

EZRA, NEHEMIAH
and
ESTHER

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BIBLE STUDY TEXTBOOK SERIES

EZRA
and
NEHEMIAH

by
Ruben Ratzlaff

ESTHER

by
Paul T. Butler

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Table of Contents

Preface for Ezra and Nehemiah	xiii
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E Z R A

Introduction—Ezra	1	
I. The Captives Return Under Zerubbabel		
(chapters 1, 2)	9	
A. Authority is given by King Cyrus, for the captives who wish to return to Israel.....		9
1. Cyrus issues a decree (vss. 1-4)	9	
2. The people return and begin to rebuild (vss. 5-11)	12	
B. This is a list of the leaders and groups among the returnees		17
1. Their leaders (vss. 1, 2a)	17	
2. Men of the people (vss. 2b-20)	22	
3. Men of certain towns (vss. 21-35)	23	
4. Men of certain classes: Priests, Levites, Temple servants, (vss. 36-58)	25	
5. Some whose ancestral records were lost (vss. 59-63)	28	
6. Totals (vss. 64, 65)	30	
7. Number of their livestock (vss. 66, 67)	31	
8. Their offering for restoring the Temple (vss. 68, 69)	31	
9. Their location in the land (vs. 70)	32	
II. The Temple Is Rebuilt (chapters 3-6)		35
A. The altar is built, and the foundation laid		35
1. The altar and the sacrifices are restored (vss. 1-7)	36	
2. The foundation of the new Temple is laid (vss. 8-13)	41	
B. The work is interrupted by Israel's enemies		46
1. Opposition develops (vss. 1-5)	46	

EZRA, NEHEMIAH AND ESTHER

2. Israel's enemies write letters to prevent rebuilding (vss. 6-16)	50
3. Artaxerxes replies and orders the work stopped (vss. 17-22)	55
4. This brings the restoration to a halt (vss. 23, 24)	56
C. The work is resumed by the reign of Darius	59
1. The work gets under way (vss. 1-5)	59
2. A letter is sent to clarify the situation (vss. 6-17)	63
D. The Temple is completed and dedicated	71
1. The Royal Edict authorizing construction is found (vss. 1-5)	71
2. Darius consequently issues a decree directing the construction (vss. 6-12)	73
3. The work is completed and the building is dedicated (vss. 13-18)	76
4. Services are resumed, especially the Passover (vss. 19-22)	78
III. Ezra Becomes Involved In The Restoration of Israel (chapters 7-10)	82
A. Ezra leads a second band of returnees back to Israel, and gives God thanks	82
1. Who Ezra was, and what he was doing (vss. 1-10)	82
2. Authorization from King Artaxerxes (vss. 11-26)	85
3. Ezra's thanksgiving and compliance (vss. 27-28)	89
B. Lists are given of returnees, and treasures which they carried back; the treasures are delivered	92

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. The list of exiles returning with Ezra (vss. 1-14)	92
2. Addition of Levites to the company (vss. 15-20)	94
3. Leave-taking ceremonies, (vss. 21-23)	96
4. The treasures, and how they were handled (vss. 24-30)	97
5. The journey, and arrival at Jerusalem (vss. 31-36)	98
C. Ezra hears about some current sins, particularly marriage to foreigners, and he prays	102
1. Ezra is informed of the problem (vss. 1-5)	102
2. Ezra prays about it (vss. 6-15)	105
D. The community is cleansed, and a list of the offenders is given.	111
1. A decision is reached by those who heard Ezra pray (vss. 1-4)	111
2. The decision is shared by the leaders, and an assembly is ordered (vss. 5-8)	113
3. The decision is accepted by all, in the assembly (vss. 9-15)	115
4. The decision is carried out (vss. 16-19)	116
5. A list is made of those who complied (vss. 20-44)	118

NEHEMIAH

Introduction—Nehemiah	123
I. The Wall is Rebuilt, and Reforms are Instituted at Nehemiah's First Visit: chapters 1-7	126
A. Nehemiah hears of Jerusalem's helplessness	126
1. Report on Jerusalem (vss. 1-4)	126
2. Nehemiah's prayer (vss. 5-11a)	128
3. Identity of Nehemiah (vs. 11b)	130

EZRA, NEHEMIAH AND ESTHER

B. Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem	133
1. Nehemiah is given permission by Artaxerxes to make the trip (vss. 1-10)	133
2. On his arrival, he secretly inspects the city's walls (vss. 11-20)	137
C. The rebuilding of the wall, section by section, is described	142
1. Who the builders were	146
2. What part they built, and	147
3. How they built	149
D. The enemies try ridicule and rumor to block construction	152
1. Their enemies try to block them with ridicule (vss. 1-6)	152
2. They spread rumors of impending attack (vss. 7-14)	155
3. Work progresses in spite of these (vss. 15-23) . . .	157
E. Internal difficulties arise and are overcome	161
1. The problem stated (vss. 1-5)	161
2. The solution (vss. 6-13)	164
3. Nehemiah's own example (vss. 14-19)	166
F. The enemies resort to tactics of diversion, but the wall is completed	171
1. Sanballat and Geshem plot treachery through invitation to a conference (vss. 1-4)	171
2. They try again through spreading rumors of rebellion (vss. 5-9)	172
3. Tobiah tries his hand at discrediting Nehemiah (vss. 10-14)	174
4. Success is achieved in spite of some differences with Tobiah (vss. 15-19)	176
G. Nehemiah finds the list of the first exiles to return.	180

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Nehemiah makes arrangements for the continued defense and administration of the city (vss. 1-4)	180
2. He retraces the genealogies of the first returning exiles (vss. 5-73)	181
II. The Law is Read in Public, and its Ceremonies are Resumed: chapters 8-10	188
A. The Law is read, and the Feast of Booths is kept	188
1. Ezra instructs the people in the Law (vss. 1-8)	188
2. The people celebrate with joy and feasting (vss. 9-12)	192
3. The Feast of Booths is rediscovered (vss. 13-18)	194
B. The Levites lead in a psalm of confession	198
1. Introduction: The occasion on which the prayer was offered is described (vss. 1-5a)	198
2. God is praised for his power in creation (vss. 5b-6)	200
3. His goodness to Abraham (vss. 7-8)	201
4. His hand in the Exodus (vss. 9-15)	202
5. Israel's rebellion in the Wilderness (vss. 16-21)	204
6. God's compassion takes them into Canaan (vss. 22-25)	206
7. Disobedience, punishment, and repentance characterize the period of judges and kings (vss. 26-31)	207
8. Prayer for present mercy (vss. 32-38)	209
C. The people make vows of faithfulness.	213
1. A list is given of the signatures on the document (vss. 1-27)	213
2. The content of the document is a vow of purity from the heathen (vss. 28-31)	215
3. The people pledge additionally to support the Temple (vss. 32, 33)	217

EZRA, NEHEMIAH AND ESTHER

4. They also arrange support for the Levites, who in turn are to support the priests (vss. 34-39)	218
III. Persons Bound by Vows are Listed, and Reforms on Nehemiah's second Visit are Described:	
chapters 11-13	222
A. The genealogies of residents of Jerusalem and names of other cities are listed	222
1. An effort is made to increase Jerusalem's population (vss. 1-2)	222
2. People of Israel (vss. 3-9)	223
3. Priestly leaders (vss. 10-14)	224
4. Levites (vss. 15-19)	225
5. Other groups (vss. 20-24)	226
6. Towns occupied in Judah and Benjamin (vss. 25-36)	227
B. The genealogies of priests and Levites are given, and the wall is dedicated.	231
1. Priests and Levites who came up with Zerub- babel (vss. 1-9)	231
2. Names of high priests, from the Return from Captivity to the end of Nehemiah's time (vss. 10, 11)	232
3. Priests' families at the time of Joiakim (vss. 12-21)	232
4. Levites, in the time of Joiakim (vss. 22-26)	233
5. Levites assembled for dedication of the wall (vss. 27-30)	234
6. Processional and dedication ceremonies (vss. 31-43)	236
7. Concern about support of the Levites (vss. 44-47)	238

