



Good News
Bible Reading Program

A free educational service provided by the United Church of God, *an International Association*

— December 2004 —

DATE	READING TOPIC	SCRIPTURES
1 Dec	Opposition to Jews of Judea in the reign of Ahasuerus (Xerxes); Queen Vashti deposed	Ezra 4:6; Esther 1
2 Dec	Esther made queen; Mordecai reports a plot against the king	Esther 2
3-4 Dec	Haman's plot against the Jews	Esther 3
5-6 Dec	Esther learns of Haman's plot and agrees to tell the king	Esther 4
7 Dec	Esther's first banquet	Esther 5
8 Dec	The honoring of Mordecai	Esther 6
9 Dec	Haman exposed and hanged	Esther 7
10-11 Dec	Edict to save the Jews	Esther 8
12-13 Dec	The Jews destroy their enemies; Institution of Purim; The greatness of Mordecai	Esther 9-10
14 Dec	Supplement: "Esther: A Woman of Faith and Courage"	
15 Dec	Supplement: "Esther: A Woman Willing to Save Others"	
16 Dec	Ezra sent to Jerusalem by Artaxerxes' decree	Ezra 7
17-18 Dec	Ezra leads the return to Jerusalem	Ezra 8
19-20 Dec	Intermarriage of Jews in Judea with neighboring pagans	Ezra 9
21 Dec	Covenant to put away pagan wives and offspring	Ezra 10
22 Dec	Supplement: "Ezra: Spiritually Restoring a People"	
23 Dec	Opposition to Jewish rebuilding in Jerusalem	Ezra 4:7-24
24-25 Dec	Nehemiah fasts and prays for the Jews of Judea	Nehemiah 1
26-27 Dec	Nehemiah sent to rebuild Jerusalem	Nehemiah 2
28 Dec	Organization of the work of rebuilding the wall	Nehemiah 3
29 Dec	Enemy attack plan leads to new security measures	Nehemiah 4
30 Dec	Nehemiah deals with exploitation; Nehemiah's generosity	Nehemiah 5
31 Dec	Plot against Nehemiah; Completion of the wall	Nehemiah 6:1-7:3

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Highlights to Think About From This Month's Reading

Introduction to Esther (Ezra 4:6; Esther 1)

December 1

The second Jerusalem temple was completed in response to the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah early in the reign of the Persian king Darius the Great (also known as Darius II or Darius Hystaspes). Darius expanded the reach of the Persian Empire. By 516 B.C., around the time of the temple's completion, "he had pressed east as far as India and then returned to deal with the Libyans. His northward penetrations were not so successful, however, for he met stiff resistance from the Scythians and was forced to retreat. Still unsatisfied he set his sights on Europe. His first attempt to bring the independent Aegean [Greek] states under his control failed when the Ionian states [between Greece and southern Italy] which were already under Persian suzerainty broke free to assist their harassed kinfolk. He eventually prevailed, however, and incorporated all of western Asia into his realm. Flushed with success Darius made an ill-advised sweep across the Aegean Sea in the year 490 with the intent of conquering Athens and the other city-states of the Greek peninsula.... The Athenians met Darius head-on. In the decisive battle of Marathon the Persians underwent a humiliating defeat and were forced to retreat to the Asian mainland. Convinced that victory had eluded him only because of insufficient manpower, Darius resolved to return once more to Greece to finish what he had begun. A revolt in Egypt preempted this action, however.

"Before Darius could completely resolve his new problem and resume his European operations, he died, leaving his grand design to his son Xerxes....the Old Testament Ahasuerus. He had for some years been designated heir by his father, so the change in leadership was without contention. By virtue of his governorship of Babylon, Xerxes was admirably prepared to undertake the formidable responsibilities of his new office. Xerxes' first interest lay in the completion of the royal palace at Susa [the biblical Shushan] and further aggrandizement of Persepolis, the latter project occupying him on and off for the twenty-one years of his reign (486-465). A more pressing concern, however, was with Egypt, which rebelled at once upon his accession. In less than two years he was able to resolve this problem...." (Eugene Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*, 1987, pp. 490-491, 498). Ezra 4:6, which we earlier read in arrangement order of Ezra, tells us that the Samaritans wrote an accusation against the Jews of Judea in the beginning of his reign—to which he apparently paid no heed, perhaps because he was occupied with these other concerns at the time during his first two years as king. This brings us then to the third year of Xerxes' reign, 484-483 B.C., which is when the book of Esther begins (see Esther 1:1-3).

The book of Esther is about a beautiful young Jewish woman—raised by her older cousin Mordecai—who becomes Xerxes' queen and later bravely acts to thwart an evil adversary's plot to exterminate the whole Jewish race. The remarkable deliverance from this genocidal plot is still celebrated in the Jewish festival of Purim, the institution of which is explained near the end of the book.

Esther is one of five books among the Writings division of the Old Testament that are read during holy festivals. These are collectively known as the Megilloth ("Scrolls"). The book of Esther is called *the Megillah* (Scroll) because of its great popularity among Jewish readers. "Against a background of centuries of persecution, it is understandable why the Feast of Purim became such a favorite of the Jews. It recalls a time when they were able to turn the tables on those who wanted to destroy them. Purim is celebrated today amid a carnival-like atmosphere, with masquerade parties, noisemaking, and revelry. The story is reenacted in synagogues with the audience hissing Haman and cheering Mordecai. The Book of Esther is a profound statement about the heroic resistance necessary for survival in the face of violent anti-Semitism that continues to the present day" (*The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, introductory notes on Esther).

However, Esther has long been a controversial book because of what many have reckoned as indefensible moral conduct on the part of Esther and Mordecai and the absence of any mention of God. On the first matter, we will examine the issues in that regard as we come to them in the account. But we may note up front that *none* of the Bible's human heroes are perfect except for Jesus Christ.

This brings us to the second matter of objection. It is certainly true that God is not named or directly referred to in a surface reading of the book (as is also the case with the Song of Solomon). Some have

postulated that the reason God is not directly mentioned is that the book was intended as a Persian state chronicle explaining to the Persians the Jewish celebration of Purim. And that is certainly possible, though we still might expect a reference to “the God of the Jews” or something similar. The absence of a direct reference to God seems quite deliberate.

Some have proposed that God’s name is hidden in four separate verses in Esther in acrostic style (1:20; 5:4, 13; 7:7), i.e. spelled out by the first or last letters of each word in the verse. This is supported by the fact that carefully structured acrostic spellings appear in several books of the Old Testament. In these four examples in Esther, the divine name *YHWH* is spelled out from the first or last letters of the words in these verses. This may point to the nature in which God is revealed in the book. God is hidden in the story, but His presence is evident beyond measure. Certain important circumstances in the story contributing to the amazing outcome are clearly beyond mere time and chance. Furthermore, the reliance on fasting and Mordecai’s certainty of “deliverance...from another place” if Esther failed to act (see Esther 4:3, 13-16) are veiled references to beseeching God and trusting in His providence. Indeed, the main theme of Esther is God’s miraculous intervention and preservation of His people. Jews the world over consider the story of this book to be one of the greatest evidences of God’s hand in the course of human history to preserve them as a people. (While the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Old Testament dating back to Christ’s time—adds a number of explicit references to God, these are generally understood to have been added by people seeking to correct perceived spiritual inadequacy in the book.)

As for who wrote the book, no explicit statement is given. “A strong Jewish spirit pervades the book... Moreover, the author was acquainted with Persian culture, as the extensive descriptions of the palace complex at Shushan (also called Susa) and the domestic details about the reign of King Ahasuerus [Xerxes] indicate. For these reasons, some [such as the third-century church father Clement of Alexandria and the medieval Jewish sage Ibn Ezra] have ascribed the authorship of the book to Mordecai, one of its principal characters” (*Nelson Study Bible*, introductory notes on Esther). Yet others object to this because of the book’s concluding statements praising Mordecai (see 10:2-3)—though these could easily have been added by a later editor such as Ezra. In fact, Ezra has also been suggested as the book’s author. Whoever the author was, one commentator says that he must have used “sources, such as some of the writings of Mordecai (9:20), books of the annals of the Median and Persian kings (2:23; 6:1; 10:2), and certain familiar oral traditions” (*Expositor’s*, introductory notes on Esther).

Because of the way the book begins—“now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus (this was the Ahasuerus who reigned...)”—it must have been written after the king’s reign, and thus no earlier than 465 B.C. This is confirmed by the mention of the deeds of Mordecai in the past tense (10:2). “Yet the fact that Greek words do not appear in the book rules out a date after about 300 B.C. when [because of the conquests of Alexander the Great and the rule of his successors] the Greek language became more prominent in the ancient Middle East. On the other hand, the numerous words of Persian origin in the book point to its being composed during the latter half of the fifth century B.C. For example, the book calls Xerxes by the Hebrew name [*Akhshurosh*, Anglicized as] Ahasuerus, a spelling derived from the Persian Khshayarsha. If it had been written after 300 B.C. a spelling closer to the Greek form Xerxes would be expected” (*Nelson*, introductory notes on Esther).

“While the historicity of the Book of Esther has been challenged, it meets every reasonable test. Descriptions of the Persian court and the customs of the times, the provision of precise dates, and the use of Persian names current in the era, as well as the characterization of Xerxes, are completely accurate. Independent confirmation of Mordecai’s rise to power comes from a cuneiform tablet found in Borsippa, which identifies Marduka (Mordecai) as an official in the royal court at Susa in the early years of Xerxes’ reign!” (Lawrence Richards, *The Bible Reader’s Companion*, introductory notes on Esther).

The story of the miraculous salvation of the Jews was inspiring in the fourth century B.C., and this book became one of the most important literary pieces of Jewish history. Its inspiration continues for God’s people today. Even as God protected the people of ancient Judah, though scattered from their homeland, from an enemy bent on destroying them, so will God protect His spiritual people today, scattered throughout the present evil world, from the great enemy who would destroy *them*. In the end, ultimate victory will belong to God and all His people—followed by triumphant joy and celebration.

The Deposing of Vashti (Ezra 4:6; Esther 1)**Dec. 1 Cont'd**

The account begins with a reference to Ahasuerus or Xerxes reigning over 127 provinces or districts. Some have argued that this is a mistake, since there were only 20 satrapies in the empire of Xerxes' father Darius. But the Hebrew word used here, *medinah*, referred to a *subdivision* of a satrapy, and it is reasonable that there would be 127 of these. (Another Hebrew-Aramaic word meaning *satrapy* could have been used if that was intended.)

Next we see the mention of two feasts—one for all the officials, royal servants, nobles and provincial governors lasting for six months (verses 3-4) and the other, at the end of the six months to cap it all off, a week-long celebration for all the people in Shushan (or Susa), both great and small (verse 5). Some have objected to a feast lasting six months, questioning how all the officials of the realm, particularly the provincial ones, could be away from their duties for so long. Yet it could well be that the officials came by groups in rotation. Xerxes' display of wealth and regalia over this period may have been to recruit needed support from all the regions of his realm, both near and far-flung, for his soon-coming resumption of his father's plan to conquer Greece.

The remainder of the chapter concerns the refusal of Xerxes' queen Vashti to answer the king's summons so he might show off her beauty. A major objection "raised against the historicity of Esther is that the only known wife of Xerxes was called Amestris, the daughter of a Persian general Otanes. Persian records do not mention a queen by the name of Vashti who was deposed, nor do they mention the name of Esther as Xerxes' wife [as the following chapters of the book of Esther show her to have become]. Amestris was known for her cruelty; [the Greek historian] Herodotus says she had the mother of her husband's paramour brutally mutilated and had fourteen noble Persian young men buried alive in an act of religious devotion.... A number of answers have been proposed: (1) in a polygamous society a king may have had more than one wife... (2) Esther may have [become] a subordinate wife or chief concubine... (3) the most persuasive explanation is one...which shows the similarity of the names 'Vashti' and 'Amestris' and concludes that they were one and the same person" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, introductory notes on Esther).

No specific reason is given as to why Vashti would not come. Perhaps she did not want to be degraded by being paraded before the king's drunken guests.

For counsel the infuriated ruler turned to the "wise men who understood the times" (verse 13). "Like their Babylonian counterparts, these wise men were astrologers and magicians who gave counsel according to their reading of celestial phenomena (cf. 1 Chronicles 12:32; Isa 44:25; 47:13; Jer 50:35-36; Dan 2:27; 5:15). It was the king's custom to consult experts in matters of law and justice and to hear their opinions before he acted on any matter. There were seven of these wise men, all with Persian names, called 'the seven nobles' [NIV] ('the seven princes,' KJV, RSV) of Persia and Media.... They were probably the Council of Seven mentioned in Ezra 7:14 and Herodotus 3.1.... 'Seven advisers' corresponds with the Persian tradition (Herodotus 1.31; 3.84; 7.8; 8.67; Xenophon *Anabasis* 1.6.4f)" (notes on Esther 1:13-14 and Ezra 7:14).

Speaking for the others, Memucan says that the queen's behavior, if tolerated, would lead to the wives of officials throughout the realm rebelling against their husbands—thus elevating the issue beyond a royal domestic dispute to that of a state concern, as the increase of ruling officials experiencing such trouble at home would weaken the empire. Perhaps these men were also thinking of their own personal domestic situations.

The proposal, to which the king agrees, is that Vashti be stripped of her position of chief wife and that this honor be given to another. It does not say that the king would divorce Vashti, though her complete removal from royal favor and from right to the king's presence effectively amounted to that.

Esther Becomes Queen (Esther 2)**December 2**

Chapter 2 begins with a search for a replacement for Vashti as chief wife. The king's harem is said to be under the custody of Hegai (verse 3). "The eunuch's name [in Hebrew] is spelled...*Hege*...in v. 3 but...*Hegay*...in vv. 8, 15. Herodotus (9.33) mentioned a eunuch of Xerxes with a similar name" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, footnote on verse 3).

The whole process of finding and adding women, including Esther, to the harem evidently took a few years, as the later elevation of Esther in verse 16 to the position of chief wife does not occur until the winter of the seventh year of the king's reign (479 B.C.)—around four years after the deposing of Vashti

in 483 or 482. There is most likely a historical reason for the delay. Indeed, this skip forward in the time frame actually helps to confirm the identification of Ahasuerus as Xerxes. For it was during this very period, from 481-479, that Xerxes the Great launched his monumental campaign against Greece—as had been prophesied in Daniel 11:2.

“Like his father, Xerxes seemed irresistibly drawn to the west and the conquest of Greece, so after reorganizing his armies and navies he moved west in 481 [with one of the largest assembled forces in ancient history—a million or more men]. The badly divided Greek states were unable to achieve an effective coalition and at first were badly mauled by the superior Persian forces. Even the redoubtable Spartans were defeated at [the famous battle of] Thermopylae though they fought to the last man. At [the naval battle of] Salamis [in 480], however, Xerxes underestimated their almost fanatical courage and as a result lost more than two hundred Persian ships.... Xerxes then left for Persia, having placed his general Mardonius in command of the Persian troops still remaining in Greece.... Mardonius suffered one setback after another until he lost his life in the battle of Plataea [in 479]. The final blow ending Xerxes’ aspirations to conquer Greece was administered at Mycale in 479. The Greeks had now destroyed two of the Persian armies and forced a third to return to Asia” (Eugene Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, pp. 498-499). After Xerxes’ return to Susa, Herodotus says that he consoled himself over his defeat by sensual indulgences with his harem. This fits exactly with the time that he went and selected Esther from his harem to replace Vashti.

In verses 5-7 of chapter 2 we are first introduced to Mordecai and Esther. Their presence at Susa “suggests both the wide distribution of the Jewish Diaspora a century after the fall of Jerusalem and the fact...that the majority of the exiled Jews remained in lands of their captivity even when they had opportunity to leave [and return to the Promised Land]. Their assimilation into their new world is also clear from the very names of the principal protagonists in the story. ‘Mordecai’ is a Hebrew transliteration of the Babylonian divine name *Marduk*.... His cousin’s name is similarly pagan in its overtones. ‘Esther’ is a form of Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of love and war” (p. 501). Some explain the name *Esther* as coming from the word for “star,” but it should be realized that the name *Ishtar* shares the same derivation—referring specifically to the planet Venus (the goddess Venus and the goddess Ishtar in fact being one and the same).

Esther also bore a Hebrew name, *Hadassah*, meaning “Myrtle.” This is the name by which she was probably known to the Jewish community. If Mordecai had a Jewish name, it is not recorded. “Jewish people in antiquity customarily had two names when they lived in regions distant from Israel. One would be their secular name, a name understandable in their adopted culture, and the other would be their sacred name given in Hebrew” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 7). Yet why the secular names borne in the case of Mordecai and Esther are overtly pagan has been a source of controversy. Some fault the protagonists themselves in this matter. Yet it could have been their parents who chose these names. Moreover, the names may have been viewed as merely common or secular and not really considered as pagan. Consider that parents today may name a daughter *Diana* without any thought to that being the name of a pagan goddess—though that would seem to be less likely in a society more seriously attentive to such deities. Another possibility is that the king is the one who later gave the protagonists the particular names at issue—and that they are referred to by these names where they are introduced in the account even though they did not actually come by them until later. Recall that Daniel and his three friends were given pagan names by Nebuchadnezzar.

