew could mean either. (Verse 29 might provide a clue in that Meshullam is listed among the offenders, but that was a very common name – there are perhaps as many as 10 different Meshullam’s in Ezra and Nehemiah!) In short, all we can say for sure is that they were opposed to something – which is probably all we need to say.

The process begins on the first day of the tenth month and ends on the first day of the first month – which is about 75 days. If we compare that with the list of 110 cases that concludes this chapter, it means that they dealt with fewer than two cases a day on average. Why so few? First, they were complicated matters, and the people had been told to come to Jerusalem in an organized manner. Second, some may have been found innocent, which means their cases would not have been listed in verses 18-44. Third, it is possible that not all the cases were listed in verses 18-44.

Verses 18-44

Ezra 10:18 Now there were found some of the sons of the priests who had married foreign women: Maaseiah, Eliezer, Jarib, and Gedaliah, some of the sons of Jeshua the son of Jozadak and his brothers. 19 They pledged themselves to put away their wives, and their guilt offering was a ram of the flock for their guilt. 20 Of the sons of Immer: Hanani and

Zebadiah. 21 Of the sons of Harim: Maaseiah, Elijah, Shemaiah, Jehiel, and Uziah. 22 Of the sons of Pashhur: Elioenai, Maaseiah, Ishmael, Nethanel, Jozabad, and Elasa. 23 Of the Levites: Jozabad, Shimei, Kelaiah (that is, Kelita), Pethahiah, Judah, and Eliezer. 24 Of the singers: Eliashib. Of the gatekeepers: Shallum, Telem, and Uri. 25 And of Israel: of the sons of Parosh: Ramiah, Izziah, Malchijah, Mijamin, Eleazar, Hashabiah, and Benaiah. 26 Of the sons of Elam: Mattaniah, Zechariah, Jehiel, Abdi, Jeremoth, and Elijah. 27 Of the sons of Zattu: Elioenai, Eliashib, Mattaniah, Jeremoth, Zabad, and Aziza. 28 Of the sons of Bebai were Jehohanan, Hananiah, Zabbai, and Athlai. 29 Of the sons of Bani were Meshullam, Malluch, Adaiah, Jashub, Sheal, and Jeremoth. 30 Of the sons of Pahath-moab: Adna, Chelal, Benaiah, Maaseiah, Mattaniah, Bezalel, Binnui, and Manasseh. 31 Of the sons of Harim: Eliezer, Isshijah, Malchijah, Shemaiah, Shimeon, 32 Benjamin, Malluch, and Shemariah. 33 Of the sons of Hashum: Mattenai, Mattattah, Zabad, Eliphelet, Jeremai, Manasseh, and Shimei. 34 Of the sons of Bani: Maadai, Amram, Uel, 35 Benaiah, Bedeiah, Cheluhi, 36 Vaniah, Meremoth, Eliashib, 37 Mattaniah, Mattenai, Jaasu. 38 Of the sons of Binnui: Shimei, 39 Shelemiah, Nathan, Adaiah, 40 Machnadebai, Shashai, Sharai, 41 Azarel, Shelemiah, Shemariah, 42 Shallum, Amariah, and Joseph. 43 Of the sons of Nebo: Jeiel, Mattithiah, Zabad, Zebina, Jaddai, Joel, and Benaiah. 44 All these had married foreign women, and some of the women had even borne children.

The book of Ezra ends with what has been called a list of shame – a list of those who had married foreign wives in violation of the law. But it is also a list of the repentant because verse 44 tells us that each of them sent the foreign wives and children away.

The list begins with the priests, which shows how deeply this problem ran among the exiles. It even affected the high-priestly family of Jeshua.

The guilt offering in verse 19 is also described in Leviticus 5:14-26. Interestingly, it usually referred to an unintentional transgression, which means that it is possible that these marriages were considered an unintentional act. Favoring that view is the notion that the people may not have been aware of the finer distinctions of the law until Ezra was sent to teach them. But is the prohibition against foreign marriages really a fine distinction? Also, when read alongside Malachi, it is hard to see how this sin could be called unintentional.

Also interesting is that the pledge and the guilt offering in verse 19 are mentioned only for the priests. If they were the only ones who did it, then it may have been because their transgression was worse due to

their position. But a more likely explanation is that verse 19 was the example that all the rest also followed, but it was simply not repeated over and over again in the text for each group.

A final interesting observation is that the temple servants were not mentioned. Perhaps they were too numerous to list, which would also answer our earlier question about the paucity of cases. Or perhaps this problem was one that affected only the higher social classes.

After listing the priests and the Levites, verse 25 begins the list of those “of Israel.” Sometimes Israel is used in this book to refer to all the people (priests and Levites included), and sometimes (as here) it is used to refer to people other than the priests and the Levites. Four of the families mentioned here do not also occur in the list of earlier returnees found in Ezra 2.

Verse 44 is an unusual ending, and there seems to have been some corruption from the original text. Literally the verse reads: “All these had married foreign women and there was from them women and they put children.”

But is verse 44 the last word from Ezra? No. He will disappear from the written record for about 13 years, but we see him again in Nehemiah 8 sometime after Nehemiah’s arrival in 445 BC– and we see him, in this same city square, still reading the Law, still doing the Law, and still teaching the Law! If you are looking for an example of faithfulness, godliness, commitment, and integrity, you won’t do much better than Ezra. And for an example of faithfulness, determination, and courage, you won’t do much better than Queen Esther.

In the Hebrew Bible, the books of Nehemiah and Ezra are a single book, and Nehemiah follows immediately after these events in Ezra 10. But our study must end here in Ezra (at least for now!).