TABLE OF CONTENTS

C. Foreigners are expelled and religious reforms are instituted to purify the nation	241
1. Foreigners are expelled (vss. 1-3)	241
2. Tobiah is driven out (vss. 4-9),	242
3. Support for the Levites is renewed (vss. 10-14) . .	244
4. Labor and merchandising is forbidden on the Sabbath (vss. 15-22)	245
5. Nehemiah deals with the problem of mixed marriages (vss. 23-29)	247
6. Nehemiah summarizes his reforms (vss. 30, 31) .	249
Word Study Index	254
Bibliography	255

ESTHER

Dedication	259
Introduction	261
I. Pageant of Xerxes, 1:1-22	272
A. Display, 1:1-8.	272
B. Defiance, 1:9-12	276
C. Decree, 1:13-22	278
II. Promotion of Esther, 2:1-23	285
A. Search for a Queen, 2:1-4	285
B. Solitude of Mordecai, 2:5-11	288
C. Season of Preparation, 2:12-14	294
D. Selection of Esther, 2:15-18	297
III. Perverseness of Haman, Chapter 3	307
A. Scorn of Mordecai, 3:1-6	307
B. Subterfuge of Haman, 3:7-11	310
C. Sentence of Xerxes, 3:12-15	315
IV. Pluck of Esther, Chapter 4	320
A. Cry, 4:1-3	320

EZRA, NEHEMIAH AND ESTHER

B. Crisis, 4:4-9	322
C. Contingency, 4:10-12	324
D. Courage, 4:13-17	326
V. The Plan of Esther, 5:1-8	332
A. Coquetry, 5:1-4	332
B. Curiosity, 5:5-8	335
VI. The Petulance of Haman, 5:9-14	338
A. Depression, 5:9-13	338
B. Depravity, 5:14	340
VII. Panic of Haman, 6:1-14	343
A. Appreciation, 6:1-5	343
B. Arrogance, 6:6-9	345
C. Abasement, 6:10-14	348
VIII. Plea of Esther, 7:1-10	352
A. Massacre Disclosed, 7:1-6	352
B. Minister Doomed, 7:7-10	355
IX. Proclamation of Xerxes, 8:1-17	360
A. Mordecai's Reward, 8:1-2	360
B. Monarch's Reparation, 8:3-8	361
C. Massacre Resisted, 8:9-14	364
D. Multitudes Rejoice, 8:15-17	368
X. Preservation of the Jews, 9:1-19	372
A. Power, 9:1-5	372
B. Progress, 9:6-15	374
C. Peace, 9:16-19	378
XI. Purim Instituted, 9:20-32	381
A. Practiced, 9:20-22	381
B. Perpetuated, 9:23-28	382
C. Posted, 9:29-32	385
XII. Postscript, 10:1-3	388

Preface for Ezra and Nehemiah

This book is prepared with the interested Bible School teacher, church leader, Bible College student, or minister especially in mind. Its purpose is to make the content of Ezra and Nehemiah more practically useful to the church of today, and the people and events of Ezra-Nehemiah more understandable and contemporary to our culture.

As to the format, the questions at the beginning of each chapter are of a discussion nature; read them, then look for answers in the Bible text, the comments, or in your own judgment. There may not be hard and fast answers for every one of them. The outline will seek to call attention to the major topic or topics of the chapter, and to break each chapter down into small enough units to observe the development of ideas. The text itself is from the New American Standard Bible; we make no effort to evaluate which is the best translation available today, but we have observed that the NASB is widely used among the readers for which this book is designed. Some use of the Hebrew text is made in the preparation of the comments, but the only use of the Hebrew will be in English transliteration in the Word Studies when it is deemed helpful to the reader. It is hoped that the Word Studies may spark an idea for development in teaching or exposition, or may clarify some symbol in the text itself; they are not all at the same stage of development. The summary hopefully will put each chapter into focus so that its whole message can be seen in one overview. The questions at the end of the chapters are of a factual nature, to test recall.

This book is being written from a position of faith. It is the author's conviction that the history described in the Bible text was a part of the whole fabric of events and visitations by which God was revealing Himself and preparing a people for the coming of His Son.

Questions relating to the authorship of this material, insofar as they seek to go beyond what is made known in the text, have their importance (an educated person will have his curiosities), but are second to the content of the message itself. We have found that it is impossible, in the first place, to speak with certainty beyond what His Spirit has chosen to reveal; we have,

EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

secondly, found little spiritual or practical nourishment in these questions and suspect that the Spirit made a wise choice of what to include and what not to include.

It is hoped that this book will make a contribution to our total knowledge of Bible truth and of God's ways of working with His children, that our lives might be improved by seeing more of the details of our possible fellowship with and service for Him.

Ezra

INTRODUCTION

THE MAN

Ezra is a man of no small stature among the heroes of the Old Testament. His name itself means "Help." We may reflect on the number of ways in which he "helped" his people.

He was first of all a priest who could trace his descent from Aaron (Ezra 7:1-5); and every priest was a mediator between man and God, a messiah, God's messenger to His people.

One tradition is that he assembled the books of the Old Testament which were written before his time, to comprise the early canon of Hebrew Scripture. It is likely also that he made the transition from one alphabet (as on the Moabite Stone) to another (more similar to modern-day Hebrew), in the writing of the Sacred Text, and that he made certain modifications particularly in the style of the language to bring it up to date. By way of comparison, English poetry from 1,000 years ago is hardly intelligible to us; yet the O.T. was written over an equal span, and the language is essentially the same. Perhaps we have Ezra to thank for this. If he were a man inspired as God's spokesman, as a priest would be in his dispensation, and as his book further demonstrates, then this would not be objectionable; he was equally as guided by God as Moses or David had been.

Another tradition is that he helped organize the early Sanhedrin, the "Seventy" who governed Israel even as late as Jesus' time. He may have helped with the development of the Synagogue, whose existence is never hinted at in the O.T., and whose presence is so conspicuous in the New.

[We observe in passing that the pattern for public worship in the O.T. was not weekly worship on the Sabbath, but assembly for feasts three times yearly (later four, with the addition of Purim in Esther's time). We read our system back into their times if we suppose the Sabbath was a day of assembly for worship; rather it was a time for rest (Shabbath) and devotions in their private dwellings (Lev. 23:3). Those who insist that our worship today must be on the Sabbath, i.e., Saturday, to

EZRA

conform to the commands in the O.T. have apparently missed this point. In fact, the people were forbidden to make a journey of any significant length (Ex. 16:29, especially in the New Catholic Edition: "On the seventh day everyone is to stay home and no one is to go out"), which predetermined that the synagogue must always be small. The Sabbath meetings arose, then, not from any recorded command of God, but possibly from the needs which the people sensed during the Captivity to continue to teach their children the Law even in an unfriendly environment; Ezra would most likely have been involved in that.]

Ezra's name is also linked by tradition to the beginnings of the Pharisees, particularly the group of them called "Scribes," whose duty it was to copy and to teach the Scriptures. Before we recall what the N.T. says of these groups, let us note that they were the "Back to the Bible Conservatives" of their day, separating themselves (literal meaning of Parash: "Pharisee") from the world to obey God and His Law. These were vital institutions which should not have been allowed to degenerate, but which served an essential function originally.

For an accurate portrait of Ezra's devotion and purpose, see Ezra 7:10; and for his method of speaking, Neh. 8:1-3.

THE BOOK

The book of Ezra (and Nehemiah and Esther) is not included in the part of the Hebrew Bible which includes Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, which we label "History." It rather follows Daniel in the section including Job, Psalms, and Proverbs, which they called "Writings." Why was Ezra not listed with the "Historical" books in the Hebrew arrangement of the Bible?