In the case of Esther, though, some have pointed out that the Jews would have understood this name as sounding like the Hebrew for “Hidden.” It is possible that this was a clever subterfuge—bearing a name familiar among the Babylonians yet having a Jewish meaning, indeed one that pointed to her “hiding” her identity. Still, this would not have been a typical Jewish name—particularly as it was the name of the chief Babylonian goddess, which the Jews would have well known.

Whatever the reason for bearing them, we might wonder why the gentile names are the ones used almost exclusively throughout the account. Here again is a reason some fault Mordecai and Esther and view the book of Esther negatively. Yet as noted in the Bible Reading Program’s introductory comments on Esther, it could well be that the book was written as a Persian state chronicle. This would adequately explain the use of the non-Hebrew names. Still, we should bear in mind the stated fact that Mordecai charged Esther not to reveal her Jewish identity (verse 10). That instruction, however, was specifically

for her life in the harem and at court rather than in interaction with the Jewish people. Mordecai may have felt that with revelation of Esther's true identity she would risk discrimination and possibly physical harm. Nevertheless, this has also been a source of criticism—along with Esther's consent to marry a pagan gentile king. It seems apparent that Esther was somewhat neutral about the possibility of being the king's wife, being resigned to leave matters in God's hands. She neither tried to escape the process nor aggressively sought extra measures to impress the king. We should consider that women in that age and culture of arranged marriages rarely had much of a say as to whom they married. And in this case Esther was under compulsion to marry the absolute ruler of the Persian Empire.

Of course, it is not necessary to justify everything that Mordecai and Esther decided or did. Having lived so long in a foreign culture, more than a century at this point, it is likely that the Jewish people had lost some of their moorings with regard to the Mosaic religion. Mordecai and Esther's understanding of the truth, along with that of most of the exiles, was probably somewhat deficient. We can look to the right choices that they later made as giving us more of the lessons of the story. Interestingly, Mordecai would later openly declare himself as a Jew. And in acting to save her people, it was necessary for Esther (Hadassah) to at last reveal herself as a Jewess, as we will later see. Both of them will grow in a spiritual sense over the course of the story.

More important, though, is to realize that God is able to use circumstances to bring about His intended outcome. Esther was certainly a beautiful young woman (verse 7). But that alone did not make her queen of the realm. We are probably quite safe in assuming that it was God who guided the king to select her as his principal wife. Interestingly, some who maintain that Esther means "Hidden" point to this name, being the biblical book's title, as denoting how God is present throughout the story though not explicitly mentioned.

Mordecai remained constantly concerned over Esther's welfare—and she continued to follow his instructions and may have given him an official position. *Expositor's* notes on verses 19-20: "Mordecai's position at the gate was not that of an 'idler' but represented some kind of duty or official position he occupied. He may have been appointed to this position by Esther to give him easier access to the royal quarters.... Men who 'sat at the gate' were frequently elders and leading, respected citizens who settled disputes that were brought to them."

While he was going about his duties, Mordecai either overheard or was informed of a plot to assassinate Xerxes. The conspirators "were eunuchs, guards of the door—i.e., men who protected the king's private apartment—who had become angry with Xerxes. The cause of their anger with the king is not stated. Mordecai got word to Esther about the plot; and she relayed the information to the king, giving credit to Mordecai, without mentioning their relationship. Plots against Persian monarchs were not uncommon. Xerxes was in fact assassinated [years later] in his bedroom in a similar situation in 465 B.C. in a conspiracy" (note on verses 21-22).

The plotters of chapter 2 were put to death and the whole account written in the imperial annals in the presence of the king (verse 23). It is remarkable that Mordecai was not rewarded for his actions at this time. Perhaps the king was distracted. In any event, it appears that divine providence was setting the stage for the king to realize the need to reward Mordecai at a more opportune moment, as we will later see.

Haman's Genocidal Plot (Esther 3)

December 3-4

In chapter 3 we are first introduced to the villain of the story—Haman. A few years have gone by since the events of our previous reading. The date of Haman's promotion is not given but his casting of lots soon afterward to determine when to destroy the Jews occurred in the first month of the 12th year of Xerxes (verse 7)—that is, in the spring of 474 B.C.

Haman is referred to as the son of Hammedatha the Agagite (verse 1). Some link the term Agagite with a district of the empire. "An inscription of Sargon mentions Agag as a district in Persia" (*Expositor's Bible Dictionary*, footnote on verse 1). Many others see Agagite as meaning a descendant of King Agag of the Amalekites in the days of Saul (see 1 Samuel 15). Josephus refers to Haman as being "by birth an Amalekite" (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 11, chap. 6, sec. 5). And Jewish tradition agrees. The Amalekites, a branch of the Edomites, were ancient enemies of the Israelites (see Exodus 17:8). God had ordered Saul to wipe them out but he did not comply, sparing Agag whom the prophet Samuel then put to death. The name Agag, seeming to denote "prime ruler," could have been a title borne by all

Amalekite kings. As was explained in the Bible Reading Program comments on Obadiah, it is likely that the Edomites ranged widely over the ancient Middle East. It even appears that some of the Amalekites eventually settled in Central Asia, so it could well be that the Persian province of Agag was made up of Amalekites.

Haman's identity as an Amalekite would explain Mordecai's refusal as a Jew to bow to him (see Esther 3:2-4). It was not wrong to bow to human leaders (compare Genesis 23:7; 27:29; 1 Samuel 24:8; 2 Samuel 14:4; 1 Kings 1:16). Some, though, believe that what Xerxes expected with regard to people bowing to Haman was tantamount to worship. That could be, but the fact of Haman being an ancestral enemy—belonging to a people that God Himself had ordered utterly destroyed—would be reason enough. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* states, "The most probable reason was, as a Targum suggests, Mordecai's pride; no self-respecting Benjaminite would bow before a descendant of the ancient Amalekite enemy of the Jews" (note on Esther 3:2-4).

Haman's reaction of hatefully desiring to exterminate the entire Jewish race (verses 5-6) also seems best explained by his Amalekite heritage. Josephus says that Haman determined to abolish the whole nation "for he was naturally an enemy to the Jews, because the nation of the Amalekites, of which he was, had been destroyed by them" (sec. 5). This would make the issue one of revenge—not just personal revenge against Mordecai but national revenge for the loss suffered so long before by Haman's own people. Indeed, the ancient animosity and envy over Israel's blessings goes all the way back to the conflict between Jacob (ancestor of the Israelites) and Esau (from whom the Edomites and Amalekites were descended). In the Middle East, as is still the case today, old antagonisms die hard.

In verse 7, "the non-Hebraic word *pur* (probably the Akkad[ian] word *puru* {'die' or 'lot'}, which is explained by the Hebrew *goral* {'lot'} anticipates the institution of Purim (i.e., 'lots') in chapter 9" (*Expositor's*, note on 3:7). The Jews had at times cast lots to determine God's will—as even the apostles would later do to replace Judas Iscariot (see Acts 1:23-26). But Haman's use of lots, besides his evil intent, was occultist and pagan. "The fact that the lot was cast at the beginning of the year to determine the best time to destroy the Jewish people fits with the culture of the day. The Babylonian religion maintained that the gods gathered at the beginning of each year to establish the destiny of human beings" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 7).

Verse 8 gives us Haman's accusation against the Jews, though he does not name them up front—and perhaps he never did name them. Shmuley Boteach, a Jewish rabbi, wrote the following in a recent WorldNetDaily column: "For 2,000 years, Jews have asked themselves the question an increasing number of Americans are now asking: Why do they hate us? Is it possible that the underlying causes of anti-Semitism are similar to the underlying causes of anti-Americanism? When I lived in Oxford, I heard all kinds of academic theories proffered as to the cause of anti-Semitism, but few seemed as straightforward as the reason given by the first documented, genocidal anti-Semite—the biblical Hitler—Haman. In asking King Ahasuerus for the authority to slaughter all the Jews in the ancient Persian empire, he says: 'There exists a people, dispersed and scattered among the nations, in all the provinces of your kingdom. And yet their values are entirely different from everyone else's.' Jewish singularity, Jewish peculiarity, a refusal to blend in and be like everybody else is what foments hatred in Haman's breast. Why do you Jews hold yourselves aloof? Why don't you just become like everybody else? Do you think you're better than us? Add to this the Jewish penchant for promoting social justice and a steadfast commitment to espousing morality and you have the perfect formula for hating the foreigner who not only rejects your way of life while living in your country, but makes you feel inferior, to boot. The Talmud says that Mount Sinai (literally, 'mountain of hatred') was given its name because after the Jews [i.e., Israelites] received the Torah and committed themselves to lives of ethical virtue, the enmity of the world's inhabitants—who now stood out as immoral—descended heatedly upon them" (March 12, 2004, online at http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=37551).

Of course, virulent hatred and persecution has been directed toward true Christians for very similar reasons. Jesus said: "If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you" (John 15:18-19). Jesus referred to Himself and His followers as the light of the world (John 8:12; 9:5; Matthew 5:14). And in John 3:19-20 He explained: "This is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because

their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.” God’s people are indeed peculiar and different—and their message and way of life exposes the shortcomings and outright wickedness of the society around them.

On verse 9 of Esther 3, *Expositor’s* comments: “In order to obtain the king’s permission to destroy the Jews, Haman appealed to the monarch’s greed, offering to put ten thousand talents of silver of his own private fortune into the royal treasury to pay the men who would carry out the pogrom.... It is impossible to determine the value of the silver in current monetary equivalents. It was a fabulous sum that is estimated to weigh approximately 375 tons. It has also been estimated to represent the equivalent of two-thirds of the annual income of the Persian Empire.... Perhaps Haman planned to acquire such a large sum by confiscating the Jews’ property.”

Verse 11 might seem to say that the king was giving the money to Haman—or at the very least refusing to take Haman’s money. Yet Esther 4:7 makes it clear that Haman promised to pay the money into the king’s treasury and Esther later described her people as being “sold” (7:4). It could be, as many suggest, that the king was pretending to refuse the money in the common method of Middle East bargaining (as in Genesis 23:7-18). However, scholar Carey Moore in the Anchor Bible translates the king’s response to Haman as “‘Well, it’s your money,’ i.e., ‘If you want to spend it that way, it’s all right with me’” (*Expositor’s*, footnote on Esther 3:11).

The giving of the king’s signet ring to Haman in verse 10 seems to have effectively made him a prime minister or chief of staff. That it constituted more than a mere formality needed for issuing the immediate proclamation is evident from the fact that Haman bore the ring until his death (see 8:2). Indeed, Haman at one point remarks about his position that the king “advanced him above the officials and servants of the king” (5:11).

The destruction of the Jews was to be accomplished in March of 473 B.C. (compare 3:13). “Critics say Haman would not have promulgated a vindictive decree for the extermination of the Jews and then waited eleven months to carry it out, as it would have given them time to escape or to prepare for defense. [One commentator] says Haman resorted to casting the lot to determine a propitious day for carrying out his slaughter and had such confidence in the power of magical decisions that premature publication would not change the Jews’ fate. [Another] says that the Jews’ flight would not have been unwelcome to Haman as he would still accomplish his purpose of confiscating their property” (*Expositor’s*, introductory notes on Esther).

As the decree of mass genocide is sent out, the king and Haman contemptibly “sat down to drink” (verse 15)—perhaps toasting the action—heartless to the horrendous nature of the coming atrocity. Yet in the king’s case, he may have been somewhat misled as to the wording of the decree, having placed complete trust in Haman. He may not even have realized that the Jews were the ones condemned or, if he did, that all of them were to be destroyed—especially given his later honoring of Mordecai. We do see in verse 15 that at least the people at the capital of Susa or Shushan did not relish what was happening. They were utterly bewildered at this order. It was certainly not typical of Persian rule, which was normally characterized by cultural pluralism and mild treatment of conquered peoples. Indeed, we may be sure that there were evil spiritual forces working behind the scene in an attempt to eradicate the Jewish people through whom the redemption of all mankind would eventually come. But God’s great plan will not be thwarted.

“For Such a Time as This” (Esther 4)

December 5-6

On hearing all that had happened, Mordecai engaged in public mourning—as did the Jews in all provinces where the new decree arrived (4:1-3). Indeed, we see in verse 3 that the mourning was accompanied by fasting—a spiritual tool linked with prayer in Scripture (see 1 Samuel 1:7-10; 2 Samuel 12:16-17; Ezra 8:23 Nehemiah 9:1; Isaiah 58:2-5; Jeremiah 14:12; Daniel 9:3; Joel 1:14; Zechariah 7:3-5; Acts 13:3). Even though God is not directly mentioned, the clear implication is that the Jews in the Persian Empire, threatened with imminent extermination, urgently cried out to Him as they fasted.

Encouragingly, we see signs of God’s overseeing care in the very fact of what Mordecai had learned of the situation—information that would prove important to opposing the aim of the decree. “If Mordecai had not been appointed as a high official at the king’s gate, it is unlikely that he would have known about Haman’s bribe to the king. He was providentially placed by God in an exalted position in a foreign

government, as were Joseph (see Gen. 41), Daniel (see Dan. 2:48), and Nehemiah (see Neh. 1:11)” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on Esther 4:7).

Mordecai informed Esther of her need to plead the case of her people before the king. Yet her Jewish identity was still a secret. Given the circumstances, it no doubt seemed that revealing it at that time would have been extremely dangerous. Moreover, Esther was at first fearful to act for another serious reason. She instructed her attendant “to return to her cousin to remind him that no one could approach the king in the inner court without a royal summons. The penalty for such a transgression was death. On occasion the king had been known to extend his golden scepter to an uninvited person as a gesture of mercy. Herodotus (3.118) mentions the Persian custom that anyone who approached the king uninvited would be put to death unless pardoned by the king. Herodotus also said, however, that a person could send a letter to the king asking for an audience. Why this procedure did not occur to Esther can only be surmised. Since she had not been summoned by the king for a month, Esther did not know whether he would forgive her if she approached him without a royal summons. She may have concluded that she had lost the king’s favor. It appears that initially Esther was more concerned about her own welfare than about her people” (*Expositor’s*, note on verses 9-11). But that was about to change.

Mordecai responds in verses 13-14 with the central message of the entire book. His confidence that deliverance for the Jews would come from another place even if Esther refused to act is more than simple optimism. It embraced the whole of Jewish national history. There was no question as to why the Jews still existed as a people. They had been delivered, time and time again, by the God of their forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Israel). Over the centuries, God had made many promises that could not be fulfilled if the race was wiped out. Mordecai knew that God would save His people even now. The statement that Esther refusing to act would lead to her and her father’s house perishing was probably a warning of divine judgment, reminiscent of Christ’s later remark, concerning the end time, that “whoever seeks to save his life will lose it” (Luke 17:33). And then the remarkable statement at the end of Esther 4:14: “Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” The obvious suggestion is that it was no mere coincidence that the young Jewish woman Hadassah had become queen of the Persian Empire at this very time in history. It was the work of God. Of course, the all-powerful God clearly did not *need* her. But He had placed her in her current position to *use* her if she were willing. And if she were *not* willing, then He would reject her and work out the deliverance of His people another way.

Mordecai’s message succeeded. Esther would go to the king about the matter even if it meant her death. But first she called for a three-day fast of all the Jews in Shushan. Again, the focus is clearly religious. What was the purpose for this fast if not for spiritual preparedness and direction and help from God? Yet again, God is not directly mentioned in the account in any way—which is most remarkable. As mentioned in the Bible Reading Program’s introductory comments on Esther, even if it were written as a Persian state chronicle, we might expect the account to say something to the effect of “the Jews besought their God for help.” But it does not. It may well be that the point is to teach us to see the work of God not in explicit references but in His general providential guidance of events for our welfare. As *The Bible Reader’s Companion* notes on its introduction to the book, “God, although hidden from our view, works through circumstances and human choices to accomplish His own ends. Esther teaches us to see the hidden God revealed in the ebb and flow of personal and world events and to praise Him for His continual care.”

And no matter what happens, like Esther all of us have the personal responsibility to do whatever is in our power to serve God and His people—even if it means sacrificing our own comfort or, should it be necessary, even our own lives. If we are in a position to speak out for the welfare of others in dire need, then that is what we must do. If human laws forbid us from obeying God, we must decide to obey Him anyway. Our task is ever and always to do the will of God—whatever it is. When hard times come and it’s difficult to make the right choice, remember this scriptural example and ask yourself, “Who knows whether you have come to your particular situation for such a time as this?”

Esther’s First Banquet (Esther 5)

December 7

When Esther goes in to see the king, he is receptive to her—she would not die. Xerxes knows that she must have some important reason for daring to approach him, and he reassures her of his favor, promising her up to half his kingdom—“probably an example of Oriental [i.e. Middle Eastern] courtesy

that was not intended to be taken too literally (cf. Mark 6:23)” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, note on Esther 5:3).

