

Lesson 12

We ended last week by reading the letter to Darius and the letter back, which included a decree by King Darius. Now we will see the reaction to that letter.

Ezra 6:13-15

13 Then Tatnai, governor on this side the river, Shetharboznai, and their companions, according to that which Darius the king had sent, so they did speedily. 14 And the elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they builded, and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the commandment of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia. 15 And this house was finished on the third day of the month Adar, which was 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 Darius’ strings. As one commentator noted, this victory of God’s people clearly displays the providence of God at work through these pagan potentates. I’m sure that Darius the Great thought he was completely worthy of that title, but he was just a tool in the hand of God.

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 (such as those 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 rushed through that door. Do we?

Are we on the look out for ways in which God is using those outside of his church to help us in our mission? As the walls come down in Cuba, are we looking for ways to take the gospel there? As new technologies are created, are we thinking of ways to use them to spread the gospel? As economies collapse and industries falter, are we looking for hurting people who may now be more receptive to the gospel? God opens doors – of that there can be no doubt. The only doubt is whether his people will notice the doors and then go through the doors. Let’s resolve to remove that doubt!

Whatever situation we find ourselves in, we need to be looking for ways to serve God and proclaim his word. We are not called to try to change our situation through revolution or other such conflict, but instead we need to work within whatever system we find ourselves in. The Jews were not called by God to rebel against Babylon or Persia. The Christian were not called by God to rebel against Rome, but rather were told to honor the emperor. Kingdoms rise and fall at the whim of God; not at our whim. We can pray for change, but we need to pray for such things according to God’s will while doing what we can within the system in which we are living.

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 520 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 he included the (then future) support for the Jews that also occurred during the reign of Artaxerxes (although, as we will see, that support involved rebuilding the walls rather than rebuilding the temple). Ezra is using all three kings involved in the restoration as illustrations of how even mighty kings are tools to accomplish the command of the God.

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 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.

Solomon’s temple had stood for 400 years. This second temple stood for about 570 years until it was replaced by Herod’s temple in 19 BC. Herod’s temple and whatever remained in it from this second temple were destroyed by the Romans in AD 70.

Was it ever rebuilt? Yes, the temple was rebuilt on the first day of Pentecost following the resurrection of Christ – about 40 years before the Jewish temple was destroyed in AD 70.

1 Peter 2:5 Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 2:19-22 Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; 20 And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; 21 In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: 22 In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.

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. Two things are certain – (1)

God will accomplish his plans, and (2) God's people love and obey God's word. Each of those facts is a central theme of the book of Ezra.

Ezra 6:16-18

16 And the children of Israel, the priests, and the Levites, and the rest of the children of the captivity, kept the dedication of this house of God with joy, 17 And offered at the dedication of this house of God an hundred bullocks, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs; and for a sin offering for all Israel, twelve he goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel. 18 And they set the priests in their divisions, and the Levites in their courses, for the service of God, which is 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" in verses 16-17 is Hanukkah, the name of the Jewish holiday that celebrates a similar dedication of this same temple after its defilement by the Antiochus Epiphanes in 165 BC. Unlike that event in 165 BC, we have no indication that this dedication became annual celebration.

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 how: They did "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 people today must do the same thing if they want to be pleasing to God.

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. We earlier discussed some possible reasons for the switch to Aramaic.

Ezra 6:19-22

19 And the children of the captivity kept the passover upon the fourteenth day of the first month. 20 For the priests and the Levites were purified together, all of them were pure, and killed the passover for all the children of the captivity, and for their

brethren the priests, and for themselves. 21 And the children of Israel, which were come again out of captivity, and all such as had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the LORD God of Israel, did eat, 22 And kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy: for the LORD had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria unto them, to strengthen their hands 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.

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 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 Corinthians 5:7) So, as we saw that Zechariah was proclaiming Christ to the people, this feast was also pointing forward to the perfect sacrifice that was to come.