Jesus makes reference to the threefold structure of the Old Covenant in Luke 24:44: Law, Prophets, and (Writings whose most prominent book was) Psalms. The Prophets would be divided into Early (Joshua, Judges, I and II Samuel, I and II Kings) and Latter. The Latter would be further divided into Major (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel) and Minor (Hosea to Malachi,

INTRODUCTION

“The Twelve”). Note that there is no division, hence no essential difference, between history and prophecy; if God has spoken, it is equally certain whether it is past or future. The Hebrew language had no clear way of distinguishing between past and future. This is not to detract from its history, but to show the positive nature of its prophecy.

Now, Joshua is remembered as a prophet: he was a successor to Moses, who was a prophet (Deut. 18:15ff.). The last of the Judges, Samuel, also doubles as a prophet (I Sam. 3:20). Hence his two books would fit the category of prophetic writings, even without the assistance of Nathan and Gad. Since Samuel was also a judge (I Sam. 7:15), perhaps for consistency the other judges are included in the same section. Since I and II Kings deal particularly with Elijah and Elisha, they also fit this mold, especially if the tradition is true that Jeremiah was the author.

But Ezra is not a prophet. He is, in fact, a prominent priest. He is most notable for his exercise of civil authority (Ezra 7:6, 21, 25); note the comparison with Daniel. Therefore, Ezra's book is not in the section identified with prophets, but rather with kings or rulers: David, Solomon, Esther, Nehemiah, Daniel, and a desert chieftan named Job.

This is not to suggest that the material in the book of Ezra (or in any of the other books among the Writings) is unhistorical. There is history in the section called “Law,” yet it is separated from the books called “History.” Ezra's classification with the Writings is only an indication of the rank of the man who was its subject, or its author, or both.

We are also reminded that the inspiration of the Scriptures does not apply necessarily to the arrangement of the books; men have arranged them differently at different times for various reasons.

AUTHORSHIP

No great purpose would be served by taking our present readers through the multiplied theories held by all ranks of believers or disbelievers in the Scriptures, relative to the authorship

EZRA

of Ezra. The "I" passages particularly in chapter seven sufficiently identify Ezra with the writing of at least part of the book. Most likely, the book of Ezra is a parallel to the book of Acts, whose author also is a participant in the latter part of the book as indicated by his use of the first person, and who writes the first part also in order to make the latter part of the account understandable and to fit into a sequence of developing events.

Some of the book (4:8—6:18) is in Aramaic, the official language of the Persians; but this poses no problems, as Ezra is described as being equally at home in both cultures, and this section deals especially with Persian court affairs and records, which would normally be in Aramaic.

TIME

The book traces events beginning in 536 B.C., when Cyrus of Persia instituted procedures for Israel's return from Captivity under the Babylonians, whom Cyrus had defeated in 538. Ezra is introduced in the narrative at chapter 7:1. According to E.J. Young,¹ this sets the date of the writing of the book during the reign of Artaxerxes I (465-424 B.C.). The events in the book fit into two time-slots: the first, identified with Israel's return from Captivity, and the second following a gap of more than seventy years. The returned captives, small in number and still disheartened, are having a struggle, and Ezra accompanies another band of the returnees (7:7) to help bring encouragement and to assist in re-establishing the institutions of the Law of Moses.

CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL SCENE

One of the oddities of the book of Ezra, shared with the other equally late books in the O.T., is that mention is made of the return of a "Son of David," namely Zerubbabel, preserving the

¹ E.J. Young, *An Introduction to the O.T.*, p. 406.

INTRODUCTION

continuity of the kingly line even through the Captivity. (Zerubbabel, however, bears only the rank of Governor, since the nation is still under Persian authority, hence subject to the king of Persia.)

Nevertheless, Zerubbabel quickly vanishes from view, and no further descendant of his is mentioned as Israel's ruler till Jesus stands in this line (Matt. 1:12, 16). What has happened; and why the silence? It had been predicted that the tribe of Judah should continue to provide the ruler for Israel "until Shiloh come" (Gen. 49:10):

There are two obvious explanations for this oddity.

1) The prophecy cannot be pressed to mean that a king from the tribe of Judah must always, without interruption, be on Israel's throne. It was centuries (perhaps as many as eight) after the prophecy before Israel had a king at all. Then, the very first one, Saul, was of the tribe of Benjamin rather than Judah (I Sam. 10:20f.). It is enough that the line was preserved, that one of the tribe of Judah and its line of kings (Jesus) might one day sit on its everlasting throne.

2) The Word of God specifically makes provision for this interruption, and for the tribe of Levi to assume the role of leadership. Zech. 3:5-7 states that the priests beginning with Jeshua would rule the nation as long as they walked in God's ways. History demonstrates that during the era between the Old and New Testament, the priesthood returned to such prominence that the O.T. contains the writings of no prophets during this period of our centuries; the channel of God's communication through the priests was regarded, then, as adequate. History also recounts the rule over Israel by the Maccabees, of the tribe of Levi and of the priestly line, for a century during this intertestamental period. It is a reminder that all prophecy may be conditioned on man's reaction and co-operation (Jer. 18:7-10), and that God, being a Person, has the ability to decide on different courses of action as circumstances vary, in order to accomplish His purposes. God stated that He had chosen the priests as rulers of the nation, and that is what happened.

If we go back through Israel's apostasy to the time of Eli and

Samuel (I Sam. 2 and 8), we see the responsibility of being God's spokesmen (Messiah, "Anointed") moving from the priesthood because of their shortcomings, to lodge briefly with a prophet and then to be carried on at length by kings. Subsequently the responsibility returns to the prophets, from Elijah to Malachi. Now, when apostasy has extracted its price and the nation has been healed, it is fitting that leadership returns to the order of priests; it is God's pride that His people will one day be known as the whole world's priests (Isa. 61:6; cf. 66:21). Ezra was of this line.²

In due course of time the kingship reverts to the line of Judah, and Jesus becomes Messiah (King) of Israel, and of all God's Creation. Appropriately enough, He also becomes the high priest of the people (Heb. 2:17) though He is not of the priestly tribe (Heb. 7:13-15). So in one era God gives the rulership of Israel to men of Levi in place of Judah; and in another, He gives the duties of the priesthood to One Who came from Judah, in place of Levi.

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK OF EZRA

The contents of the book of Ezra may be summarized under the following headings, chapter by chapter:

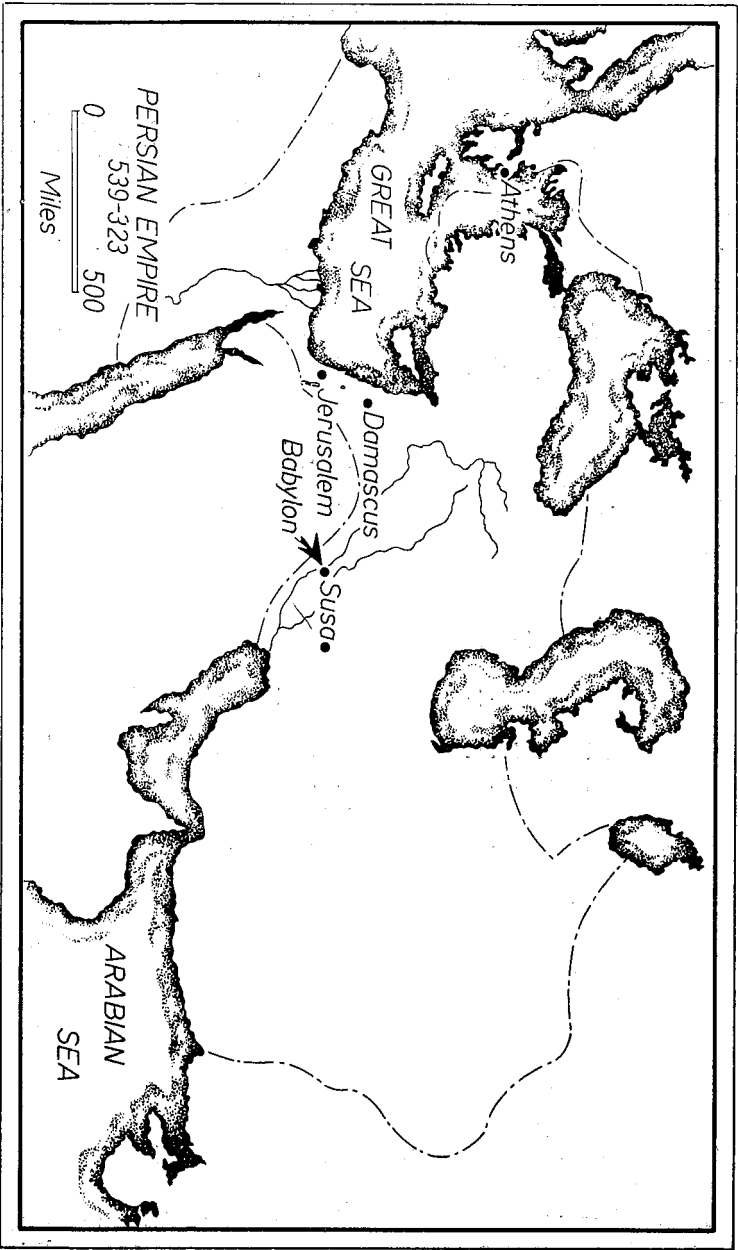
- I. The Captives Return Under Zerubbabel (chapters 1, 2)
 - Ch. 1 Authority is given by King Cyrus, and the captives who wish are allowed to return to Israel.
 - Ch. 2 This is a list of the leaders and groups among the returnees.
- II. The Temple Is Rebuilt (chapters 3 - 6)
 - Ch. 3 The altar is built, and the foundation laid.
 - Ch. 4 The work is interrupted by Israel's enemies.
 - Ch. 5 The work is resumed in the reign of Darius.
 - Ch. 6 The Temple is completed and dedicated.

2. Note in the N.T. the position of the priests as rulers: John 18:12-14; Acts 22:30—23:5.

INTRODUCTION

III. Ezra Becomes Involved In The Restoration of Israel (chapters 7 - 10)

- Ch. 7 Ezra leads a second band of returnees back to Israel, and gives God thanks.
- Ch. 8 Lists are given of returnees, and treasures which they carried back; the treasures are delivered.
- Ch. 9 Ezra hears about some current sins, particularly marriage to foreigners, and he prays.
- Ch. 10 The community is cleansed, and a list of the offenders is given.



Chapter One

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

See if you can find answers to these questions, or figure them out for yourself, as you read the first chapter of this book, and the first chapter of Ezra in your Bible.

1. How did it come about that a completely defeated people were freed to return to their homeland and to rebuild?
2. What types, and what percentage, of the people do you think actually took advantage of the opportunity to return?
3. What might have motivated Cyrus to this generosity?
4. What help did the returnees get from their kinsmen who chose to remain where they were?

OUTLINE

- I. The Captives Return Under Zerubbabel (1:1—2:70)
 - A. Authority is given by King Cyrus, and the captives who wish to return to Israel.
 1. Cyrus issues a decree (vss. 1-4).
 2. The people return and begin to rebuild (vss. 5-11).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- I. The Captives Return Under Zerubbabel (1:1—2:70)
 - A. Authority is given by King Cyrus, and the captives who wish to return to Israel.
 1. Cyrus issues a decree.

TEXT, 1:1-4

- 1 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying,
- 2 "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.
- 3 'Whoever there is among you of all His people, may his God be with him! Let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah,

and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel; He is the God who is in Jerusalem.

- 4 'And every survivor, at whatever place he may live, let the men of that place support him with silver and gold, with goods and cattle, together with a freewill offering for the house of God which is in Jerusalem.' "

COMMENT

Verse 1. Note the similarity of Ezra 1:1, 2 to II Chron. 36:22-23. This gives support to the idea that both of these books have the same author, i.e., Ezra. The word "now" is the word usually translated "and," to indicate continuation of a narrative; however, several of the O.T. books (including Ruth and Joshua) begin with this same word, so it cannot be concluded with finality that this is but the continuation of a more lengthy work. It may be only the author's device to indicate at the beginning that his record presumes a set of events previous to it, and that he is consciously seeking to preserve this sense of continuity of events whose record was begun by someone else. The Hebrew notion of time is involved here; while the Greeks thought of time as moving in repetitive, indecisive circles, the Hebrews thought of it as a progression of events added together, moving in a line toward an eventual goal, or purpose, or final outcome. This may explain the frequency with which the word "and" or "now" is used throughout the O.T.

"The first year of Cyrus" indicates the year following his conquest of the Babylonians, therefore his first year of rulership over the total Persian kingdom including Israel. From Israel's point of view, then, it was his first year. This event, of the making of the decree that follows, is usually dated in 536 B.C.: the first full year of Cyrus' rule over Babylon and Israel.

"The word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah" refers to Jer. 25:11, 12; and especially Jer. 29:10, predicting that the people of Judah would remain in captivity 70 years. But if the people went into bondage in 586 B.C., this adds up to only 50 years. We recall, however, that Jerusalem suffered three invasions: in 606, when Daniel and his three friends were among

the captives taken; in 597, involving Ezékiel; and finally in 586 when the remainder of the city was destroyed and the bulk of the captives taken. In this we see the generosity of God: He obviously gave them full credit toward the 70 years from the time the first persons were captured: thus, 606 to 536.

The real basis for Cyrus' proclamation is that God moved him to do it. God's power may work through persons of any rank or nationality or religion; God may be responsible for many good impulses even among pagan people throughout history.

Josephus¹ credits Isaiah's "prophecy from 140 years before the temple was demolished" (Isa. 44:28) in which Cyrus is mentioned by name, with influencing the surprised and grateful Cyrus to release the Jews to return to their homeland.

The decree was set forth both orally and in writing; what we read at this point in Ezra may have been the oral version which the Jewish communities heard in their own language.

Verse 2. Cyrus himself gives credit to Israel's God as being supreme ("of heaven") and as ordering his release of these prisoners. Two observations follow: 1) While Cyrus was not a convert to Judaism nor a worshiper of their God, yet he made such statements as a regular policy; he makes similar reference to the gods of the Babylonians,² for example. This quotation from Cyrus in Ezra is known to be in harmony with his character, as seen in his own writings. 2) It was also a regular policy of Cyrus to liberate prisoners taken by the nations which he conquered; this is verified by contemporary documents, including the Inscription of Cyrus. After listing nine or ten lands, Cyrus speaks of "the cities (beyond) the Tigris, whose sites have been founded of old—the gods who dwelt in them I returned to their places, and caused them to settle in their eternal shrines. All their people I assembled and returned them to their dwellings. . . . May all the gods, whom I have returned to their cities, pray before Marduk and Nabu for the prolonging of my days, may they speak a kind word for me. . . ." (Evidently he

1. Josephus, *Antiquities of The Jews*, Book XI, chap. 1.

2. G. E. Wright, *Biblical Archaeology* (Hardback edition), p. 200.

3. G. A. Barton, *Archaeology and The Bible*, p. 485.

wanted as many friends as possible in supernatural circles, and sought to ingratiate himself to all the gods of whom he had heard, to be entirely safe!)

So again Cyrus' own records, recently excavated, confirm the description of his character and actions as they are described in the Bible.