Esther’s response is not to immediately plead for her people. Instead, she invites the king and Haman to a banquet she has prepared for that day. Given the presumptuousness of her entrance, she may not have deemed it a good moment to compound the problem by possibly upsetting the volatile king in revealing that she, his wife and queen, had for all this time not disclosed her national identity to him. It could also be that she did not want to reveal this matter before all the royal officials who were probably present. But why invite Haman to the banquet? “Many suggestions have been made. To make Xerxes jealous. Perhaps so that Haman’s reaction, when Esther accuses him, might reveal his guilt. Perhaps Esther acted in the best traditions of her people, to confront Haman face-to-face rather than speak behind his back” (*Bible Reader’s Companion*, note on verse 4).

Xerxes realizes that Esther did not risk her life for a mere banquet. And he probably understood that she prepared the banquet so as to avoid discussing the real reason before all of his officials. At the meal, then, the king asks her for her actual petition. But she delays, asking the two back for a second banquet the next day—which, remarkably, the king does not question. “One may ask why Esther waited instead of disclosing what was on her mind. [Whatever her reason,] the delay providentially allowed time for the king’s sleepless night and the events that followed (ch. 6)” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verses 6-8).

Haman’s brief exultation is cut short by Mordecai’s disrespect (verse 9). His vanity caused him such hatred for Mordecai that he could not enjoy how well things seemed to be going for him (verses 10-13). Of course, in this case things were not going so well as he thought. “Haman’s boasting only accentuated his later humiliation and fall from favor (cf. Prov 16:18)” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, note on Esther 5:11-12).

The “hanging” proposed for Mordecai was, as the *Word in Life Bible* points out in a note on Esther 2:23, “probably not hanging as we know it. The gallows of ancient Persia was not a scaffold but a pole or stake upon which the victim was impaled. Execution by such impalement was a common practice of the Assyrians, who killed war captives by forcing their living bodies down onto pointed stakes. The Persians continued this grim means of execution. Thus references to hanging in Esther (5:14; 6:4; 9:14) probably refer to impalement, or possibly crucifixion.”

The Turning Point (Esther 6)

December 8

With chapter 6 we come to “the turning point in the book. Within this chapter we observe a series of events that unmistakably point to God’s sovereign hand [ultimately] controlling all events. Only because of his sleepless night did the king learn of Mordecai’s past bravery on his behalf.... The king might have been aware to some extent of Mordecai’s deed when it originally occurred. In 2:23 the author says that the events were written down ‘in the presence of the king.’ Now the Lord led the king to this very text” (*Nelson*, notes on verses 1-3). The oversight in not having already rewarded Mordecai “must have disturbed Xerxes, as it was a reflection on him for not rewarding one of his benefactors. Herodotus indicated that it was a point of honor with Persian kings to reward promptly and generously those who had benefited them” (*Expositor’s*, note on verses 2-3).

In verses 4-5 we again see God’s hand at work. Xerxes wants to set things right with regard to Mordecai and asks if some court official is around who can attend to the matter. It was at this very moment that Haman arrived to recommend to the king that Mordecai be hanged. Perhaps it was early morning by this point.

There is great irony and humor in what follows. Haman in his prideful arrogance cannot imagine who the king could wish to honor more than him, so he proposes what he believes will be the pinnacle of public adulation showered on himself. Yet the one to be honored turns out to be none other than the hated enemy he has come to have hanged. Worse, he himself would have to stoop to leading Mordecai’s horse around and publicly extolling this person against whom he burned with rage. “Haman had no choice but to carry out the king’s orders. No writer, however gifted, could adequately describe the chagrin and mortification Haman must have experienced as he robed Mordecai and led him through the streets” (note on verse 11).

It is interesting that the king refers to Mordecai as “Mordecai the Jew” (verse 10)—having not long before issued an edict to eradicate the Jewish people. As mentioned previously, it may be that the king did not realize exactly whom Haman’s decree was meant for. It does seem that he would have come to

know it by now, but perhaps not. It could be that he thought only some of the Jews were to be killed. In any case, that the king would so greatly honor a Jew did not bode well for Haman's plan—a fact his own wife and friends recognized (verse 13). No doubt they also saw that it was no mere coincidence that Haman had been forced to honor someone he had meant to hang. They perhaps saw this as a case of supernatural forces acting against him—as indeed they should have. Furthermore, as *Expositor's* notes regarding verse 13, “Most commentators think the author was injecting into the mouths of Haman's friends the Jewish belief in the ultimate victory of the Jews over the Amalekites.” Indeed, it may even point to the fact that all God's people will ultimately prevail over all their enemies—a fact prefigured in the outcome of this story.

Haman's Fall (Esther 7)

December 9

At Esther's second banquet, the king again asks her what this is really all about, promising to grant her request (verses 1-2). This time she makes her impassioned plea—for her own life and that of her people (verses 3-4). From the king's response in verse 5, it may be that she did not yet reveal the identity of her people. For had she done so, and if he were aware that the Jews were slated for destruction—which seems likely on some level despite his honoring of Mordecai—he wouldn't have wondered who was paying for their eradication, having himself been complicit in Haman's decree.

Then, in verse 6, she lets the hammer drop—the enemy is Haman. It is this statement that actually reveals Esther as a Jew. The king is stunned and furious. He storms outside—dazed, full of emotional turmoil and trying to think. He may well have been unhappy with Esther herself for hiding her nationality from him for all this time. And had not Haman made a good case against those deserving execution? Was he not a valued, trusted adviser? Yet perhaps Haman was the evil, wicked person the queen claimed after all. And look at what he had allowed this man to talk him into. The wise and mighty Xerxes had let someone pull the wool over his eyes, making a fool of him. It was just too much to take in all at once.

The terror-stricken Haman runs over to Esther, pleading for his life. When the king returns, he finds “Haman...draped over the queen's couch in a compromising position. Presumably, he was grasping at her with a desire to implore her favor. The king, on discovering this outrageous situation, wondered aloud if Haman intended to ravage the queen. The Persians had strict rules about contact with the harem by any male other than the king. The eunuchs were the only persons who had access to the rooms of these women. Haman was in danger merely by being near her. This sight enraged the king” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 8). Perhaps the king saw Haman as attempting through such an assault to force her to retract her accusation against him. In any case, it was all over for Haman the Agagite.

As the king spoke, the account says that “they” covered Haman's face (verse 8)—evidently referring to the eunuchs mentioned in the next verse. We are not told whether they had been present the whole time or came in because of the commotion. “The king's angry words were a sentence of death. Although there is no evidence that it was a Persian custom to cover the face of a condemned criminal before he was led away to execution, that was probably its meaning here” (*Expositor's*, note on verse 8).

In verse 9, Harbonah, mentioned near the beginning of the book as one of the eunuchs sent to summon Queen Vashti (1:10), speaks up about Haman's just-built scaffolding meant for Mordecai, a man the king had honored the previous day for saving his life. The poetic justice demanded was all too clear. Haman was sentenced to the same grim fate he had planned for Mordecai (7:9-10).

A New Edict (Esther 8)

December 10-11

The same day as the events of the previous chapter, the king gave Haman's estate to Esther (8:1). “Persian law gave the state the power to confiscate the property of those who had been condemned as criminals (cf. Herodotus 3.128-29...)” (note on verse 1). Esther revealed her relation to Mordecai, who was then brought in and given the king's signet ring, making him the prime minister in place of Haman. Mordecai's position is later explained to be “second to King Ahasuerus” (10:3). Having just honored Mordecai for saving his life, the king probably saw this man as one he could trust. And Mordecai being the adoptive father of the queen was another reason to accord him high status. In a further example of poetic justice, Esther commits Haman's estate to Mordecai, making him very wealthy. Recall that Haman had sought to confiscate the property of the Jewish people (see 3:13).

Yet there was still a major problem, which Esther brought to the king—the decree to destroy the Jews was still in effect. As other scriptures show, Persian law could not be altered (see Daniel 6:8, 12, 15). But depending on the wording of a decree, a second decree might be able to effectively invalidate it.

This is what the king instructed Esther and Mordecai to draw up in Esther 8:7-8. In verse 9 we see that it was the third month, still leaving almost nine months until the time set for the Jews' destruction in the first decree—thus allowing ample time to prepare for an attack at that time.

Verses 11-12 have led many to reject Esther as an uninspired book. The view is that Esther and Mordecai were evil in calling for such vengeance as to utterly wipe out their enemies, including women and children, when God had not ordered such a thing. Yet that is based on a misreading of these verses. If we carefully compare these verses with Haman's original decree, we can see that the original decree is actually quoted in them—so that the women and children are not those of the enemies but of the Jews. Note the wording of the original decree referred to in Esther 3:13: "And the letters were sent by couriers into all the king's provinces, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all the Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their possessions." The counter-order in chapter 8 is to defend against anyone who would try to carry out the wording of the first decree. Notice in 8:11-12 that the Jews were to "protect their lives—to destroy, kill, and annihilate all the forces of any people or province that would assault them, [them being the Jews, including] both [as the original decree stated, the Jews'] little children and women, and [who would assault the Jews] to plunder their possessions, on one day in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar." That this is not talking about the Jews killing the women and children of their enemies and plundering their property in revenge should be clear from the fact that when the Jews carried out the decree, *they killed only men* (see 9:6, 12, 15) and *they did not take any plunder* (see 9:10, 15-16). The point of the new decree, then, was simply for the Jews to defend themselves against those enemies who would seek to cause them harm. However, this probably did include striking preemptively against those who had already shown themselves hostile to the Jews.

When the new decree came, the mourning of the Jews was replaced with great rejoicing (8:16). No doubt news also spread of all that had transpired. This was a cause of great fear of the Jews among the people of the empire (verse 17)—no doubt due to a perceived supernatural favor that must have rested on them. Surprisingly, this sparked mass "conversions" (see same verse). The phrase "became Jews" is interesting—as it shows the name Jew as applied not in an ethnic sense but as denoting one who was part of the Jewish religious community. Motivated by fear of the Jewish people, it seems likely that most of these conversions were not genuine. Many may have merely claimed to be Jews without making any changes in their lives at all. Nevertheless, this all served to increase the acceptance of the Jews in the empire—and it enlarged their numbers to help dissuade would-be attackers. The real point here, though, is to see just how far the tables had turned. The change was so drastic that it was now deemed dangerous to *not* be a Jew.

Victory and the Celebration of Purim (Esther 9–10)

December 12-13

The day decreed for the attack on the Jews, and subsequently for the Jews to strike out against their enemies in self-defense—even preemptively if deemed necessary—finally arrives (9:1). The 13th day of the 12th month, Adar, corresponds to March of 473 B.C. This day had been determined by Haman's superstitious casting of lots, but it seems likely that God had interfered in the process—causing the date to be sufficiently late enough for the Jews to both determine who their enemies were and to make preparations against them. On this fateful day that the enemies of the Jews had hoped to prevail, the opposite happened.

Besides the general fear that had come on the people of the empire because of the Jews' apparent divine favor and help, we are told that the officials of the land helped the Jews on this occasion because of their particular fear of Mordecai's growing influence in the empire (verses 2-4). They may have been trying to garner political favor with the new prime minister, and at the very least were trying to secure themselves against any possible reprisal.

In verses 7-14 we see a return to the conflict with Haman in the killing of his 10 sons. "The patterns of reprisal and vengeance were so deeply ingrained in the cultures of the ancient Middle East that the survival of even one of these sons might mean trouble for the next generation of Jewish people. By listing each of the vanquished sons of their mortal enemy, the Jewish people celebrated the fact that the victory was complete" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verses 7-10). It could also be that these sons had taken or threatened action against the Jews at some point. Moreover, we may perhaps see in this a

continuation of the carrying out of the ancient divine edict of destroying the Amalekites. King Ahasuerus granted Esther's request that the bodies of Haman's sons be publicly displayed on the gallows (verses 11-14). This was to serve as a deterrent against anyone contemplating harm against the Jews.

Having overcome their enemies on Haman's determined day, the Jews set aside the next day, the 14th of Adar, as a holiday for celebration. The Jews at Shushan, however, were granted permission to continue fighting through the 14th. So they set aside the 15th as the day to celebrate (verses 13-19). Mordecai sent a letter directing the Jews to observe both days annually from then on and this became an accepted custom (verses 20-25, 27). The days were referred to as *Purim*, named after the word *pur*, meaning "lot" (verse 26; see verse 24; 3:7). *Purim* is the plural.

At some point Esther sent out a second letter with Mordecai confirming the tradition of observing Purim (9:29-32). Though God had not established this feast in the law, it was appropriate for the Jews to commemorate God's intervention on their behalf in this annual celebration. Purim is similar in this respect to Hanukkah, which was instituted three centuries later to commemorate God's help and deliverance in the days of the Maccabees. Jesus Christ apparently went to Jerusalem for the observance of Hanukkah (see John 10:22-23). And as a Jew it is likely that He also observed Purim, especially as its institution is recorded in Scripture. Yet as Purim and Hanukkah are national celebrations not commanded in the law, it is not required that Christians observe them. Indeed, non-Jewish Christians would not be expected to, just as non-Americans are not expected to observe the American holidays of Thanksgiving and Independence Day.

What about the "fasting" in verse 31? "No date is assigned for this fast. Jews traditionally observe the 13th of Adar, Haman's propitious day (see 3:7, 13), as a fast ("the fast of Esther") before the celebration of Purim. These three days of victory celebration on the 13th-15th days of Adar rhetorically balance the three days of Esther's fasting prior to interceding with the king (4:16)" (*NIV Study Bible*, note on verse 31).

In the three verses that make up the short chapter of Esther 10, we see a final mention of Ahasuerus (Xerxes) and Mordecai. Xerxes reigned eight years beyond the events of chapter 9—dying by assassination in 465 B.C. We know nothing of what became of Esther and Mordecai. But they left an amazing legacy, having cooperated with Almighty God in His grand design to save His people.

Supplement: "Esther: A Woman of Faith and Courage" **(From *The Good News*, December/November 1996)**

December 14

The Bible offers Christians many examples of faith from which we can learn and be encouraged. One of the most remarkable examples is that of Queen Esther.

Has fear ever paralyzed you, made you afraid to make a critical decision because of possible or probable serious consequences?

It has been said that courage is not the absence of fear; it is the mastery of it. The Bible, however, adds an important element to the definition of courage: trust and faith in God. Moses told the ancient Israelites not to fear the other nations when they crossed over the Jordan River into the Promised Land, because God was with them and would not forsake them (Deuteronomy 31:6).

How can you have this kind of faith? How can you step out and confidently make decisions that will affect the course of your physical—and maybe even your spiritual—life?

From an orphan to a queen

For the answer, consider the example of a Jewish girl from ancient Persia.

In the third year of his reign, Ahasuerus, king of the Medes and Persians, searched for a new queen from among the beautiful virgins in his kingdom. She was to replace Queen Vashti. Vashti had humiliated her husband in front of many people including all his officials. She had refused to allow him to display her beauty before everyone at his special feast (Esther 1:10-22).

Esther, a young orphan, was among the women the king ordered brought to the palace for special pampering and preparation for the king's scrutiny as possible royal replacements. Her cousin, Mordecai, had reared her. Mordecai was a Jewish servant "in the king's gate" (Esther 2:19), which implied that he held a position in the king's court. Following her cousin's advice, Esther did not reveal her ethnic identity. After the king chose her as queen, she maintained her contact with her cousin (Esther 2).

Plot to wipe out a race

Sometime later Ahasuerus appointed Haman, a man prominent in the kingdom, to a special office over his princes. Ahasuerus commanded that each servant should bow down to Haman, paying him homage. Mordecai refused.

Haman was enraged by Mordecai's actions. But he wasn't satisfied just to seek revenge on one man; he devised a scheme to destroy all the Jews in the kingdom. He approached the king and informed him that the Jews did not keep the king's laws. He convinced Ahasuerus to issue a decree saying 10,000 talents of silver would go to anyone who would destroy the Jews (Esther 3).

In ancient Persia, when the king made a decree and sealed it with his signet ring, it was not to be revoked or amended. Ahasuerus's decree went out, resulting in great mourning and fasting among the Jews throughout the land. Clothed in sackcloth and ashes of mourning, Mordecai sat in the square near the king's gate. When Esther learned of Mordecai's circumstance, she told her maids to take garments to clothe him and to take away his sackcloth. But Mordecai would not accept them.

Esther then sent Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs who attended her, to find out what was wrong with Mordecai. Mordecai told him all that had happened and gave him a copy of the written decree to show to Esther. He also told him to tell her to go to the king and plead for her people.

Esther had not seen the king for 30 days. The king enforced a law that anyone who came into the inner court to approach him whom he had not specifically called was to die. However, the king could make an exception by holding out his golden scepter, thereby sparing the person. So Esther sent the eunuch back to Mordecai with the message that she could not enter the court to see the king.

Mordecai answered that, if she did nothing, she risked death along with all her countrymen in the kingdom. He also asked a piercing question: What if God had elevated Esther to her position as queen for the specific purpose of helping save her people at this critical time? (Esther 4:13-14).