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 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 only if they "had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the LORD God of Israel." They were not allowed to have one foot in Canaan and one foot in Jerusalem; they had to decide whose side they were on. Some of them chose God's side.

Verse 21 is important because it corrects the false impression that the returning exiles were some sort of a bitterly exclusive group that wanted nothing to do with their neighbors. What verse 21 tells us is that the only people who were excluded were those who excluded themselves – those who had "separated themselves" as verse 21 puts it. For those who wanted to join in on God's terms as opposed to their own terms, what they found was an open door.

Jeremiah 29:13 And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart.

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 worshiping 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! That is a very sad place to live, which explains the misery!

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:

Nehemiah 9:32 Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who keepeth 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.**

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.

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 fictionalized history? 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, although some translations use God's name in 8:6.)
- 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 this same 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.)

Esther certainly presents itself as history. Why do some argue otherwise? Esther has been weighed in most historians' balances and found wanting. Why? Here are some of the alleged problems gleefully recorded in a number of the liberal commentaries:

- There are no extrabiblical sources that mention either queen (Vashti or Esther) or advisor (Haman or Mordecai) during the reign of Xerxes.
- The Greek histories of Persia tell us that Xerxes' queen at this time was Amestris, a non-Jew.
- Herodotus tells us about a Persian restriction of royal marriages to members of seven aristocratic families.
- Esther 1:1 begins with a reference to 127 satrapies in the Persian empire; Herodotus mentions

only 20.

- One of the major complicating factors in Esther is the irrevocable nature of the laws of Persia. However, we are told that there is no extrabiblical evidence for this.
- There is likewise, we are told, no confirmation of a law that uninvited guests approaching the king would be slain without the king raising his scepter.
- Mordecai was taken captive with Jehoiachin (596 B.C.; Esth. 2:6) but became prime minister during the twelfth year of Xerxes (474 B.C.; Esth. 3:7; 8:2), which was 122 years later.

One commentator reports that the “conclusions seem inevitable that the Book of Esther is not historical, and that it is doubtful whether even an historical kernel underlies its narrative.”

You look at a list like that in a commentary, and your first thought is that those do indeed seem like problems. But as soon as you start investigating them, the problems quickly disappear. And a lack of evidence? Hardly. Esther is evidence. Daniel is evidence. Ezra is evidence. In fact, those books are the best evidence we have.

We will discuss those alleged problems shortly (as well as later for some of them when we get to them in the text), but first let’s look at how others characterize the book of Esther.

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 this very serious 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.

We can group these proposals into two categories: (1) The first option is that Esther is not fictional at all, but rather is what it purports to be: a historical account of the Jews in Persia during the reign of Xerxes. (2) The second option is that Esther contains portions that are fictional (it is either partly fictional or entirely fictional).

The arguments in favor of the second option and against Esther’s historicity are based primarily on three things: (1) contrary statements by Greek historians (mainly Herodotus), (2) the absence of confirming evidence by the same Greek historians, and (3) events judged to be highly improbable, at least based on our limited knowledge of the ancient world.

For starters, 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. For example, 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 very probable!

As for the absence of confirming evidence, that is not very surprising when one considers the lack of sources about Persia during this time. There are a few inscriptions about King Xerxes' reign written during his reign, which means they are very biased in his favor. The Greek historians also tell us about Xerxes, but their focus is primarily on Xerxes' interaction with the Greeks, and they are biased against him. There is little information from any source on the period between 479 and the end of Xerxes' reign in 465.

As for the supposed contradictions between Esther and the writings of the Greek historian Herodotus, it never seems to occur to them that perhaps Herodotus is the one that is mistaken.

Also, while it is true that Herodotus does not mention Esther, Mordecai, or Vashti (at least not by that name), it is also true that Herodotus does not mention Belshazzar, whose existence was likewise denied by liberal scholars until archaeological discoveries confirmed his place in history and the left the liberal scholars with liberal egg on their faces.