Verse 3 contains the decree giving permission for the Israelites to return and rebuild their Temple at Jerusalem. The language reflects Cyrus' polytheism, implying his belief that there is one god who presides in Jerusalem, and other gods in other lands.

Verse 4 encourages all who remain (people of Judah and Israel who remained in the land of their captivity) to contribute to the returnees for two purposes: to finance their journey, and to make offerings to the Temple; thus having a share in these two projects.

2. The people return and begin to rebuild.

TEXT, 1:5-11

- 5 Then the heads of fathers' households of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and the Levites arose, even everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go and rebuild the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.
- 6 And all those about them encouraged them with articles of silver, with gold, with goods, with cattle, and with valuables, aside from all that was given as a freewill offering.
- 7 Also King Cyrus brought out the articles of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and put in the house of his gods;
- 8 and Cyrus, king of Persia, had them brought out by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and he counted them out to Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah.
- 9 Now this was their number: 30 gold dishes, 1,000 silver dishes, 29 duplicates;
- 10 30 gold bowls, 410 silver bowls of a second kind, and 1,000 other articles.

11 All the articles of gold and silver numbered 5,400. Sheshbazzar brought them all up with the exiles who went up from Babylon to Jerusalem.

COMMENT

Beginning with *verse 5*, these projects are set in motion. From descriptions of their conditions in captivity given prophetically by Jeremiah (29:4-7) and historically in Jewish documents, it can be concluded that they had not fared so badly in Babylon; they were able to own their own homes, operate their own businesses, continue their previous religious practices at least in a limited way, educate their own children, and live quite normal lives. Many of them would prefer to continue in their present condition rather than risk an uncertain future.

Those who chose to return would be largely motivated by religious reasons. Isaiah and others had foreseen the return of a "purified remnant"; in actual fact, it would have been predominantly the most Godly who returned, though not altogether. Health or age may have prevented the return of many equally religious persons.

As noted in *verse 5*, the returnees were chiefly from Judah and Benjamin, tribes which had been closest to the Temple: plus a disproportionate number of Levites and especially priests, who had been most intimately identified with Israel's religious affairs.

In *verse 6*, the gifts to the travelers are again put into two categories: (1) those which would assist in financing the journey, and (2) those which are offered to God, possibly to be used in sacrifice and in reconstruction of the Temple. It is appropriate that free-will offerings were given for the Temple. Its early predecessor, the Tabernacle, had been built with free-will offerings exclusively (Ex. 35:22).

The list of vessels taken from the Temple by the Babylonians and now restored to Israel to be used once more in the renewed Temple (*vss. 7, 9-11*) is a reminder of the splendor of the Temple in previous times. These had been preserved by the captors and not melted down for other uses; the ancients

frequently demonstrated a fear of misusing things which had been dedicated for sacred uses, and regarded them as "unclean" for common or profane use. If the number of vessels seems excessive, we need to remember that (1) they were for the use of the entire community of priests, and (2) temples in ancient times were often used as the "government banks"; that is, temples were expected to be the repositories for the wealth of the state.

The "Sheshbazzar" of *verses 8, 11* is not clearly identified; he is mentioned in the Bible by Ezra only. Matthew Henry⁴ regarded this as another name for Zerubbabel. G. E. Wright⁵ takes it as a variant spelling of "Shenassar," mentioned as one of Jehoiachin's sons in I Chron. 3:17-18, hence one of the royal family. The *Living Bible* would allow the interpretation that he was merely a leader of the returning exiles. Any of these three views would be an honest possibility; the first would seem to be the most likely. This will be discussed more fully when it comes up again at Ezra 5:16.

In *verse 9*, two things are obscure. The word "dishes" ("chargers" in the KJV) and the word "duplicates" ("knives" in the KJV) occur only here in the O.T. Other ancient translations (Septuagint, Syriac, Talmud, and Vulgate) disagree on the translations of these terms. It is difficult, then, to know exactly what the articles were which had these names in Ezra's day.

The word for "duplicates," for example, is *machalaph*; the word for "knife" used in other places is *maakeleth*; one might suspect that the similarity of sound of the two words, though they are completely different, may have influenced the earlier translation.

While this word never occurs as a noun elsewhere in the O.T., the verb form (*chalaph*) does. Its meaning is to slip or glide; hence to glide along, or pass through or pierce; therefore to change, or exchange. A slaughter-knife may be suggested because it glides or passes through the flesh. A censor may be

4. Matthew Henry's *Commentary On The Whole Bible*, in loc.

5. G. E. Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

indicated because it is pierced, to exude smoke or incense. Or a duplicate of another piece may be indicated by the idea of changing, or exchanging. None of these explanations is totally convincing, so it is impossible to know with certainty what the item was. While this explanation will not brush away the obscurity or relieve our curiosity, it will perhaps indicate why the obscurity is there. Fortunately it is a small detail that really doesn't affect the story.

Verse 11 contains another obscurity. The total number of articles is given as 5400; when we add the list in the previous two verses, it comes to but 2499. One suggestion is that one of the figures has become corrupted in transmission. This is the position taken by the translators of the Revised Standard Version; therefore they substitute figures taken from I Esdras 2:12, 13,⁶ where the list and the total agree.

A simpler solution is that Ezra only named major articles in the previous list, but included many others in the final total. We will see that he does the same kind of thing in the next chapter with a list of names and numbers, and then a grand total.

WORD STUDIES

Some of the names involved have interesting meanings.

EZRA: the name comes from a verb meaning to surround or enclose: to protect, as with a wall; hence he was a "help," or "aid." The word, in feminine form, is used of woman as man's "helper" in Gen. 2:18. It also occurs in the proper name, Ebenezer ("stone of help") in I Sam. 7:12, where Samuel raises a monument to memorialize God's having helped them against the Philistine armies.

PERSIA: one possibility as the base meaning is to separate, or spread out (the feet): hence, "horseman." This is how they appeared to their contemporaries. The same word is used in Daniel 5:25 ("Upharsin") and 5:26 ("Peres"), and is translated, "divided."

6. I, II Esdras in the *Anchor Bible*, or in the *New English Bible with Apocrypha*.

CYRUS' name possibly is the Persian word for the sun. The name contains the same consonants as the Greek word "Lord" (kyrios). (The Hebrew was written without vowels at this time.) Cyrus is the one foreigner referred to as a "Messiah" in the O.T. (Isa. 45:1).

SUMMARY

During the first full year that Israel was under the rulership of Cyrus, the Persian king, Cyrus, was led by God to publish a decree allowing exiles from Judah (also called Israel) to return to their homeland and rebuild their Temple. This was a fulfillment of prophecies by Jeremiah that the nation would survive the captivity and be restored. Those who did not choose to return should contribute to bear the expenses of those who did, and to finance offerings and repairs to the Temple. A number of exiles, chiefly of Judah, Benjamin, and Levi (including priests) subsequently set out, bringing with them also a quantity (some five and a half thousand) of valuable items from the first Temple, thanks to Cyrus' generosity.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who, and what kind of person, was Cyrus?
2. Who was Sheshbazzar?
3. What nation freed the Jewish captives?
4. What other nation or nations were involved?

Chapter Two

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Why do you suppose this list of names and numbers was regarded as important enough to be included in the Bible?
2. Does this list give you any mental image of the kinds of people that made the trip?
3. Do you suppose they all remained, after they arrived?
4. What can you figure out about their financial status?
5. How does their number compare with those who came originally from Egypt into the Promised Land under Moses and Joshua?