Esther's dilemma

What a decision for such a young woman! Death seemed certain regardless of what she decided. Vashti had been only banished from her position as queen. Esther might actually be killed!

She had to answer Mordecai. What would she do? She must have prayed and agonized over her decision. Tension and anxiety must have consumed her. She was sickened with fear for herself and her people.

She must have asked herself a hundred times would God really let her die if she refused to help the Jews? She was so young. Surely God did not want her to die. On the other hand, could she stand silently by and watch heartless Haman annihilate her people? Why couldn't her dilemma just go away like a bad dream?

In the midst of her turmoil, Esther realized she could not allow fear to paralyze her into inaction; that in itself would be a decision. Instead, she left the outcome with God. It was clear she had only one real choice.

Even in giving Mordecai her answer, Esther knew she did not have the courage within herself to face Ahasuerus. But she did know where to go for the courage she lacked: to God in fasting and prayer. Placing her life in God's hands, she let Him decide the outcome for her and her people.

She sent word to Mordecai requesting that he ask their fellow Jews to fast for her for three days and nights. She and her maids would do likewise. Then she promised to go before the king, knowing full well she was risking her life (Esther 4:16).

You can read the remainder of the book of Esther to see what happened. The king did extend his golden scepter, and he spared Esther's life. After several special banquets for the king and Haman, Esther finally revealed Haman's plot and made known her request for her people. The king ordered Haman hanged on the very gallows he had prepared for Mordecai's execution.

The king issued a new decree: The Jews were free to defend themselves and destroy anyone who would assault them. He promoted Mordecai, and the Jews were saved. To this day, many Jews observe the Feast of Purim in honor of this event.

What can we learn?

Sometimes fear is our normal human reaction when we are faced with a seemingly impossible decision. Acknowledging our lack of courage is the first step to overcoming it. But we must not allow fear to paralyze us into taking no action at all.

You must realize that you need help and that you cannot go it alone. Recognize that God is all-powerful, that He has promised never to leave you or forsake you (Hebrews 13:5). Go to Him in prayer and fasting to seek His will in making the right decision. Then confidently make your decision, with the courage and conviction that God is on your side.

Perhaps a fitting conclusion to this story of godly courage can come from the words on a memorial in Westminster Abbey. Inscribed on the monument to Lord Lawrence are these words: “He feared man so little because he feared God so much.” *GN*

Supplement: “Esther: A Woman Willing to Save Others”

(From Profiles of Faith series, *The Good News*, May/June 1999)

December 15

The Jewish exile Mordecai knew the situation was dire and dangerous. Through a sinister plot, the Jews in Persia were secretly condemned to death (Esther 3). Mordecai pleaded with Queen Esther to risk her life: “If you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14).

The story of Esther and Mordecai transcends time and culture. The situation they faced still applies and teaches valuable spiritual lessons.

Setting for the story

Esther’s story takes place near the end of the events described in the Old Testament. The two kingdoms of Israel and Judah had fallen and been taken into captivity in Assyria and Babylon, respectively.

By this time, several hundred years after their fall, the descendants of Israel—the “lost 10 tribes”—had scattered and disappeared from the Middle Eastern map. The descendants of Judah, however, had maintained their beliefs and way of life while in Babylon. However, Babylon, too, had fallen, and now the Jews lived under the benign rule of the Persian Empire.

The Persians had allowed Jews willing to make the long overland journey the opportunity to return to Jerusalem and their homeland. Although many had made the trip, many more had decided to remain where they were and put down roots.

The book of Esther is a complement to the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Although those books describe life for the Jews who returned to Palestine, Esther is the only Bible book that offers a portrait of those who chose to remain in Persia.

The book of Esther introduces us to a great king of Persia known as Ahasuerus (Hebrew), or Xerxes (Greek). In 479 B.C. the Greeks defeated Ahasuerus in the battle at Salamis.

The Greek historian Herodotus wrote that the Persian king sought consolation in his harem after his defeat. He gave a huge banquet, lasting several days, for palace personnel (Esther 1:1-8). At that time Queen Vashti—wife of Ahasuerus—gave a banquet for the women of the palace. On the seventh day of his banquet, the king commanded Vashti to appear before his court so everyone could behold her beauty (verses 9-11).

But the queen refused to appear before her husband. So Ahasuerus, on the advice of his counselors, decided to look for someone to replace her as queen.

The king’s servants came up with a plan: “Let beautiful young virgins be sought for the king; and let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom, that they may gather all the beautiful young virgins to Shushan the citadel, into the women’s quarters, under the custody of Hegai the king’s eunuch ... Then let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti” (Esther 2:2-4). The king agreed and looked forward to the prospect of a beautiful wife who could become his new queen.

Esther becomes queen

Mordecai was an older cousin of Esther’s who had helped raise her: “And Mordecai had brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle’s daughter, for she had neither father nor mother” (verse 7). They lived in Shushan.

The king’s decree brought to his palace many beautiful young women, but none was more beautiful than Esther. From the beginning Hegai, a eunuch and custodian of the women, favored Esther favor, “so he readily gave beauty preparations to her, besides her allowance” (verse 9).

In turn, each young lady was presented before the king. When it came Esther's turn, she was allowed to choose her attire. However, "she requested nothing but what Hegai the king's eunuch, the custodian of the women, advised. And Esther obtained favor in the sight of all who saw her" (verse 15). Hegai knew the king's social tastes. She deferred to his advice.

Finally, Esther was presented before the king. "The king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she obtained grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins; so he set the royal crown upon her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. Then the king made a great feast, the Feast of Esther, for all his officials and servants; and he proclaimed a holiday in the provinces and gave gifts according to the generosity of a king" (verses 17-18). Thus Esther became queen of Persia.

Mordecai averts assassination

One day Mordecai, now a royal official, found that two of the king's doorkeepers planned to assassinate the king. Mordecai told Esther, who promptly warned the king. The king hanged the men. These proceedings, including Mordecai's faithful disclosure, were "written in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king" (verse 23).

Throughout this time Esther, on Mordecai's advice, had not told the king of her family background or that she was related to Mordecai.

Haman's jealous plot

Another chain of events then began that would threaten Esther and Mordecai.

King Ahasuerus promoted Haman, one of his officials, above all other officials and nobles. By the king's order all the others were to bow and pay homage to Haman. But Mordecai, faithful to God's instruction that prohibited the veneration of anyone but God (Exodus 20:5), refused.

Others noticed Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman. They confronted Mordecai, who still refused. Then they told Haman.

Haman grew furious (Esther 3:5). He determined that Mordecai was a Jew, prompting him to craft a plan to kill not only Mordecai but all the Jews throughout Persia—because of Mordecai's refusal to honor him.

Haman and his accomplices cast lots to determine the best day to massacre the Jews. They decided the best day to carry out their perfidy would arrive some 11 months later. Haman presented his plan, couched in deceptive language to hide his motivation, to the king.

"There is a certain people scattered and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from all other people's, and they do not keep the king's laws. Therefore it is not fitting for the king to let them remain. If it pleases the king, let a decree be written that they be destroyed, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who do the work, to bring it into the king's treasuries" (verses 8-9).

The king, alarmed at this perceived threat, foolishly agreed: "The money and the people are given to you, to do with them as seems good to you" (verse 11). The decree gave any Persian the right to kill Jews and loot their property. The city of Shushan and the palace were in confusion over this bizarre decree.

Mordecai's sacrificing service

When Mordecai heard of the decree, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes as a sign of tragedy and mourning. He walked through the city crying bitterly (Esther 4:1).

Esther's servants relayed the news to her. Not yet understanding the gravity of the situation, she sent clean garments to Mordecai. He refused them. Esther then sent her servant Hathach to discover why Mordecai refused the garments. Mordecai sent details and proof of Haman's heinous plan to destroy the Jews and urged the servant to ask Esther to approach the king and plead for the lives of the Jews.

When Esther heard of Haman's plan and Mordecai's request, she was at first undecided over how she should proceed. She knew that to come before the king without a formal invitation, even though she was the queen, could mean she would be put to death (verse 11). She sent word of her predicament to Mordecai.

Mordecai's advice was sobering yet filled with faith. "Do not think in your heart that you will escape in the king's palace any more than all the other Jews. For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house

will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (verses 13-14).

Yes, Mordecai told her, Esther would risk her life if she approached the king uninvited. But if she didn't she and her relatives would be killed in the coming slaughter, he warned. Mordecai knew God would ultimately preserve the Jewish people and pointedly asked Esther to consider whether her influence could provide the deliverance of her people from catastrophe.

A fateful and faithful decision

Esther knew what she must do. First she requested that the Jews in Shushan join her in a three-day fast to humble themselves and seek God's intervention. She would then approach the king, willing to accept the consequences, "and if I perish, I perish!" (verse 16).

Still fasting, Esther dressed in her royal robes and called upon the king, unsure of her fate.

Immediately the king held out his golden scepter to her, welcoming her presence.

"What do you wish, Queen Esther?" the king asked. "What is your request? It shall be given to you—up to half my kingdom!" (Esther 5:3).

Esther answered the king wisely and humbly: "If it pleases the king, let the king and Haman come today to the banquet that I have prepared for him."

The king reacted promptly: "Bring Haman quickly, that he may do as Esther has said" (verses 4-5).

King Ahasuerus and Haman were obviously thrilled to attend Esther's banquet. The king again invited Esther to state her request. Her reply: "If I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfill my request, then let the king and Haman come to the banquet which I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king has said" (verse 8).

A sudden turn

Haman was beside himself. He excitedly relayed the news of his unexpected good fortune to his wife and friends: "Besides, Queen Esther invited no one but me to come in with the king to the banquet that she prepared; and tomorrow I am again invited by her, along with the king."

Nevertheless Haman was still jealous and bitter: "Yet all this avails me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate" (verses 12-13).

Haman's wife and his friends had an idea sure to cheer up Haman: "Let a gallows be made, fifty cubits [75 feet] high, and in the morning suggest to the king that Mordecai be hanged on it; then go merrily with the king to the banquet" (verse 14).

Haman's sullen face suddenly erupted in a wide grin. He immediately ordered the gallows built.

On the night before Esther's banquet, however, the king couldn't sleep. He told one of his servants to read to him the royal chronicles.

The king's servant read aloud how Mordecai had averted the earlier plot to assassinate the king (Esther 6:1-2). Reminded of this event, the king asked his servants, "What honor or dignity has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?" The servants responded that nothing had been done (verse 3). This shocked the king. This oversight could forever tarnish the king's otherwise magnificent reign.

The king asked if someone of high rank might be present in the court to help correct this oversight. Haman had just entered the outer court of the king's palace. His jealousy and anger toward Mordecai had moved him to approach the king late at night. Ironically, both Haman and the king had Mordecai on their minds.

The king's servants said that Haman had just entered the court. "Bring him in before me," said the king.

When Haman approached, the king asked him: "What shall be done for the man whom the king delights to honor?" (verse 6).

Haman couldn't believe his ears. How could things get any better for him? Now, finally, others would be forced to acknowledge his greatness.

Haman replied without hesitation: "For the man whom the king delights to honor, let a royal robe be brought which the king has worn, and a horse on which the king has ridden, which has a royal crest placed on its head. Then let this robe and horse be delivered to the hand of one of the king's most noble princes, that he may array the man whom the king delights to honor. Then parade him on horseback through the city square, and proclaim before him: 'Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor!'" (verses 7-9).

Ahasuerus was pleased with Haman's suggestion. He instructed him to hurry and perform what he suggested, to take the robe and the horse "and do so for Mordecai the Jew...! Leave nothing undone of all that you have spoken" (verse 10).

Haman was astonished. Yet he was so full of pride, so intent on currying favor with the king, that he did exactly as he was told.

Haman found himself forced to honor the man who would not bow to him. He told his wife and friends of this bewildering turn of events. Listening carefully, they predicted where things were headed: "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish descent, you will not prevail against him but will surely fall before him" (verse 13).

Shortly afterward, the king's eunuchs found Haman and whisked him away to Esther's banquet.

Haman's downfall

For the second time the king and Haman dined with Queen Esther. The king repeated his magnificent offer to grant her any request, up to half of his kingdom. Finally Queen Esther presented her request: "If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request. For we have been sold, my people and I, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. Had we been sold as male and female slaves, I would have held my tongue, although the enemy could never compensate for the king's loss" (Esther 7:3-4).

The king was furious: "Who is he, and where is he, who would dare presume in his heart to do such a thing?" (verse 5).

Esther turned and pointed toward Haman: "The adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman!" (verse 6).

Haman was mortified. How could things have gone so wrong? The king was so angry he could not speak. He stormed out into the palace garden. The desperate Haman began begging Queen Esther for his life. So distressed was he over the turn of events that he lost his equilibrium and fell across the couch on which Esther was seated.

Just then the king, his temper having cooled somewhat, reentered the banquet room only to see what appeared to be a clumsy attempt by Haman to molest his beloved wife, the queen of Persia! He roared, "Will he also assault the queen while I am in the house?" (verse 8).

One of the servants exclaimed to the king: "Look! The gallows, fifty cubits high, which Haman made for Mordecai, who spoke good on the king's behalf, is standing at the house of Haman" (verse 9).

"Hang him on it!" the king commanded.

Immediately the king's servants hanged Haman on his own towering gallows, and only then was the king's anger abated.

Esther informed the king that Mordecai was her cousin. Immediately the king summoned Mordecai and gave him Haman's signet ring. Queen Esther appointed Mordecai to oversee the house of Haman.

Esther's countrymen delivered

Even so, the potential annihilation of the Jews throughout Persia still threatened. According to Persian law, once the king had issued a decree and sealed it with his signet ring, it could not be revoked.

Esther reminded the king of Haman's deceitful plot to destroy her people; she pleaded for their lives. Although he could not revoke the earlier decree, the king allowed Esther and Mordecai to write a counterdecree that would enable the Jews to arm themselves and band together against any who would attack them.

When the fateful day arrived, the Jews overcame their enemies (Esther 9:1-11). To express their thanks to God, the Jews instituted the Feast of Purim. The name of this feast is a reminder of Haman's casting of lots (*pur* means "lot") and God's deliverance of the Jews from their enemies on the day they were to be annihilated (verses 17-32).

Esther, Jewish queen of gentile Persia, set a remarkable example of personal sacrifice. Although understandably at first hesitant, she willingly risked her life so others could be saved. In this respect she prefigured the sacrifice of the coming Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, who willingly gave His life so each of us could have the opportunity to receive God's gift of salvation, eternal life in His Kingdom.

Similarly, Christ expects His followers, His saints, to be willing to put their lives on the line to follow Him (John 15:13).

Speaking of His followers, God's Word describes them as having overcome Satan "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death" (Revelation 12:11).

Like faithful Esther and Mordecai, we should have godly, loving faith built on a loving, trusting relationship with Him. To see how you can develop such a relationship with your Creator, be sure to request your free copy of *You Can Have Living Faith. GN*

The Decree of Artaxerxes (Ezra 7)

December 16

We return now to the book of Ezra. The events of Ezra 6 occurred during the reign of Darius the Great. Chapter 7 jumps forward to the reign of his grandson Artaxerxes I, also known as Longimanus (464-424 B.C.). It was between these two chapters that the events of the book of Esther took place—during the reign of Xerxes, the son of Darius and father of Artaxerxes. With the death of Xerxes in 465 B.C., "the reins of government should have been handed over to [another] Darius, the eldest son of Xerxes, but instead Artaxerxes his brother murdered him, with the encouragement of Artabanus, captain of the guard, and took his place as king" (Eugene Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*, 1987, p. 499).

Artaxerxes' reign was beset by "widespread unrest and even revolt, particularly in the more remote provinces. By 460 Egypt refused to pay further tribute and solicited and received support from the [Greek] Delian League in this bold act of defiance. Persia undercut this arrangement by bribing [the western Asia Minor city of] Sardis to go to war with Athens, a move that neutralized the league and jeopardized not only Egypt but Athens.... The orator-statesman Pericles had begun to lead Athens to a position of dominance amongst all the Greek states by 458, a situation that the latter feared and resented. The [Greek] civil wars which then broke out freed Artaxerxes of further concern for his western Asia provinces, allowing him to attend to matters closer to home" (p. 499).

It was in this time frame, specifically in 457 B.C., the seventh year of Artaxerxes (see verses 7-8) that the king gave permission to Ezra to lead a band of exiles back to Jerusalem. "Most scholars assume that the seventh year of Artaxerxes I should be reckoned according to the Persian custom of dating regnal years from spring to spring (Nisan to Nisan, which was also the Jewish religious calendar). Thus Ezra would have begun his journey on the first day of Nisan (8 Apr. 458) and arrived on the first day of Ab (4 Aug. 458.... [Yet] during the monarchy the Israelites had adopted a civil fall-to-fall calendar (Tishri to Tishri) as well.... [And some] have argued that the Jews resumed such a calendar after the Exile partly on the basis of an Elephantine papyrus [of the Jewish community in Egypt at the time]. The seventh year of Artaxerxes I would have run from Tishri 458 to Tishri 457. Ezra would have left on 27 March 457 and arrived on 23 July 457" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, note on verses 7-9). These latter dates appear to be the correct ones. For the fall-to-fall reckoning is confirmed by comparing Nehemiah 1:1 and 2:1—as the Hebrew month Kislev (corresponding to November-December) there precedes Nisan (corresponding to March-April) in the same 20th year of Artaxerxes (whereas Nisan would mark a new regnal year if a Nisan-to-Nisan reckoning were used).