OUTLINE

- B. This is a list of the leaders and groups among the returnees.
 1. Their leaders (vss. 1, 2a).
 2. Men of the people (vss. 2b-20).
 3. Men of certain towns (vss. 21-35).
 4. Men of certain classes: Priests, Levites, Temple servants (vss. 36-58).
 5. Some whose ancestral records were lost (vss. 59-63).
 6. Totals (vss. 64, 65).
 7. Number of their livestock (vss. 66, 67).
 8. Their offering for restoring the Temple (vss. 68, 69).
 9. Their location in the land (vs. 70).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

B. This is a list of the leaders and groups among the returnees

1. The introduction of the list gives the names of their leaders.

TEXT, 2:1-2a

- 1 Now these are the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of the exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king

of Babylon had carried away to Babylon, and returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his city.

2a These came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, and Baanah.

COMMENT

Verse 1 "Now, these are the people," refers to the total list, to verse 63. The phrase, "people of the province," reminds us that the returnees were not free, nor were they returning to a free land. The Judah to which they returned was still a province of Persia, and the people still subjects of the Persian king. Judah was one subdivision of the Fifth Persian Satrapy.¹

The significance of this migration contrasted sharply with the Israelites' original coming into the land of Egypt, from slavery to freedom. "The first exodus witnessed the birth of a nation: the second saw only a migration within the boundaries of an empire, sanctioned by the ruler because it did not include the deliverance of the subject people from servitude."²

Yet the Prophets had emphasized it as something that would surpass even their coming up out of bondage in Egypt (Isa. 43:18-21, for example)! But it is still a remarkable story; how many other examples can be given of a people so completely subjugated, who became a significant nation again?

No account is given of the people who had been left in the land, and who may or may not have been on hand to greet those now returning. The ones who had come through the experience of the Captivity preferred to ignore those who had remained in Judah, and to treat them as inferiors.

Their return "to Jerusalem, and Judah, each to his city," would indicate that Jerusalem was the end of the expedition: the first center at which they arrived, and which they restored to habitable condition.

The phrase, "each to his own city," need not be taken absolutely literally. It may indicate the pattern which they followed

1. See *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 576.

2. W. F. Adeney, *Expositor's Bible*: "Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther," p. 37.

next, of proceeding as far as possible to restore and settle in many of the individual towns of their ancestry. Or it may indicate that they had been assigned to repopulate certain areas before they left Babylon.

Many of the ancient settlements were not reoccupied at this time, judging from archaeological remains. Even if every returnee actually sought out his ancestral town and settled there, it would be unlikely that every ancient town would have enough representatives among the returnees to receive a significant settlement. They were a pitifully small number compared with the population when the land had been conquered and its people carried off by Nebuchadnezzar.

Verse 2. Here we plunge into a long list of names and statistics. We are tempted to ask, "Why are such lists frequently included in the Bible? Didn't the authors realize how boring these tend to become? This doesn't make for easy reading, or especially rewarding either, from the standpoint of Spiritual enrichment."

Three things could be cited to justify this list, and all such lists in general, in the Bible.

1) Names and events are a part of the fabric of history, and their inclusion is a reminder that the events were historical: that one generation at least could have verified or questioned their authenticity. Judaism and Christianity share the distinction of being historical religions; there is a finality and decisiveness to historical events. Books of pretended history may also contain such lists, but they would have little value if the books did not exist during or shortly after the lifetime of the persons involved in the making of the events and statistics which they record.

2) Archaeologists, philologists, and other technicians in the study of history find these to be amazingly informative; the fact, for example, that few of the names resemble those from the earlier parts of the Bible may indicate the completeness of the break with the past which the Hebrew people underwent in the Captivity. The philologist will note that many of the names actually contain foreign words; this speaks eloquently of the foreign surroundings in which the previous generation

had grown up. Many of the names are more Babylonian than Hebrew.³

3) If your name and the names of your intimate friends or relatives were on this list, you would find it quite interesting. We tend to minimize the importance of church rolls, but the Holy Spirit of God may value them quite highly. Judging from these Biblical examples, He obviously feels that such memorials have their place, possibly to teach respect for the significant makers of history in the past, and to remind us of His concern for the individual.

Having noted this, however, we will not call further attention to most of the names, but will only point out some patterns that occur.

Verse 2. These are the names of their leaders. The omission of two names may be as significant as the eleven which are included. First, we had heard of Sheshbazzar (1:8); though he was referred to previously as the prince of Judah to whom the holy articles were committed by the Persian treasury, his name is not included here. Has he died in the interim? Or is he simply called by another name, i.e., Zerubbabel? We will hear Sheshbazzar mentioned again in Ezra 5:16; his omission in the verse before us now strengthens the likelihood that the one person was known by either name.

Secondly, an almost identical list of names appears in Neh. 7:7. One difference is that Nehemiah includes a twelfth character, Nahamani. Why is he omitted here? The verse before us ends with a reference to "the people of Israel" (not merely Judah). Twelve names, reminders of the twelve original tribes, would be so appropriate here. Was this one man's name dropped because of some action which he took later on? Then what was the thing which he did, which caused Ezra to drop his name? Did he fail to complete the trip, or forsake the returnees soon after the return to Babylon? Or are we being reminded that it is an incomplete list, and there may be many reasons why some individuals are not mentioned?

3. A detailed treatment of this list, with the foreign components of some of the names, is available in Keil and Delitzsch's *Commentary on The Old Testament*, on this chapter of Ezra.

The first explanation for the omission that would come to mind is a copyist's error; at some time in antiquity when all copies were produced by hand, someone left out this name inadvertently. Of course this is a possibility; almost no one would say all these copyists were inspired against error; except that we feel this explanation is made use of much too often, where no evidence for it exists, either to avoid some difficulty in the text or to get rid of something that doesn't fit the commentator's theories. Other explanations, where they can reasonably be made, are certainly preferable.

The most natural explanation, or guess, is that he died or was incapacitated before completing his full round of duties.

Whatever the reason, he was one of the leaders and Nehemiah gives us adequate justification for including him. An omission of a name is not necessarily an error or discrepancy; such omissions occur even in genealogical lists.⁴ It apparently was not regarded as important to include every detail in every instance.

Further comment on the significance of the twelve names to the twelve tribes of Israel, and on the difference in these names in Ezra and Nehemiah will be reserved till we arrive at Nehemiah seven. For the present, each difference can be accounted for as a normal variation in spelling.

Another question that arises about verse two is its punctuation, and therefore the relationship between these names. The King James Version (KJV) has a semicolon after Zerubbabel, thus indicating his primacy in leadership. Many of the more recent translations have a comma, suggesting the equal share which all of this group had in leadership, though Zerubbabel's name still heads the list. It is a subtle distinction, but it does say something. (The Hebrew text can be translated either way, with equal accuracy.)

For example, is this a list of contemporaries, or does it include leaders of later expeditions? Some note the names of Nehemiah and Mordecai, which would fit a later period. Also,

4. Amaziah's name is omitted by Matthew in the genealogy of Jesus; cf. Matt. 1:8, II Chron. 25:25; 26:23.

Ezra's name may be hidden in a longer form, Seraiah; and Bigvai is the name of a governor of Judah under Darius II.⁵ However, it is more likely that the persons in verse two are other men of the same name, and not the persons better known to us from later times. The flow of the narrative itself, eventuating in the observance of a religious festival in Ezra 3:1ff., suggests that we have here a description of one historic event, at one point in time, and that these were the leaders who shared in that one event.

2. The list really begins with "laymen," simply
"men of the people of Israel."

TEXT, 2:2b-20

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

5. *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 577.

19 the sons of Hashum, 223;

20 the sons of Gibbar, 95;

COMMENT

Just one comment on this section: the term, "sons of," could also be translated "descendants of." Emphasis here, as usual in the O.T., is on the social unit, the family, rather than the individual.