Ezra 7 gives us our first introduction to Ezra himself. Introduced with a long genealogy showing his priestly descent from Aaron (verses 1-5), he is called the "son of Seraiah" (verse 1)—which actually refers not to his immediate father but to his line of descent, as Seraiah was the high priest at the time of Jerusalem's fall (see 2 Kings 25:18) and his son Jehozadak went into Babylonian captivity (see 1 Chronicles 6:15). The name *Ezra* (meaning "Help") is apparently a shortened form of Azariah ("YHWH Has Helped"), a name that occurs twice in the list of his ancestors.

Besides being a priest, Ezra was also a "skilled scribe" (verse 6)—"one who copied and studied the Law. After the Exile, the office of scribe came into prominence, in some ways replacing the prophet in importance, and eventually eclipsing even the role of the priest" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 6). Verse 11 shows Ezra's deep spiritual commitment to studying God's law, living by it and teaching it to others. He is here called "Ezra the priest, the scribe, *expert* in the words of the commandments of the Lord, and of His statutes to Israel." Ezra became known in Jewish tradition "as 'the scribe's scribe' or the teacher of scribes" (note on verse 11)—considered founder of the scribal movement, which had a formative impact on the Jewish religion of Christ's day.

The king commits a remarkable degree of authority and wealth into Ezra's hand. There is no question but that God was involved in the giving of this decree, as that is explicitly stated in verses 27-

28. Indeed it is from this decree that we are to date the commencement of the 483 years of the 70-weeks prophecy of Daniel 9 leading to the appearance of the Messiah (for more on this, see the Bible Reading Program comments on Daniel 9).

Nevertheless, God often works through typical human motivations of national leaders to bring about his intended results. Biblical historian Eugene Merrill comments: “It will be helpful to see if there were any political factors that motivated Artaxerxes [who had murdered his own brother to become king] to this beneficent policy [of helping the Jews], for, try as we might, it is difficult to believe that the king was operating out of purely charitable motives.

“We have already suggested that the neutralization of the [Greek] Delian League after 460 left Artaxerxes free to deal with matters closer to home. He instructed Megabyzus [his brother-in-law], an official who had bribed Sparta to attack Athens and had then been made governor of the satrapy of Syria, to lead Persian troops south from Cilicia [in what is now southern Turkey] to wage war on Egypt, the ally of Athens. After defeating Athenian troops at Prosopitus (an island in the Nile Delta), Megabyzus brought Egypt itself to submission in 456. Very possibly, then, in 458 [or 457] Artaxerxes viewed a loyal Judean province as an important asset for his anticipated disciplinary action against Egypt. And what better way to ensure Judean loyalty than to allow Ezra, no doubt a highly popular and powerful Jewish leader, to reestablish Jewish life and culture in that little land that was so crucial to Persian success?” (pp. 506-507). God was no doubt involved in the geopolitical circumstances that made such a decision appealing to Artaxerxes at this crucial time.

Ezra 7:7-9 briefly mentions the journey of Ezra and his company to the Promised Land—a journey that took four months, including an 11-day wait at the beginning as we will see in the next chapter, which gives more details about this second Jewish return from captivity (compare 8:31).

The decree itself, in 7:12-26, is written in Aramaic. In the decree, the Jews are referred to as “the people of Israel” (verse 13). While those represented were almost all from the tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Levi, they were nevertheless looked upon as the remnant of Israel, especially since Israel was the name of the nation in covenant with God—the God of Israel, a term also used in the decree. It might seem odd that Artaxerxes would himself use such terminology. More peculiar still is the phrase “priests and Levites” (same verse), as this seems a particularly Jewish distinction and not one the Persians would make. This wording has in fact aroused suspicion among scholars about the authenticity of the document. Yet it is likely that the king used Jewish officials—perhaps Ezra himself—to help draft the decree.

The “seven counselors” of verse 14 are parallel to those of Xerxes in Esther 1:14.

The support for local religions by the Persians is attested to in historical documents. “There are close parallels to the directive of vv. 15-16 [about specifics regarding offerings] in the Elephantine letters, i.e., in the so-called Passover Papyrus, in which [a later Persian emperor] Darius II ordered the Jews [of Elephantine Island in what is now the city of Aswan in southern Egypt] to keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread...and also in the temple reconstruction authorization [for the Jews of Elephantine to build their own temple]: ‘Let meal-offering, incense and burnt-offering be offered upon the altar of the God Yahu in your name’” (*Expositor’s*, note on verses 15-16).

There might have been some superstition on the part of the Persian rulers in their policy of promoting local religions. Perhaps they genuinely wanted to win the favor and avoid the wrath of the gods worshiped throughout their realm. Yet at the same time, it just may have seemed rather practical to them—to win the favor of subject peoples and keep order among them.

With the conclusion of the decree in verse 26, the text of verses 27-28 returns to Hebrew. These two verses, written by Ezra in the first person, begin a section that continues to the end of chapter 9 known as the Ezra Memoirs.

Ezra is greatly encouraged by the evident intervention of God to once again bless His people.

Returning to the Promised Land (Ezra 8)

December 17-18

Chapter 8 gives more details about the journey of Ezra and the band of exiles who went with him to Jerusalem. “Verses 1-14 list those who accompanied Ezra from Mesopotamia, including the descendants of 15 individuals. The figures of the men listed total 1,496, in addition to the individuals named. There were also a considerable number of women and children (v. 21). An additional group of about 40 Levites (vv. 18-19) and of 220 ‘temple servants’ (v. 20) are also listed” (*The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, note

on verse 1). The distinction “last sons of Adonikam” in verse 13 may indicate that these were following other family members who had returned to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel 80 years earlier (see 2:13).

The river of Ahava, the departure point, was probably a canal a short distance outside Babylon. “The canal that flows toward Ahava’ probably flowed into either the Euphrates or the Tigris (cf. the ‘River’ Kebar in Ezek 1:1, which was also a canal). [One scholar] suggests the modern Meem, classical Maschana or Scenae, on the right bank of the Tigris River, which was near the beginning of two caravan routes” (note on verse 15).

After camping there for three days, awaiting more arrivals, it was soon realized that there were no Levites (verse 15). A similar problem came up at the time of the first return. While more than 4,000 priests returned with Zerubbabel, only 341 Levites did, including singers and gatekeepers (2:36-42). Perhaps they reckoned the Levitical role as lacking in prestige as compared with the priestly office. And maybe, with settled lives in Babylon, they did not want to go embark on a life of service and hard work in a faraway, undeveloped land. Yet, as noted above, about 40 Levites did answer the recruiting efforts initiated by Ezra (verses 16-19).

In Ezra 8:21, Ezra proclaims a fast. There are some important principles here. The purpose of a fast is to “humble ourselves before our God”—not so that we can cajole Him into taking pity on us and answering our every wish, but so that we can realize our total dependence on Him and therefore be in a more appropriate frame of mind for receiving His blessings. As part of this mind frame, we will be more receptive to God’s will. That will help us “to seek from Him the right way for us.” When we face hard decisions about where to go or what to do or how to do what needs to be done, fasting is a way to help us see God’s direction. He can answer in a variety of ways—through circumstances, advice from others, direct inspiration or revelation through His Word, the Holy Bible, or even by direct intervention.

Ezra and those with him were in a serious predicament. Being waylaid by bandits and robbers was rather common in the ancient world. And yet Ezra had not asked the king for a military escort, as he felt it would have made his pious testimony to the king about the power and wrath of God seem phony (verse 22). Having fasted, however, Ezra says that God answered their prayers (verse 23). Whether this means that they received some confirmation of His protection is not clear. Perhaps they came across scriptural promises of protection during the fast. Perhaps God helped them to pick out a safer route. Then again, it may just refer to the fact that they made it to Judea without incident. Ezra does, however, specifically say that God delivered them “from the hand of the enemy and from ambush along the road” (verse 31). But whether actual ambushes were attempted and thwarted is not clear. Perhaps God kept any potential robbers from even thinking to ambush the returning exiles. This is quite remarkable when one considers all the treasure the company was transporting. “The 650 talents of silver weighed nearly 25 tons. The one hundred talents of gold weighed over three tons. These figures do not include the numerous other valuable objects of exquisite artistry” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verses 24-30). These sums equate to millions of dollars in today’s money.

The exiles departed from Babylon and gathered outside the city at the Ahava Canal on the first day of the first month of the Hebrew calendar (7:9). They remained there for 11 days, striking out on their long journey on the 12th day of the month (8:31). From that point it took them about three and a half months to reach Jerusalem, as they arrived on the first day of the fifth month (7:9). After resting for three days, the returned exiles deposited their treasure in the temple and then offered sacrifices (verses 32-35). Then, “the delivery of the royal orders to the regional governors (8:36) may have taken weeks or even months. Ezra did not just deliver the decree, he secured the support of the king’s satraps and governors” (note on 9:1).

We should realize that with this miniscule return of exiles, even added to those who had come in Zerubbabel’s day, the vast majority of the Jewish people remained in Babylonia or were scattered throughout the empire. More would come later with Nehemiah, but the vast majority of the Jews would still remain scattered. In historical fact, many more Jews have returned to the Holy Land over the past century than ever returned in ancient times. Yet even the modern return constitutes a minority of the world’s Jewish population. These small returns, while necessary to fulfill God’s scriptural prophecies, have not constituted the *great* return to the Promised Land prophesied in Scripture—in which all Judah and all Israel as well are to return with miraculous signs and wonders. This great event is yet future—to occur after Christ’s return. Nevertheless, we should view the small returns of ancient times as a tiny

foretaste of what is to come—in the sense of a joyful reunion with God and true worship in His land after so long a time being gone.

The Problem of Intermarriage (Ezra 9)

December 19-20

After settling in and completing the business of securing the support of the regional governors (see 8:36–9:1), a shocking report is brought to Ezra. This was apparently about four and a half months after his and his company's initial arrival on the first day of the fifth month (see 7:9), as the measures to deal with this issue are rather speedily announced on the 17th day of the ninth month (compare 10:8, 9).

Ezra is informed that the people, priests and Levites included, had entered into mixed marriages with the neighboring pagan peoples (9:1-2)—a direct violation of the law that God had given through Moses (see Exodus 34:16; Deuteronomy 7:3). The law in this regard was intended to keep the covenant people distinct as a nation and to protect them and their children from being influenced into false religious concepts and practices.

While it is possible that some of the new arrivals could have been guilty, it seems unlikely that any of them would have entered into marriages with foreigners in just a few months' time. More likely, the guilty were only of those Jews who already lived in the land when Ezra arrived. In stating that the transgressors were “of those who had been carried away captive,” Ezra must have meant they were the descendants of those who returned with Zerubbabel. Certainly those who already had children by these illegal marriages had to have been in these marriages prior to Ezra's arrival.

It is pointed out to Ezra that the leaders and rulers of the people led the way in this transgression (Ezra 9:2). Leaders always have an opportunity to serve as examples for others to emulate—whether for good or ill. When those in such responsible positions are corrupted, they often lead others astray.

Specific motivations behind what happened are not given. “Humanly speaking there may have been reasons for such intermarriages, such as a disparity between the number of returning men and available Jewish women” (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, note on verses 1-2). Yet it would have been far better to remain single, even if it meant living alone with no perpetuation of one's family lineage, than to so flagrantly disobey God. The One who created marriage desires for people to experience its benefits, but only within the boundaries He has set. This is important for all of us to remember. Christians in the New Testament are instructed to not marry unbelievers (2 Corinthians 6:14; compare 1 Corinthians 7:39). This is for our own sake and that of any children we might produce—and that of the rest of the Church. Of course, many when they are first converted and become part of God's Church are already married to a spouse who is not yet called of God—and in this case the apostle Paul instructs that the marriage be maintained if the unbeliever is willing to continue the marriage in fidelity and peace (see verses 12-16).

Ezra is utterly distraught at the news that has been brought to him, rending his garment in grief and even tearing out some of his own hair (Ezra 9:3)—a unique occurrence in Scripture, as *shaving* one's hair is otherwise given as a symbol of shame. As others gather about him in dire concern, Ezra collapses into a fast of mourning, rising from it at the time of the evening sacrifice to pour out a confession of guilt to God. The next chapter reveals that he did this before the temple (see 10:1).

Verses 10-12 of chapter 9, while stated as if a single quotation from the law regarding the present sin, actually draw from many passages (see Deuteronomy 7:3-4; 11:8-9; 23:6; Proverbs 10:27; 13:22; 20:7; Isaiah 1:19).

Ezra ends his prayer with a declaration that God is righteous—and that the remnant of Israel is deserving of being wiped out (Ezra 9:13-15). Perhaps he was going to now ask that the people be led to repentance and for forgiveness but, as we will see in the next chapter, his prayer is cut short—for a good reason.

Covenant to Put Away Pagan Wives (Ezra 10)

December 21

As Ezra prayed and wept before the temple, a large assembly of the people gathered to join in his mourning and prayer to God. Just as corrupt leadership had led the people astray, so righteous leadership can lead others in the proper direction.

In verse 2 a certain Shechaniah remarkably observes that even though the people had grievously sinned, “yet now there is hope in Israel in spite of this.” That is a true and wonderful message. It characterized the whole history of the nation. And it remains true for all who will today or in the future be part of the Israel of God, His chosen people. Despite our past sins, God will still work with us and ultimately deliver us. Yet that is contingent on our making a change in our lives. People must repent. And

in verse 3, Shechaniah suggests a covenant with God to do just that—in this case, ending their illegal marriages.

Shechaniah is referred to as the son of Jehiel of the sons of Elam. “Possibly his father is the same Jehiel mentioned in vv. 21 and 26 as he also was of the family of Elam.... Perhaps Shechaniah was grieved that his father had married a non-Jewish mother. Six members of the clan of Elam were involved in intermarriages (v. 26)” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, note on verse 2).

Specifically, Shechaniah’s call is to put away their pagan wives and the children born to them. Shechaniah says, “Let it be done according to the law” (verse 3), evidently referring to the law of divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1-2, where a man could divorce a wife if he found fault in her. In this case, the fault was evidently that the women were still pagans. Moreover, these marriages were illegal to start with. The sending away of the children with their mothers had a precedent in God telling Abraham to heed Sarah in sending Ishmael away with Hagar so that Ishmael and his lineage would not cause problems for the son of promise, Isaac, and his lineage (see Genesis 21:8-21).

Encouraged, Ezra has the leaders take an oath about putting away the foreign wives (Ezra 10:4-5). Yet he continues his fast (verse 6). In verses 7-8, a proclamation is issued demanding that all the Jews of Judea gather at Jerusalem within three days. “As the territory of Judah had been much reduced, the most distant inhabitants would not be more than fifty miles from Jerusalem. The borders were Bethel in the north, Beersheba in the south, Jericho in the east, and Ono in the west.... All could travel to Jerusalem ‘within three days’” (note on verse 8). Those who would not come would have their property confiscated and be expelled from the Jewish community. Emperor Artaxerxes had given Ezra the powers of confiscation and banishment along with other state powers—even capital punishment—in the decree he issued regarding the return (see 7:26).

Incidentally, some see “all Israel” in 10:5 and other such references to Israel as an indication that all 12 tribes of Israel had returned to the Promised Land. But verse 9 makes it clear that this referred only to “all the men of Judah and Benjamin” along with the Levites also mentioned in verse 5. These constituted the *remnant* of Israel—Israel, as mentioned earlier, being the name of the nation in covenant with God. While a small smattering of people descended from the northern tribes did live among the southern tribes, having been absorbed into Judah, the northern tribes, as tribes, remained scattered. They will not return to the Promised Land until the time of Christ’s return.

The 20th day of the ninth month (verse 9) would have been in December. So besides being rainy, it was also probably very cold—leaving the people shivering (on top of their trembling over the current situation). This created a problem in dealing with the matter at hand. The people, while in agreement with Ezra’s directive, recognized that it would take much more than a day or two to search out all the guilty and make sure all were sworn to putting away their pagan wives and children—and during this time the people who had traveled to Jerusalem couldn’t reasonably be expected to live and sleep outside in the cold and rain. So they requested that the investigation be organized by their officials and carried out in rotations (verses 12-14).

The opposition of the four men in verse 15 lends credibility to the account. That is, rather than a general statement that “everyone agreed,” we are specifically told of four who did not without any indication given as to why. It’s like the reading of a vote tally. As to the objections of these four, it should be noted that it is not clear exactly what they were objecting to—whether to the rotational investigation proposed by the people or the putting away of wives and children. Whatever it was, their objections apparently had no effect. The investigations by Ezra and the leaders proceeded (verse 16).