3. Next it includes people identified mainly by their towns.

TEXT, 2:21-35

21 the men of Bethlehem, 123;

22 the men of Netophah, 56;

23 the men of Anathoth, 128;

24 the sons of Azmaveth, 42;

25 the sons of Kiriath-arim, Chephirah, and Beeroth, 743;

26 the sons of Ramah and Geba, 621;

27 the men of Michmas, 122;

28 the men of Bethel and Ai, 223;

29 the sons of Nebo, 52;

30 the sons of Magbish, 156;

31 the sons of the other Elam, 1,254;

32 the sons of Harim, 320;

33 the sons of Lod, Hadid, and Ono, 725;

34 the men of Jericho, 345;

35 the sons of Senaah, 3,630.

COMMENT

Note that the phrases, "the men of," and "the sons of," are used interchangeably. The proper names are all, or nearly all, the names of communities, though Elam in verse 31 presents a puzzle. The same name, with the same number of persons, is mentioned in verse seven, among the individuals. This may be

only a remarkable coincidence, though some regard it as a repetition; the Bible writer himself indicates that he is aware of the similarity of the name at least, for he uses the phrase, "the other Elam," in verse 31.

We are particularly interested in the mention of some of the towns in this list. Here is Bethlehem (*verse 21*), never very large, but memorable as the ancestral home of David and his royal descendants.

And Anathoth (*verse 23*), once the home of Jeremiah. Here the prophet had bought a piece of property at God's direction (Jer. 32), in the face of his own predictions of the destruction and captivity of his nation. This was his way of showing his faith, and God's assurance, that the land would be valuable again. So he had invested in the future for his nephews and nieces; now his faith and his obedience is being vindicated!

Here is Ramah (*verse 26*); Samuel had judged his people at Ramah (I Sam. 7:17).

And Geba (*verse 26*). At least once this is another spelling of Gibeah,⁶ just a few miles from Ramah. At Gibeah Saul had set up the kingdom of Israel. Most likely Geba and Ramah are grouped together because they were close to each other, as were Bethel and Ai in verse 28.

Bethel (*verse 28*) would recall the lives of Abraham and Jacob; both of them had built altars there (Gen. 12:7; 35:1).

Nebo (*verse 29*), across the Jordan, afforded Moses his only view of the Promised Land before he died (Deut. 34:1). Here, however, it probably denotes a small town in Judah.

The walls of Jericho (*verse 34*) had echoed the march of Joshua and all Israel shortly after (Joshua 6).

So the people who returned would have remembered many other hallowed events from their past, as they took up residence once more in the land of their ancestors.

6. Judges 20:10 in Hebrews; also 20:33, where Maareh-geba may be translated "field (or plain) of Geba." Note that the surrounding verses all deal with Gibeah.

4. Also important enough to be mentioned were certain people connected with the Temple and religious worship.

TEXT, 2:36-58

- 36 The priests: the sons of Jedaiah of the house of Jeshua, 973;
 37 the sons of Immer, 1,052;
 38 the sons of Pashhur, 1,247;
 39 the sons of Harim, 1,017.
 40 The Levites: the sons of Jeshua and Kadmiel, of the sons of Hodaviah, 74.
 41 The singers: the sons of Asaph, 128.
 42 The sons of the gatekeepers: the sons of Shallum, the sons of Ater, the sons of Talmon, the sons of Akkub, the sons of Hatita, the sons of Shobai, in all 139.
 43 The temple servants: the sons of Ziha, the sons of Hasupha, the sons of Tabbaoth,
 44 the sons of Keros, the sons of Siaha, the sons of Padon,
 45 the sons of Lebanah, the sons of Hagabah, the sons of Akkub,
 46 the sons of Hagab, the sons of Shalmal, the sons of Hanan,
 47 the sons of Giddel, the sons of Gahar, the sons of Reaiah,
 48 the sons of Rezin, the sons of Nekoda, the sons of Gazzam,
 49 the sons of Uzza, the sons of Paseah, the sons of Besai,
 50 the sons of Asnah, the sons of Meunim, the sons of Nephisim,
 51 the sons of Bakbuk, the sons of Hakupha, the sons of Harhur,
 52 the sons of Bazluth, the sons of Mehida, the sons of Harsha,
 53 the sons of Barkos, the sons of Sisera, the sons of Temah,
 54 the sons of Neziah, the sons of Hatipha.
 55 The sons of Solomon's servants: the sons of Sotai, the sons of Hassophereth, the sons of Peruda,
 56 the sons of Jaalah, the sons of Darkon, the sons of Giddel,
 57 the sons of Shephatiah, the sons of Hattil, the sons of Pochereth-hazzebaim, the sons of Ami.
 58 All the temple servants, and the sons of Solomon's servants, were 392.

COMMENT

The priests (*verses 36-39*) are the first in rank among those connected with the Temple. Of the four clans or households which follow, three are identifiable as being among the twenty-four courses appointed in David's time to serve in rotation at the altar: I Chron. 24:7, 8, 14 mention Jedaiah, Immer, and Harim. (Pashur may have been a replacement for one of the other groups, or an alternative name of one of them; it is identified with the priesthood elsewhere.)

This gives a clue to the source of the names in this list; it is possible that many are the names of clans, or "family names," going back to the time of David and the organization of the Kingdom of Israel. We may wish for names more easily identified, which can be traced to specific tribes; but that may not be necessary since all the priests would be of the tribe of Levi, and since we have been told previously (Ezra 1:5) that the other returnees were of the tribe of Judah and Benjamin, at this time.

Jeshua, the high priest, is identified with the clan of Jedaiah (*verse 36*). More extensive mention of him is made by Haggai (1:1) and by Zechariah (3:1): both spell his name "Joshua." He was the priest whose leadership, along with the governor Zerubbabel's, brought about the reconstruction of the Temple.

Verse 40. Of the Levites in addition to the priests, only seventy-four are mentioned. The "Jeshua" in this verse is apparently a second man by that name, rather than the priest mentioned previously. It is likely that the Levites, not being as directly involved in religious duties as the priests, were not as a group as excited about returning. It is also possible that, since Ezekiel 44:9-16 predicts the demotion of the Levites from some of their responsibilities because of their previous sins, this reduction of their size is a consequence. It is further possible that, since their functions were primarily teaching instead of ministry through ritual, many of them would remain in Persia to furnish needed instruction to the majority of their brethren who remained there.

Singers (*verse 41*) are mentioned next. These would be important to ancient worship, as attested by Egyptian plaques found

at Megiddo in Israel.⁷ The name of Asaph in this list also goes back to the organization of the worship in David's time (I Chron. 15:17, 19). The name, either of the individual or his descendants, is identified with the authorship of twelve of the Psalms (50, 73-83).

The sons of the gatekeepers (*verse 42*) may not have had a lofty calling, but they had their significance. A holy man once expressed his preference to "stand at the threshold of my God, Than dwell in the tents of wickedness" (Psa. 84:10).

The temple servants (*verses 43-54*) would have even a humbler task. Perhaps these would include descendants of people whom Israel had subjected either by war or by treaty; two examples are given in Num. 31 (Midianites) and Joshua 9 (Gibeonites); note especially Josh. 9:27.

Solomon's servants (*verses 55-57*) were apparently a similar group added later to the temple servants, with whom they are classed (*verse 58*). Solomon's activities (I Kings 9:20, 21) reduced some of Canaan's former tribesmen to servitude. If the pattern set in Num. 31 was followed, then a percentage of these also, along with other war captives added from time to time, ended up in the service of the Temple, and their descendants would be included among the voluntary returnees from captivity.

Does this seem ironic, that many free citizens of Israel now choose to stay in the land of their captivity, while some who had been enslaved by Israel are now freely choosing to return to the land which had enslaved them? This speaks well of the treatment they had received from Israel, and of the Spiritual appeal of service in the Temple, that they still want to maintain their identity with them though it began as forced servitude. There are surely parallels today among children compelled to attend religious services against their will, or of young lovers enduring religious obligations to be near the object of their affections, and then finding something in the services which calls them to full voluntary dedication to the things of God.