Interestingly, we are told that it took a few *months* to “question” the men who had married pagan women (verse 17). It seems that for a mere blanket decree of putting away foreign wives, a simple identification of each woman’s nationality would have sufficed and that this would not have taken so long. Perhaps there was a complicating factor. Some of these women may have converted to the Israelite religion, as with Ruth and Rahab. If so, the examination may have included determining if these women were indeed still pagan, and only those who still were would have to have been put away, along with their children who would have been adversely affected by their mothers.

Verses 18-44 list 113 men who had married pagan women. The *Encyclopaedia Judaica* comments that this is “an exceptionally small number in a community of some 30,000 persons. It is probably a truncated list, including representative names and pointing to the involvement of all classes, as the

schematic arrangement may indicate. For the most part members of the upper classes are named, which also seems to reflect the genuineness of the list since they alone were in a position to contract such marriages and stood to benefit most from them” (quoted in *Expositor’s*, note on verse 44). On the other hand, it could have been a complete list—as the sins of a few could bring guilt on the whole nation (compare the sin of Achan in Joshua 7). Either way, it is worth noting that of the 113 listed, 17 are priests, 10 are Levites and 86 represent the rest of the nation. Thus, nearly 25 percent of those listed are religious leaders. What a sad state of affairs this was.

Presumably, all who were married to pagan wives gave their promise to put them away, though that is explicitly stated only about those listed first (see verses 18-19; compare verses 20-44). Yet whether or not all of them followed through on their promise is not even hinted at. It seems hard to believe that Ezra would have allowed this to continue on any kind of wide scale. But his hand may have been weakened over time. Indeed, around 25 years later Nehemiah would have to redress this problem once again.

We should not look at Ezra 10 as the conclusion of the book. For as mentioned in the Bible Reading Program’s introductory comments on this book, in the Hebrew canon Ezra and Nehemiah are reckoned together as one book. Yet before proceeding to Nehemiah 1, we will, after a supplementary reading, turn back a few chapters in the book of Ezra for the sake of following the apparent chronological order.

Supplement: “Ezra: Spiritually Restoring a People”

(From Profiles of Faith series, *The Good News*, March/April 1999)

December 22

Ezra the priest was a faithful servant of God who helped fulfill God’s promises to the remnant of Judah in Babylon in the 400s B.C. His calling was not self-appointed, nor could anyone on his own fulfill the kind of responsibilities to which he was called.

God recognized Ezra as a man of judgment (Ezra 7:25). He was conscientious (Ezra 9:3). His principles led him to resolutely oppose sin. He had a profound love of God’s Word and devoted himself to studying it and faithfully teaching God’s truth (Ezra 7:10).

Ezra found the spiritual strength he needed through prayer and fasting. He was willing to sacrifice his own needs—and encourage others to do the same—to extol and honor God.

Understanding Ezra’s background can help us see how God could use him to bring His people back to wholehearted obedience.

Judah restored

God forgets neither His people nor His promises to them. In love, He warned the people of Judah that, if they didn’t repent of their sinful, rebellious ways, He would remove them from their homeland. When they refused to heed His repeated warnings through His prophets, He allowed the Babylonians to conquer and remove them through three major deportations (ca. 606, 597 and 587 B.C.). Their punishment was 70 years of captivity in a foreign land (Jeremiah 25:1-13).

True to His word, God fulfilled His promise to restore the descendants of Judah after the 70 years.

Zerubbabel headed the first return, which was to rebuild the temple (Ezra 1-6; ca. 536-516). Ezra led a later group in 457. Nehemiah, Ezra’s contemporary, returned to rebuild the shattered walls of Jerusalem in 444.

The Bible tells us that Zerubbabel was a prince of Judah in Babylon. He led nearly 50,000 of his countrymen to rebuild the temple. They faced considerable opposition to this monumental project. Zerubbabel and others got sidetracked. Their focus shifted to building houses for themselves. But the correctional exhortations from prophets Haggai and Zechariah corrected the problem. Zerubbabel and his workmen got back on track and completed the temple around 516.

Although the people rebuilt the physical temple, they were still in poor spiritual condition. Then Ezra entered the picture.

When God needed a man of sterling character and strong conviction, He chose Ezra. *Ezra* means “help,” as in helping to restore and reform Judah. His example can be encouraging to any who desire to be faithful to God.

Ezra was a direct descendant of the priestly family that included Eleazar, Phineas, Zadok and Aaron (Ezra 7:1-5). He was “a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses” (verse 6) and an “expert in the words of the commandments of the LORD, and of His statutes to Israel” (verse 11). In a testimony to his convictions,

we read that “Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel” (verse 10).

While in Babylon, Ezra gained the favor of King Artaxerxes, who granted him a commission to return to Jerusalem (this was the second return, ca. 457 B.C.). The king invited all who wanted to go—Jews, Israelites, priests and Levites—to accompany Ezra to Jerusalem. However, only 1,754 chose to make the journey, compared with 49,897 who had returned with Zerubbabel 79 years earlier.

Restoration of the people

Although the second return numbered fewer than 2,000 people, we must consider that five decades had passed since the completion of the temple in Jerusalem (in 516). Much can happen in two generations. The temple was complete and in use, but something was missing: a right attitude toward Almighty God. The people still lacked understanding. They were not wholeheartedly obedient to God.

God works in a systematic and orderly way. Through the great Persian king, Cyrus, He fulfilled His promise that the Jews could return to their homeland after 70 years in captivity. Next God provided Zerubbabel to rebuild the literal temple. Finally God set His hand to begin to restore the spiritual temple, a remnant of Judah. He used Ezra to accomplish this.

Ezra took a census of those who volunteered to return to Judah and Jerusalem with him. An important and practical reason for the census was to determine the needs for the temple services.

Ezra was surprised—as he considered who could serve in what capacity—that no Levites were present. “And I looked among the people and the priests, and found none of the sons of Levi there” (Ezra 8:15). So he directed leaders of his countrymen to “bring us servants for the house of our God” (verse 17). The leaders then made sure some Levites would return with Ezra for the service of the temple.

Next Ezra needed protection for “us and our little ones and all our possessions” on the long journey back to Jerusalem (verse 21). He was ashamed to ask the king to supply an escort of soldiers for defense against any enemies they might encounter. So he proclaimed a fast, and he and the people humbled themselves before God, asking Him to safeguard them on this dangerous trek. “So we fasted and entreated our God for this, and He answered our prayer” (verse 23).

The journey was safe and uneventful. “So we came to Jerusalem, and stayed there three days” (verse 32). Then they gave offerings to God.

Removing sin

After their offerings, the leaders came to Ezra worried about a significant problem: Men of the remnant of Judah and a few from Israel had taken wives from neighboring gentile nations. This God had expressly forbidden them to do, since such marriages would weaken their resolve to honor God, who had specifically chosen and selected Judah and Israel to represent Him.

Note Ezra’s words in this regard: “The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, with respect to the abominations of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites” (Ezra 9:1).

These heathen nations worshiped false gods. Were the Israelite men to remain married to their foreign wives, the prospect of false religion again enticing and seducing God’s people was a real and dangerous problem. This, God had earlier warned, was precisely one of the reasons His people would be taken into national captivity unless they repented.

Israel reformed. God had sent Ezra to teach His people His way of life, to reveal to them their sins and exhort them to heartfelt repentance. “Now while Ezra was praying, and while he was confessing, weeping, and bowing down before the house of God, a very large assembly of men, women, and children gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept very bitterly. And Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, spoke up and said to Ezra, ‘We have trespassed against our God, and have taken pagan wives from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope in Israel in spite of this’” (Ezra 10:1-2).

Shechaniah encouraged Ezra to take the responsibility and make a decree that Jewish men separate themselves from their gentile wives. “Then Ezra arose, and made the leaders of the priests, the Levites, and all Israel swear an oath that they would do according to this word. So they swore an oath” (verse 5).

Ezra issued a proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem to the descendants of the captivity, directing them to gather in Jerusalem (verse 7). The men of Judah and Benjamin came as directed and sat

in the open square of the house of God, trembling because of importance of the business at hand and because of heavy rain. (This took place in the time of year we would call December.)

Ezra led a confession to God, admonishing the gathered Benjaminites and Judahites and some Israelites to put away their pagan wives. The majority of them agreed to do so and obeyed God's command through Ezra. After several months "they finished questioning all the men who had taken pagan wives" (Ezra 10:17). God, through His faithful priest Ezra, had removed a major source of sin from the people. God recognized that His people need to be united spiritually in their worship of Him (2 Corinthians 6:14-15).

Although faithful Ezra had helped the remnant of Judah to return to God, they did not remain faithful. Neither had Israel repented and turned to God after Assyria removed its people from their northern kingdom almost three centuries earlier (721-718).

Another priest to gather Israel

Many of the descendants of the kingdom of Judah are still identifiable as we near the year 2000. The so-called lost 10 tribes of Israel, which disappeared from history after their captivity in Assyria, are also still extant, although not as easily identified, as we near the beginning of the third millennium.

Ezra the priest is a forerunner of Jesus Christ, the High Priest of God the Father (Hebrews 7). Near the end of the present age of man—promised Christ, our High Priest—a remnant of believers, spiritual Jews (Romans 2:28-29), would not only escape great tribulation (Revelation 12:12-17) but carry on the work God began through Jesus Christ (Matthew 24:14; 28:19; 2 Corinthians 5:17).

God promised the people of Judah He would return them to Jerusalem, after their 70-year Babylonian captivity, to rebuild the temple and restore proper worship. God similarly promises to return Judah *and* Israel to their ancestral homeland. Many prophecies show that at Jesus Christ's second coming He will gather the descendants of Israel and Judah from the ends of the earth (Isaiah 11:10-12; Jeremiah 23:3-8; Ezekiel 36; 39:25-29).

"Then they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who sent them into captivity among the nations, but also brought them back to their land, and left none of them captive any longer. And I will not hide My face from them anymore; for I shall have poured out My Spirit on the house of Israel," says the Lord GOD" (Ezekiel 39:28-29).

These astounding events are part of the good news of the Kingdom of God Jesus Christ proclaimed (Mark 1:14-15). To understand more about the incredible feats Jesus Christ has promised to accomplish at His return, be sure to request the free booklet *The Gospel of the Kingdom. GN*

Opposition to Jewish Rebuilding in Jerusalem (Ezra 4:7-23)

December 23

We read this passage earlier in following the arrangement order of the book of Ezra because of a widespread belief that the book is written entirely in chronological order—making the Artaxerxes mentioned in this passage the same as the ruler known to history as the imposter king Gaumata (also known as pseudo-Smerdis), who preceded Darius the Great. However, as explained in the prior Bible Reading Program comments on this passage, the majority view sees the Artaxerxes in this passage as the Persian emperor known to history as Artaxerxes I Longimanus—the king who issued the decree allowing Ezra to lead a group of Jewish exiles to Jerusalem. This seems more likely (see earlier comments from June 16–18), which is why we are reviewing this section here and considering some other reasons for this conclusion.

The Samaritans resisting the Jews of Judea write to Artaxerxes (verses 7-16), complaining about the building up of the city walls and foundations of Jerusalem (verse 12). There is no corroborating reason to believe the city fortifications were built up under those of the *first* Jewish return from Babylon under Zerubbabel. Cyrus' decree had permitted them to rebuild the temple, not the city. Again, it seems more likely that the rebuilding referred to in the letter was done by those who returned with Ezra in the days of Artaxerxes I.

Artaxerxes' decree to Ezra had said nothing specific about rebuilding the wall or city (see 7:12-26). However, beyond the provision for religious offerings and temple refurbishment, the emperor did say, "And whatever seems good to you and your brethren to do with the rest of the silver and the gold, do it according to the will of your God" (verse 18). Not long after arriving in Judea, Ezra says of God, "He extended mercy to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to revive us, to repair the house of our God, to rebuild its ruins, *and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem*" (9:9). Most people see this last phrase as

a figurative expression of God's protection, as no literal wall had yet been built. But neither was the temple refurbishment complete in so short a time. This must all speak of what God had allowed the Jewish exiles to come to do—not of what they had already accomplished.

Consider also that Artaxerxes' decree of 457 B.C. appears to be the starting point of the 70-weeks prophecy of Daniel 9, the fulfillment of which was to commence with the command to rebuild not merely the temple but Jerusalem itself (verse 25; see the Bible Reading Program comments on Daniel 9). Moreover, as we will soon read, Nehemiah is not long afterward grieved over Jerusalem's wall being broken down and the city gates burned (Nehemiah 1:3)—these developments seeming to concern recent events rather than the Babylonian destruction more than 140 years before. Given all this, it appears that Ezra must have interpreted Artaxerxes' decree as allowing for the refortification of the city—as indeed it implicitly had. And so at some point it seems likely that Ezra and the returned exiles began on that project.

Yet perhaps the fact that Artaxerxes' decree had not explicitly mentioned the rebuilding of the city defenses gave the Samaritan resistance what they saw as a window of opportunity to bring an accusation against the Jews. Reminiscent of a modern legal challenge, the Samaritans saw and exploited a loophole in the initial decree. The result was a legal injunction that stopped the reconstruction project. And there were other factors at work that could explain why Artaxerxes, who had himself decreed the Jewish return and entrusted great authority to Ezra, would now heed such accusations and order the rebuilding stopped (see Ezra 4:17-22).

Recall from the Bible Reading Program comments on Ezra 7 that Egypt had rebelled against Persian authority by allying with the Greeks. Artaxerxes had sent his brother-in-law Megabyzus, governor of Syria and Palestine, to wage war against Egypt to bring it back into submission to Persia—which was accomplished in 456 B.C. It seems likely that the sending of Ezra and his company to Judea the year before this was intended to strengthen loyalty to Persia in that region prior to the attack on Egypt.

But a few years later things changed dramatically in the region. "After Megabyzus, the Syrian governor, had subdued Egypt, he took the Greek and Egyptian commanders with him to Susa [the Persian capital called Shushan in Scripture] under promise of protection there. For several years the promise was kept, but in 449 Amestris, the widow of Xerxes and queen mother [who was possibly the Vashti of the book of Esther], demanded their execution. The fulfillment of her demands so infuriated Megabyzus that he fled Susa, returned to Syria, and from there declared the independence of the trans-Euphratean satrapy [of which Judea was part]. He had sufficient following to repel at least two campaigns against him" (Eugene Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, p. 508).

This could well explain why Artaxerxes would now be suspicious of Judean loyalty to Persia. It was now part of a rebellious satrapy, and the refortification of Jerusalem could have played into the emperor's fears. He orders the Samaritans, who have professed loyalty to him by their letter, to see to it that the refortification is halted. And this they do—by military force (verse 23). Yet the king leaves open the possibility of future rebuilding (4:21), helping to set the stage for the book of Nehemiah.

Nehemiah Learns of Jerusalem's Plight (Nehemiah 1)

December 24-25

As explained in the Bible Reading Program's introductory comments on Ezra and Nehemiah, the book of Nehemiah is evidently a continuation of the book of Ezra. While Ezra is traditionally reckoned as the compiler of both sections, several parts of the section now referred to as Nehemiah were evidently written by Nehemiah himself. This is the case with Nehemiah 1:1–7:5.

As chapter 1 opens we are immediately introduced to Nehemiah (verse 1), whose name means "Comfort of YHWH [the Eternal]," "YHWH Comforts" or "YHWH Is Consolation." The time is the month Kislev (corresponding to November-December) in "the twentieth year," referring to the 20th year of Persian Emperor Artaxerxes (see 2:1)—apparently Artaxerxes I Longinus, the same king who had earlier sent Ezra (see Ezra 7:1) but later ordered the reconstruction of Jerusalem's walls halted (see 4:21-23). This would date Nehemiah 1:1 to the end of 445 B.C.—more than 12 years after the return of Ezra to Judea in 457.

The place, according to Nehemiah 1:1, is Shushan, also known as Susa, one of the capitals of the Persian Empire—the one in which the book of Esther was set. This city was around 150 miles north of the Persian Gulf in what is today Iran.

Nehemiah is an important person. Like Joseph, Daniel and Esther before him, Nehemiah appears to have been placed by God in a strategic position in a foreign imperial government to accomplish God's will on the world scene. He refers to himself at the end of chapter 1 as "the king's cupbearer" (verse 11). This was an honored position of trust. Consider that a cupbearer was to ensure against the poisoning of a ruler. But there was much more to the job than that. The apocryphal book of Tobit, also from the Persian period, refers to a certain Ahikar as "chief cupbearer, keeper of the signet, and in charge of administration of the accounts under King Sennacherib of Assyria" (1:22, NRSV). As *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* notes on verse 11, "Varied sources suggest something about Nehemiah as a royal cupbearer:

"1. He would have been well-trained in court etiquette (cf. Dan 1:4-5).

"2. He was probably a handsome individual (cf. Dan 1:4, 13, 15; Jos[ephus] *Antiq[uities of the Jews]* XVI, 230 {viii.1}).

"3. He would certainly know how to select the wines to set before the king. A proverb in the Babylonian Talmud (*Baba Qamma* 92b) states: 'The wine belongs to the master but credit for it is due to his cupbearer.'

"4. He would have to be a convivial companion, willing to lend an ear at all times.

"5. He would have great influence as one with the closest access to the king, able to determine who was able to see his master.

"6. Above all Nehemiah had to be one who enjoyed the unreserved confidence of the king. The great need for trustworthy court attendants is underscored by the intrigues endemic to the Achaemenid court. Xerxes, father of Artaxerxes I, was killed in his own bedchamber by Artabanus, a courtier."

In verse 2 of chapter 1 we see that Nehemiah's brother has just returned from a visit to Jerusalem. (We will see him mentioned again in Nehemiah 7:2 as receiving charge from Nehemiah over Jerusalem.) The report of Hanani and his traveling companions is not good. The Jews of Judea are suffering disgrace and persecution. The city wall is broken down and the gates of the city have been burned. While this could conceivably have referred to the Babylonian destruction of 142 years prior, it seems more likely to refer to recent devastation. Most scholars understand it to refer to the Samaritan military action to stop the rebuilding of Jerusalem's city wall as ordered by Artaxerxes (compare Ezra 4:21-23). As explained in the comments on our previous reading, this probably occurred in conjunction with the rebellion of the satrap Megabyzus in 449 B.C.

About two years later, Megabyzus reasserted his loyalty to Artaxerxes (Eugene Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, p. 508). But the damage in Jerusalem was done. It was now five years after the revolt and just three years after the reaffirmation of Persian rule. Evidently, things had not improved for the Jews of Judea in this short period.

Nehemiah is sorely grieved and immediately commences on a period of fasting and prayer, confessing the people's sin. In doing so, he is evidently speaking generally of the Israelites' national proclivity to sin rather than some specific sin of the Judean Jews, as he includes his own sins in the confession. He well understands that the people's long history of immorality is the reason they have been reduced to being such a weakened people. Yet Nehemiah reminds God of His promises to regather His people and asks particularly that God will grant him favor with the king (Nehemiah 1:4-11)—evidently to make a case for the rebuilding of Jerusalem, as we will see in chapter 2.

Nehemiah Sent to Rebuild Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2)

December 26-27

It is some time before Nehemiah says something about the Judean situation to Artaxerxes. "There was a delay of about four months from Kislev (Nov.-Dec.) [445 B.C.], when Nehemiah first heard the news (1:1), to Nisan (Mar.-Apr.) [444 B.C.], when he felt prepared to broach the subject to the king. There are various explanations for this. The king may have been absent in his other winter palace at Babylon. Perhaps the king was not in the right mood. Even though Nehemiah was a favorite of the king, he would not have rashly blurted out his request. We know it was politic to make one's requests during auspicious occasions such as birthday parties or when rulers were in a generous mood (Gen 40:20; Esth 5:6; Mark 6:21-25; Jos[ephus] *Antiq[uities of the Jews]* XVIII, 289-93 {viii.7}). It is certain that Nehemiah did not ask in haste but carefully bided his time, constantly praying to God to grant the proper opening" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, note on Nehemiah 2:1).

At last an opportunity presents itself when the king asks him about his downcast demeanor. Nehemiah had hidden his feelings up to this point (verses 1-2). Perhaps it was too hard to contain them any longer, though it could well be that he purposely let his feelings show on this occasion to provide a segue into making his request. In any case, the moment is now prime to speak, but Nehemiah is filled with trepidation. As *The Nelson Study Bible* points out, “Persian monarchs believed that just being in their presence would make any person happy. Yet, Nehemiah was about to request the emperor’s permission to go to Jerusalem, suggesting that he would rather be somewhere other than in the emperor’s presence. On top of that, it was Artaxerxes himself who had ordered the work on the wall to be stopped (see Ezra 4:21-23). Nehemiah had reason to be afraid” (note on Nehemiah 2:2).

Yet, of course, Nehemiah in reality had more reason to *not* fear. And despite his concerns, he sets a wonderful example for all of us in dealing with this difficult moment in a manner that gives him the confidence to proceed. He silently prays to the ultimate ruler of heaven and earth, Almighty God, probably asking for the right words to say and that his request is well received (verse 5).

The response of verse 6 is extremely encouraging. Whereas Artaxerxes could have had Nehemiah executed then and there, the king instead asks him how long he would be gone. And then remarkably this king who had ordered the cessation of the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls happily gives permission to Nehemiah to return and resume the construction. Moreover, we are told in Nehemiah 5:14 that Artaxerxes appointed Nehemiah as governor of the land of Judah when he sent him.

There may have been broader political considerations for the king’s decision. Recall that the satrap Megabyzus, who had led the region under his authority containing Judea in revolt against Persian rule, had renewed his fealty to the emperor only three years earlier. Thus, “the Syro-Palestinian satrapy was [still] in a very precarious position as far as Artaxerxes was concerned. He knew full well that what had happened once could happen again and that he might be unable to recover his rebellious territories the next time. Clearly he was willing to do anything that might consolidate his position and ensure continued loyalty from his volatile subjects. When Nehemiah volunteered to go to Jerusalem to stabilize the situation there, Artaxerxes saw in the request not only a way to accede to the heartfelt burden of his beloved cupbearer for his Jewish kinfolk, but a way to place someone over Judah whom he could trust to remain loyal to Persia and to achieve a climate of tranquility and order” (Eugene Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, p. 508). Moreover, it was probably in the confusion of Megabyzus’ rebellion that Artaxerxes gave the earlier order to halt the refortification of Jerusalem’s defenses. Further reports from the region may have revealed the Jews under Ezra as not having sided with the revolt—which would have been more reason to allow them to resume the work of restoring their holy city.

Nehemiah received from the king safe-conduct letters and a military escort. Ezra did not have such an escort on his journey because he would not ask for it lest it appear a lack of faith. Perhaps Nehemiah did not need to ask. Furthermore, this escort would have provided convincing proof of Nehemiah’s investiture of authority in his visits to the provincial governors. The king also provided him with requisition orders for obtaining lumber for work in Jerusalem on the gates of the citadel just northwest of the temple (which overlooked the temple complex), on the city wall and on the governor’s residence in which he would live.

In verses 9-10 we see that not everyone is pleased with the arrival of Nehemiah and his company. Verse 10 mentions the Samaritan leader Sanballat the Horonite. He “is attested to in the Aramaic papyri of Elephantine [i.e., of the Jewish community on the Nile island of Elephantine in southern Egypt] as having been governor of Samaria in the seventeenth year of Darius II, that is, in 407 [B.C.]. Since by then he had adult sons, it is certainly reasonable that he had been governor forty years earlier [when Nehemiah first arrived]” (Merrill, p. 509). Sanballat being called a Horonite seems to refer to his coming from the city of Beth-Horon, 12 miles northwest of Jerusalem. As this town was within the territory of Judea, it may be that Sanballat’s authority had reached into Judea before Nehemiah’s arrival—which would give greater impetus to his opposition.

Tobiah is referred to as “the servant, the Ammonite” (KJV). “Servant” probably denotes being a servant of the king—which is why the NKJV gives the word here as “official.” The reference to Ammon probably refers not to his ethnicity but to his area of administrative oversight. For Tobiah is actually an Israelite name meaning “YHWH Is Good.” This would seem to make him at least part Jewish. And there is more reason to think so. We elsewhere learn that he was married to a Jewish woman—the daughter of a

certain Shechaniah (compare 3:29; 6:18; not the Shechaniah of Ezra 10:2). Tobiah gave an Israelite name to his own son—Jehohanan (meaning “YHWH Is Merciful”). He too married a Jewish woman—the daughter of Meshullam, son of Berechiah, leader of one of the groups repairing the wall (compare Nehemiah 3:4, 30; 6:18). As *Expositor’s* notes on 2:10: “Some scholars speculate that Tobiah descended from an aristocratic [Israelite] family [known as the Tobiads] that owned estates in Gilead and was influential in Transjordan and in Jerusalem even as early as the eighth century B.C.” The same commentary goes on to conclude: “Tobiah was no doubt the governor of Ammon or Transjordan under the Persians. His grandson Tobiah is called ‘the governor of Ammon.’ The site of Araq el-Emir (‘caverns of the prince’), about eleven miles west of Amman, was the center of the Tobiads. The visible remains of a large building on top of the hill (Qasr el-’Abd, ‘castle of the slave [or servant],’ 60 by 120 feet) have been interpreted as a Jewish temple built by a later Tobiad. On two halls are inscriptions with the name Tobiah in Aramaic characters. The date of the inscriptions is much disputed”—but they nonetheless illustrate the persistence of this name among the Ammonite governors during the Persian and Greek periods. Nehemiah 6:18 tells us that many in Judah were pledged to his service, so he too seems to have exercised a significant measure of control within the province.

These men were greatly concerned despite the fact that Nehemiah had not actually told them or even the Judeans why he had really come. To further conceal his intentions, he decides to secretly inspect the city wall by night. “Since Nehemiah had arrived in Jerusalem from the north, he would have seen that side of the wall as he approached the city. If he lived in the southwestern part of the city, he could have had ample time for viewing the western wall. Nehemiah seems to have been concerned with inspecting the southern and eastern walls of Jerusalem. With a few servants, he passed through the Valley Gate into the Valley of Hinnom. He then traveled along the south wall. When the piles of stone and heaps of rubble obstructed his passage, he dismounted his animal and continued on foot up the Kidron valley in order to view the eastern wall” (*Nelson*, note on verses 12-15). “Apparently the eastern slope of the City of David was in an impassable condition due to collapsed retaining walls and ruined structures” (*The Holman Bible Atlas*, 1998, p. 172).

We next see that Nehemiah was an inspirational and motivational leader—able to stir the Jews into resuming work on the city wall (verses 17-18). It is wonderful to read the enthusiasm of their response: “Let us rise up and build.”

As a side note, it is interesting to consider that no specific mention is made of Ezra at this point, although he could have been among the priests or officials mentioned in verse 16. We do see him later in the book but not until chapter 8. This has led some to question the traditional chronology of Ezra’s return preceding that of Nehemiah. Yet the Bible makes it clear that Ezra came to Judea in the seventh year of Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:8) while Nehemiah came in the 20th (2:1). It could well be that Ezra was not playing as prominent a role at this later time, 13 years after the prior mention of him in Ezra 10—especially considering the earlier Samaritan action that Artaxerxes ordered against the Jewish rebuilding. Ezra could have been sidelined as governor. Perhaps Sanballat or Tobiah had been given administrative authority over Judea—or possibly just assumed control. Furthermore, as a priest and scribe, Ezra may have decided to devote himself more to his religious duties—and perhaps now deferred to the leadership of the high priest Eliashib (see 3:1). Age and health could also have been factors. Nevertheless, we will see Ezra mentioned again in a spiritual leadership role in Nehemiah 8. And tradition reckons him as the one who established the Hebrew Bible in its present form—a paramount responsibility.

Returning to the story, the renewed work on the city wall provokes ridicule and derision from Sanballat, Tobiah and another foreign leader, Geshem the Arab (spelled Gashmu in the Hebrew of 6:2). This man is “documented outside the Bible.... The primary source of information is a silver bowl discovered in 1947 at Tell el-Mashkutah in Lower [i.e., northern] Egypt. Like three other such bowls it has a dedicatory inscription to the goddess Han’-llat; in addition, it has the line, ‘that which Qaynu, son of Gašmu, king of Qedar, brought in offering to Han’-llat.’ Gašmu is the biblical Geshem. On the basis of the particular Aramaic writing, the nature of the bowl, and Athenian coins discovered at the same site, this inscription has been dated [to the right time frame of] around 400 [B.C.]” (Merrill, p. 509). As the king of Qedar or Kedar—a nation of nomads in northern Arabia—Geshem and his people would have “served the Persians by controlling the caravan routes between Palestine and Egypt” (“Lingering Resentment Boils Over,” *Word in Life Bible*, sidebar on 4:7).

These leaders' accusations of defying the emperor (2:19) were not sincere, as Nehemiah had already given them the royal decree expressing the king's will in this matter (see verse 9). These antagonists were quite resistant "to the reestablishment of Judah as a viable and powerful rival to their own principalities. They had no doubt sided with Megabyzus in his rebellion and now correctly saw Nehemiah as a strong pro-Persian sent among them to police the region as the henchman of Artaxerxes himself. That they dared to interfere with Nehemiah's project shows a certain residue of independence from Persia, especially since the content of Artaxerxes' letter of authorization was well known to them" (Merrill, pp. 509-510).

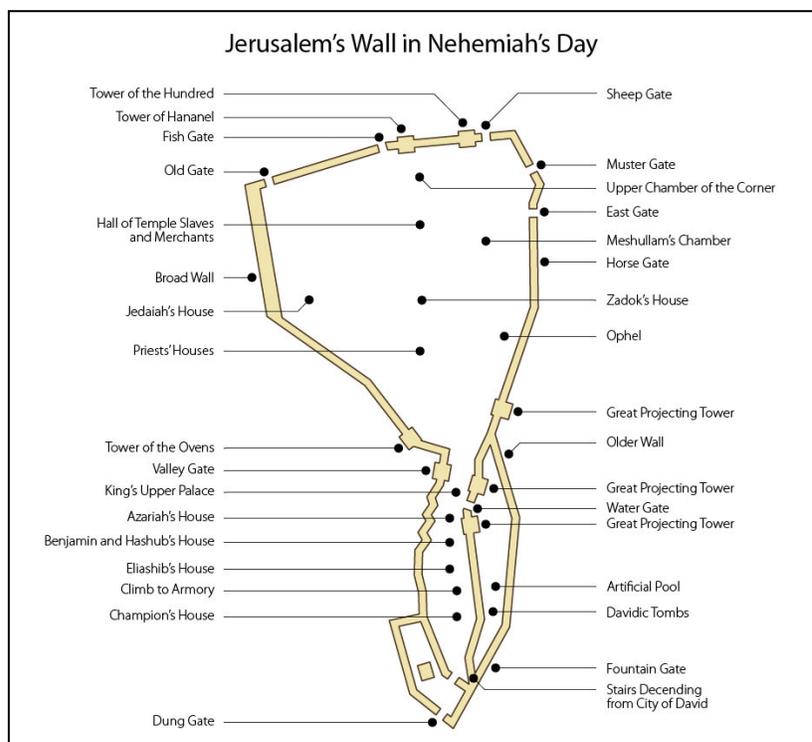
Nehemiah rebuffed them, confident in God's providential care for His people and His desire to reestablish them in Jerusalem (verse 20).

Organization of the Rebuilding Work (Nehemiah 3)

December 28

The Jews immediately commence rebuilding the city wall according to Nehemiah's organization of the work. He assigns various sections to different groups—families, neighborhoods and even professional guilds. The people had to work together not only within their particular teams but also in cooperation with other teams. Note how many times the phrase "next to them" occurs in the chapter. Major building work always takes work teams cooperating together. This is true even in the spiritual work of the people of God's Church today.

There was much work to be done. *The Holman Bible Atlas* states: "Nehemiah 3 contains numerous references to gates and structures along Jerusalem's fortifications. Unfortunately, identifying archaeological remains with any of these structures has been difficult, yet archaeologists have provided a clearer picture of Nehemiah's Jerusalem. After the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., settlers confined themselves to the eastern ridge, the old City of David and the Temple Mount. There is no evidence of any occupation of the western ridge during the Persian era, although parts of Hezekiah's walls must have remained in fragmentary condition. Settlement upon the City of David apparently was more constricted than ever before. Much of the eastern slope perhaps was left unprotected, as a new line of defense was established farther up the slope, perhaps built along the line of a much earlier wall. Fragments of a wall built of roughly dressed limestone near the crest have been identified by some archaeologists as 'Nehemiah's Wall,' but others believe the 'wall' is actually a quarry line. A few of the domestic structures on the eastern slope were reused, but most buildings were located on the crest of the ridge.



"The fact that Nehemiah completed his initial repairs in fifty-two days [as we will see in 6:15] argues strongly that segments of the earlier defenses must have been still standing; presumably the western line of defense and the walls enclosing the Temple Mount were on the same lines as those prior to 586 B.C. The Valley Gate (Neh. 3:13), along the Tyropoeon Valley [on the west side], has tentatively been identified by some scholars with remains dating from the Iron Age. The location of other gates in Nehemiah 3 are more speculative. It seems reasonable to locate the Water Gate (Neh. 3:26) near the Gihon Spring [on the east side] and the Fountain Gate at the base of the southeastern hill (Neh. 2:14; 3:15). Several towers mentioned in Nehemiah 3 (the Tower of Hananel, the Tower of the Hundred) undoubtedly lay along the northern

defenses where Jerusalem was most vulnerable. Jerusalem of Nehemiah's day was slightly smaller than the city of David and Solomon, perhaps covering thirty-seven to thirty-eight acres" (p. 172).

Finally, we should observe that the work in Jerusalem was done by people from all walks of life—just as it is in the Church of God today. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* notes on verse 32: "We know from chapter 5 that there were deep economic differences in Judean society. With the exception of the nobles of Tekoa (v. 5), everyone pitched in, from the high priest (v. 1) to goldsmiths and perfume makers (vv. 8, 31) and even women (v. 12), to accomplish a common task. Some, like the commoners of Tekoa, even did more than their share (v. 27). What an inspiring example of what can be done when God's people work together under dynamic leadership! Viggo Olsen, who helped rebuild ten thousand houses in war-ravaged Bangladesh in 1972, derived unexpected inspiration from reading a chapter ordinarily considered one of the least interesting in the Bible: 'I was struck...that no expert builders were listed in the "Holy Land brigade." There were priests, priests' helpers, goldsmiths, perfume makers, and women, but no expert builders or carpenters were named.'"

The Wall Under Threat (Nehemiah 4)

December 29

Even as Sanballat and Tobiah contemptuously mocked the Jewish rebuilding effort (verses 1-2), we can perhaps sense the panic behind their words. They were really worried. Jewish success could mean their demise. While their taunting and ridicule is intended to shake the confidence of the Jews, it is also a self-deceptive way of steadying their own shaken confidence.

Nehemiah does not answer them. Instead, he prays to God to turn the reproach back on their heads and that their sin not be blotted out—recognizing that they were actually belittling God Himself (verses 4-5). This is not a prayer for eliminating any possibility that they would ever find forgiveness through repentance. It is simply asking that God, as a matter of justice and defending His reputation, not let what they have done go undealt with.

In verse 6 we see that the confidence of the people is not shaken. Their minds are instead set on the task assigned to them and they succeed in joining the wall's sections together—though not yet to full height.

News of this development infuriates the Jews' enemies, as Jerusalem would soon be a strong fortress. In addition to Sanballat and Tobiah, we also see reference here to the Arabs (among whom Geshem was a leader—see 2:19), the Ammonites (of whom Tobiah was apparently governor) and the Ashdodites (4:7). Ashdod was one of the five principal cities of the Philistines. Yet those who lived there at this time may not have been full-blooded Philistines. The Assyrians destroyed the city in 711 B.C. It was later controlled by the Babylonians and then the Persians, who repopulated it. "With the Persian conquest alternate patches of the Palestinian coast were parceled out to the Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon, which provided ships for the Persian navy. During this period Ashdod was the most important city on the Philistine coast" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, note on verse 7).

The Jews' enemies lashing out in anger is not a matter of genuine indignation but of alarm. They are rather afraid of what is happening. As they see it, things have gotten out of control—that is, out of *their* control. They decide that they had better put a stop to this business right away—before it is too late. So they begin plotting against the Jews.

The Jews resort to their only sure defense—prayer to Almighty God. This time it is a collective prayer of the people, not merely a private prayer of Nehemiah (verse 9). Yet even as they pray, they do what they humanly can to protect themselves by posting watchmen at all times.

In verse 10 we see that the great task of rebuilding is taking its toll on the Jewish workers. Fatigue and the sheer volume of debris lead to discouragement. In the next verse we see that despite the posted watch, the adversaries seem to think that they can still catch the builders by surprise. But the plot is discovered before it can be executed.

The Jews are then arrayed for battle and exhorted to bravery on the basis of two factors: 1) The people are to remember all that God has done for His people; and 2) the people are to reflect on the fact that they, unlike their enemies, are defending their homeland and families. But the attack doesn't come. Foiled in their hopes for a surprise attack, the adversaries are so far unwilling to challenge the Jews' newly instituted security measures.

There are spiritual parallels to the dual responsibilities in verse 17. We must not neglect our own spiritual survival and security, nor must we neglect doing the Work of God.

The last three words of the chapter in the original Hebrew—*is silho hammayim*—as *Expositor's* notes on verse 23, “are notoriously difficult to interpret; they are literally ‘each man his weapon the water’.... The NIV rendering is similar to that of the RV: ‘every one (went with) his weapon (to) the water,’ and the JPS: ‘every one that went to the water had his weapon.’ This would parallel the way Gideon’s selected men drank their water with weapons in hand as an indication of their vigilance.... The Vulgate took the word *silho*, not in the sense of ‘his weapon,’ but as a verb meaning ‘stripped himself’... (‘every one stripped himself when he was to be washed’). This sense was followed by the KJV [and NKJV]: ‘every one put them [i.e., their clothes] off for washing’”—that is, *only* for washing.

Despite the still-constant threat of enemy attack, the rebuilding work went on.

Relief From Domestic Exploitation (Nehemiah 5)

December 30

No sooner is the external threat of attack staved off, at least temporarily, that another development threatens the progress of the Jews in rebuilding Jerusalem’s wall and their well being in general—this time from within. It seems likely that the problems described in this passage had been brewing for a long time—well before Nehemiah ever arrived. And now, with the current prolonged period of hard work, constant alert, inevitable fatigue and diminished regular income due to time spent on rebuilding the wall, things at last came to a head.

Verse 3 mentions a famine. Perhaps it was not severe, but even a minor one would have produced food shortages, making available food more expensive. Exacerbating the situation was the outside enemy threat, which likely kept the people of Jerusalem pent up behind their new defenses—away from access to the produce of the countryside. Some now come seeking relief because they have large families, compounding their need for grain (verse 2). Even many landowners had mortgaged their lands and homes (verse 3), so the produce of even accessible lands probably went to other people as repayment. These other people were not foreign authorities but fellow Jews. The outcry of the people in verse 1 is “against their Jewish brethren.” The rich were getting richer, and the poor were getting poorer.

Verses 4-5 describe some who borrowed money and even sold their children into slavery to pay property taxes to the king. This was not an unusual circumstance in the Persian Empire, which taxed excessively, removing vast sums of money from circulation and thereby running up inflation. “Documents from Babylonia show that many inhabitants of this satrapy too had to mortgage their fields and orchards to get silver for the payment of taxes to the king. In many cases they were unable to redeem their property, and became landless hired labourers; sometimes they were compelled to give away their children into slavery. According to some Egyptian data, the taxation was so heavy that the peasants fled to the cities, but were arrested by the nomarchs [regional governors] and brought back by force” (M. Dandamayev, “Achaemenid Babylonia,” *Ancient Mesopotamia*, I.M. Diakonoff, ed., 1969, p. 308, quoted in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, note on verse 4). “The acquisition of land by the Persians and its alienation from production helped produce a 50 percent rise in prices” (note on verse 4).

Again, though, it is not the high taxes, inflation or famine that the people are complaining about. They are complaining about each other. More specifically, the poorer people are complaining about the rich nobles and rulers (see verse 7) in the matters of borrowing money and selling children into slavery with no means to redeem them. The problem in the first matter, as Nehemiah identifies it (verse 7), is the exacting of usury—interest. The law forbade the charging of interest to poor Israelites in need. “The O[ld] T[estament] passages (Exod 22:25-27; Lev 25:35-37; Deut 23:19-20; 24:10-13) prohibiting the giving of loans at interest were not intended to prohibit commercial loans but rather the charging of interest to the impoverished so as to make a profit from the helplessness of one’s neighbors” (note on Nehemiah 5:7). Yet the latter is exactly what was happening. And this led to the second problem—Israelites having to hire themselves and their children out as servants to pay off debt. While this was permissible, it would not have been necessary if the people were not sinking further and further into debt because of the usury. Furthermore, the nobles and rulers were going beyond what was allowed with regard to Israelite servants. They were selling them as slaves (verses 5, 8), which the law expressly prohibited (see Leviticus 25:35-40).

Beyond these specifics, Scripture roundly condemned greedily profiteering at the expense of others (see Psalm 119:36; Isaiah 56:9-12; 57:17; Jeremiah 6:13; 8:10; 22:13-19; Ezekiel 22:12-14; 33:31). The people were to be looking out for one another’s welfare—not exploiting each other. And those more able to help had the responsibility to do so. Yet things were far from that ideal. “The ironic tragedy of the

situation for the exiles was that at least in Mesopotamia their families were together. Now because of dire economic necessities, their children were being sold into slavery” (note on verse 5).

Nehemiah is outraged over this terrible, sinful situation (verse 6). It is clear that he knew nothing about it until this point, having only recently arrived.

After he rebukes the nobles, having given a lot of thought to the matter, Nehemiah convenes a “great assembly” against them. Often called the “Great Synagogue,” Jewish tradition reckons this as the beginnings of a continuing authority to watch over Jewish religious affairs that persisted until Seleucid Greek times. Historian Alfred Edersheim writes: “It is impossible with certainty to determine, either who composed this assembly, or of how many members it consisted. {The Talmudic notices are often inconsistent. The number as given in them amounts to about 120....} Probably it comprised the leading men in Church and State, the chief priests, elders, and ‘judges,’ the latter two classes including ‘the Scribes,’ if, indeed, that order was already separately organised. {Ezra 10:14; Neh. 5:7.} Probably also the term ‘Great Assembly’ [beyond its introduction in Nehemiah 5:7] refers rather to a succession of men than to one Synod” (*The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, chap. 8). It is this body that is understood to have approved Ezra’s canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Regarding the matter at hand, so obvious is the nobles’ guilt that they have nothing to say by way of excuse or rebuttal (verse 8). Nehemiah points out two issues that should have been of concern to them in what they have done—showing a lack of appropriate fear of God in disobeying His laws and bringing the Jews and the God they worshiped into disrepute among the surrounding gentile nations (verse 9). Nehemiah classes himself, his relatives and his officials as among those who have been lending money (verse 10)—though he does not state that he himself has been charging interest. He calls for an end to the usury and a restoration of property, money and food with interest.

The nobles agree to Nehemiah’s directive, taking an oath regarding the matter, as he requires—and then, encouragingly, they follow through on what they have promised (verses 12-13).

In verse 14, we see that Nehemiah served 12 years in his first term as governor of Judea (444-432 B.C.). At the end of this period he would be recalled to the Persian court (13:6), after which he would return for a second term. It is surprising to see that during his administration, Nehemiah and his family did not eat the governor’s provisions or tax the people though he had that authority. In verse 15, he mentions previous governors who had abused their authority in this regard. He is surely not referring to Ezra or Zerubbabel. Archaeology has revealed that there were at least three governors of Judea between Zerubbabel and Ezra: Elnathan in the late 6th century B.C. (as revealed on a bulla and seal); Yeho’ezer in the early 5th century (as revealed on a jar impression); and Ahzai in the early 5th century (also revealed on a jar impression) (see *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, footnote on verse 15). And it may have been that the Samaritan governor Sanballat and the Ammonite governor Tobiah were acting as de facto governors over parts of Judea prior to Nehemiah’s arrival.

As for his own administration, Nehemiah made sure that it was upright and beneficent. Verse 16 shows that “Nehemiah had not acquired mortgages on land. As governor, he could easily have acquired real estate and sold it at great profit. But instead of making money for themselves, Nehemiah and his servants worked on the wall of Jerusalem for the protection of the people and the glory of God” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 16).

Nehemiah’s refusal of the governor’s provision so as not to further burden the people is made all the more remarkable by the fact that he regularly provided for so many at his table (verses 17-18). *Jamieson, Fausset & Brown’s Commentary* states: “We have a remarkable proof both of the opulence and the disinterestedness [in it] of Nehemiah. As he declined, on conscientious grounds, to accept the lawful emoluments attached to his government, and yet maintained a style of princely hospitality for twelve years out of his own resources, it is evident that his office of cupbearer at the court of Shushan must have been very lucrative” (note on verse 14).

Indeed, Nehemiah was very wealthy—and yet very generous with his wealth. In verse 19, he prays that God will remember him for good—rewarding him for all that he has done for God’s people—a prayer he repeats at the end of the book (13:31). This shows what truly motivated Nehemiah. It was not to be revered by other people but to please God, who is “a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Hebrews 11:6). That should be our motivation too—in whatever we do.

Finishing the Wall (Nehemiah 6:1–7:3)**December 31**

When the enemies of the Jews learned that Jerusalem's wall was nearly rebuilt, they decided on a new tactic. Through the pretense of a peace conference in the plain of Ono—modern Kafr 'Ana, about 20 miles northwest of Jerusalem and 10 miles east of Joppa—they would lure Nehemiah out of the city. Their plan was probably to either kidnap or assassinate him. But Nehemiah wasn't fooled and wouldn't take the bait (verses 1-4).

Sanballat then sent a letter to Nehemiah accusing him of planning to rebel against Artaxerxes and set himself up as king—and that he was using lying prophets in his cause. The Samaritan governor implicitly threatens to report this matter to the emperor if Nehemiah will not come out for the meeting (verses 5-7). Yet Nehemiah still refuses to take the bait. He knew that Sanballat would not dare to make such accusations against him to Artaxerxes, as Nehemiah was a trusted adviser. If anything, this would only have further jeopardized Sanballat's own precarious position. Sanballat's real motive, as Nehemiah realized, was not only a last-ditch effort to scare him into committing to meet, but also that news of his threat would spread so that the Jews, fearing Persian retaliation, would falter in their work on the wall (verses 8-9).

But that was not the end of the intrigue. In verse 10, Nehemiah meets with a certain Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, probably because he was called to his house. The phrase "who was a secret informer" in the NKJV is rendered by most versions in its literal sense: "who was shut up." What exactly this means here is unclear. Some see it as a reference to a state of prophetic ecstasy. Others view it as a temporary quarantine due to ritual impurity. Others see it as a feigned hiding out at home—to make it look like he was in danger. As such, it would have been simply a manipulative attempt to compromise Nehemiah.

The message Shemaiah conveys to Nehemiah is that the governor's life is in danger and that they should go into the temple to hide. Some suggest that Shemaiah, having access to the temple, was a priest. He was evidently laying claim here to also being a prophet—that his message was a prophecy from God (compare verse 12).

Nehemiah rejects Shemaiah's counsel for two reasons. First, to run and hide would be cowardly. He was the governor and, as a leader among God's people, was supposed to set a brave and faithful example among them. Second, this would have been a sin, as Nehemiah was not a priest. While it would have been legitimate to propose taking refuge in the temple area at the altar, the Mosaic Law forbade non-priests from going into the temple building itself on threat of death (see Numbers 18:1-7). God had punished the Jewish king Uzziah with leprosy for presuming to enter the sanctuary in an attempt to offer incense (2 Chronicles 26:16-21).

In considering Shemaiah's words, Nehemiah realized that he was a false prophet since he had spoken against the law of God (see Isaiah 8:20). The governor further realized that this must have been part of the enemies' scheming. Sanballat's letter had accused Nehemiah of using false prophets. But in reality it was the other side that was now employing such methods in an effort to discredit him. Despite the prominence of Sanballat's letter, however, Tobiah is mentioned first in verse 12—probably because he was evidently friendly with a number of the priests and so had likely achieved this particular inroad with Shemaiah (compare verses 18-19; 13:7-9). In verses 18-19 of chapter 6, we also learn that Tobiah had written his own share of letters in an attempt to scare Nehemiah.

In verse 14, Nehemiah also mentioned a certain prophetess, Noadiah, and other unnamed prophets who were part of the enemy conspiracy. Exactly what role they played is unstated. Perhaps they are the ones who had directed him to meet with Shemaiah.

The exchange of numerous letters, threats of public embarrassment and conspiracy remind of modern political intrigue that employs legal maneuvers and the press to try to force a political outcome. Then, as now, human nature and politics worked hand-in-hand.

The wall was at last completed—52 days (a week shy of two months) after the reconstruction under Nehemiah commenced (verse 15). And thus the wall was built again "even in troublesome times," just as had been foretold in Daniel 9:25. It was now the 25th day of Elul, only five days prior to the Feast of Trumpets. When the Jews' enemies heard of the astounding achievement, and realized that all of their plotting had come to nothing, they were completely demoralized, seeing this as the work of Judah's God (verse 16).

“Once the city was secure, Nehemiah set about the even more important task of reorganizing the government and effecting a sorely needed spiritual and moral reformation. He first appointed doorkeepers, singers, and other Levitical personnel and designated his brother Hanani as mayor of the city [7:1-2]” (Eugene Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, p. 511). This was the same Hanani who reported to Nehemiah regarding Jerusalem’s plight in 1:1-3. “‘Hanani’ is the shortened form of ‘Hananiah’ (‘Yahweh is gracious’).... The Elephantine papyri mention a Hananiah who was the head of Jewish affairs in Jerusalem. Many scholars believe that this Hananiah can be identified with Nehemiah’s brother and assume that he succeeded Nehemiah (c. 427)” (*Expositor’s*, note on 1:2). The Hananiah of these documents could conceivably be the Hananiah that Nehemiah placed over the Jerusalem citadel (7:2) if Nehemiah’s brother had died. But Nehemiah’s brother seems the likelier person referred to.

We will see more of Nehemiah’s reformation in the next few chapters. This would be the crucial part of his work. For while walls were needed, they were not an end in themselves. Their whole purpose was to safeguard a vital interest—the people with whom God was working and the worship system He gave them. God’s plan does not center on walls and buildings. It is ever and always about people.

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