7. J. B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 263.

5. There follows a list of those whose ancestral records had been lost.

TEXT, 2:59-63

- 59 Now these are those who came up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addan, and Immer, but they were not able to give evidence of their fathers' households, and their descendants, whether they were of Israel:
- 60 the sons of Delaiah, the sons of Tobiah, the sons of Nekoda, 652.
- 61 And of the sons of the priests: the sons of Habaiah, the sons of Hakkoz, the sons of Barzillai, who took a wife from the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and he was called by their name.
- 62 These searched among their ancestral registration, but they could not be located; therefore they were considered unclean and were excluded from the priesthood.
- 63 And the governor said to them that they should not eat from the most holy things until a priest stood up with Urim and Thummim.

COMMENT

In *verse 59* the settlements in Babylon from which they came are mentioned; then the names of their families, first of the common people in *verse 60*, and of those who claimed to be of the priesthood in *verse 61*. Dr. Ironside compares these priests with "some now, who cannot trace their genealogy but nevertheless insist on the Christian place as rightfully theirs." He cautions against presumptuously denying that they are born of God, yet says "we cannot own them as such till they can give clear evidence of being indeed of the priestly company and partakers of the divine nature."⁸

Should these be censured for having lost the important records

8. H. A. Ironside, *Notes on The Books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther*, p. 22.

of their ancestry, thus their birthright and identity as God's children and servants? Or should they be praised for the religious fervor that set them apart from those content to stay in Babylon, in spite of their lack of documents which would guarantee them the worldly benefits which their companions could claim? Enough that they were going back to scenes and circumstances reminiscent of their forefathers' close walk with their God!

Those particularly who claimed priestly backgrounds had a special problem: they would be presiding over Israel's religion as well as deriving their support from it, so great care must be taken to insure the correctness of their religious backgrounds. Priests, prophets, and kings were all "messiahs": that is, they were anointed of God as His representatives to the people. No person who came from a foreign land could become a prophet of Israel; he must be "from your own countrymen" (Deut. 18:15, 18). The king also must be a native (Deut. 17:15); the wisdom of this requirement is recognized even in the American Constitution, which specifies that no one can become president of the United States who is not a citizen by birth.

The priest must meet an additional requirement: he must be not only an Israelite by birth, but he must be taken from the descendants of Aaron, of the tribe of Levi (Ex. 28:1ff). No one must take this office on himself (Heb. 5:4). It had been one of the Levites above any of the other tribes who had demonstrated loyalty to Israel's God against heathen gods and customs during the Wilderness Wanderings, at Baal-Peor (Num. 25:5-13); therefore they were chosen above the firstborn of all Israelites to serve in the house of the Lord and to protect the purity of the worship. It was essential then that priests be able to trace their descent from this tribe.

Verse 63. But for those of the priestly line who had lost evidence of their descent, there was a door left slightly open. They were not simply disfellowshipped. God had spoken through His priests in time past by means of Urim and Thummin, objects in the custody of the priests (Ex. 28:30, I Sam. 28:6). If God wished the services of any of these men, He would

restore the Urim and Thummim which seem to have been lost in the Captivity, that He might be consulted about each of these individuals. There is no record of the priests' possession of these after the return from Captivity, therefore many authorities, though not all,⁹ suppose that these men were never granted a full status as priests.

6. Verses 64, 65 give the totals of the returnees.

TEXT, 2:64, 65

64 The whole assembly numbered 42,360,
65 besides their male and female servants, who numbered
7,337; and they had 200 singing men and women.

COMMENT

This grand total of 49,897 may be contrasted with the 601,730 plus the 23,000 Levites (Num. 26:51, 62) who paused on the edge of the Promised Land under Moses and Joshua, and with the 1,570,000 plus the tribes of Levi and Benjamin in David's time (I Chron. 21:5). It was indeed only a remnant, a few survivors, that returned: as Isaiah had prophesied (Isa. 1:9; 10:20f).

In *verse 65*, the singers are other than those for the Temple, in *verse 41*.

The actual lists given previously add up to only 29,818; this is a reminder that the lists are only partial.

9. G. Coleman Luck, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 22.

7. Next is a listing of their livestock.

TEXT, 2:66, 67

- 66 Their horses were 736; their mules, 245;
 67 their camels, 435; their donkeys, 6,720.

COMMENT

This is not a very large number of animals for the amount of people. All of the animals are beasts of burden, and at best there is but one for every six persons.

8. Their offerings for restoring the Temple are recorded.

TEXT, 2:68, 69

- 68 And some of the heads of fathers' households, when they arrived at the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem, offered willingly for the house of God to restore it on its foundation.
 69 According to their ability they gave to the treasury for the work 61,000 gold drachmas, and 5,000 silver minas, and 100 priestly garments.

COMMENT

It is interesting that the drachma in particular is a Persian coin (another subtle reminder of their contact with Persia):¹⁰ the mina is a unit of weight used in Israel, Babylon, and Persia. We may see a hint that coins are beginning to be used to simplify monetary exchange, but their use has not become universal.

10. An example is portrayed in G. A. Barton's *Archaeology and The Bible*, Plate 63, Figure 189.

WORD STUDIES

ZERUBBABEL: “a seed of Babylon”: a reminder that God preserved a seed of His people through the Babylonian Captivity, from which His nation would once again spring to life.

TEMPLE SERVANTS (verse 43); literally, the Nethinim: “those given.” The word is a plural form; it comes from the word “Nathan.” These were the persons “given” to the priests to assist with the menial tasks of preparing for sacrifice and worship.

JESHUA, or its variant, **JOSHUA:** “Jehovah is Salvation,” or “Salvation from Jehovah.” This is the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek name, “Jesus.”

MINA: the basic meaning is to divide out, or measure out, or number. Money originally had to be measured, or weighed, at each transaction. This is the word “Mene” in the handwriting on the wall, in Dan. 5:25f. Note that the consonants are the same as those in our word “money,” and in reverse order, the first two consonants in “number.” Can you find the two letters hidden in the “denomination” of a bill? In “numismatics”? Now you are looking at the building blocks of language!

SUMMARY

There you see the brave band of marchers: small in number, of meagre resources, threatened by many dangers on the trip and even after they arrived; yet there is no denying that they made the trip. They will be joined by others who will come in small groups as time goes on; but even when the N.T. opens, they are still a pitifully small nation. A disproportionate number of them, about one in ten, are priests, and we can understand why priests would be more likely to treasure hopes of returning to the service of God in the temple at Jerusalem. But for now, they must all unite in the physical work of rebuilding.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Is Ezra named among the returnees?
2. Who is the one most prominent person mentioned?
3. What groups of people were mentioned?
4. How would you have changed the order of these groups, if you had been writing the story?
5. What reminder is in the list, of a prophecy of Jeremiah? of Isaiah?

Chapter Three

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. How much time has passed since the events beginning in Ezra 1:1?
2. How much time is consumed by the events in Ezra three?
3. According to 3:1, the people gathered "as one man." Do you think this means that everyone came, or that those who came had one will and purpose?
4. Why do you suppose they started their rebuilding with the altar, instead of some other structure?
5. How many things that they did in this chapter reflect a knowledge of God's Law given through Moses, or of other sacred institutions?

OUTLINE

Chapters three to six are titled in our outline for the book, "The Temple Is Rebuilt." This is most generally seen as the main topic of the book; this, then, is the heart of its message. Our outline for chapter three:

II. The Temple is Rebuilt (3:1—6:22)

A. The altar and the foundation laid

1. The altar and the sacrifices are restored (vss. 1-7).
2. The foundation of the new Temple is laid (vss. 8-13).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

Chapter three begins the topic of the Temple's reconstruction by describing the building of the altar, the making of the first regular sacrifice, and then the construction of the foundation. Nothing could emphasize more sharply the centrality of sacrifice to worship. The altar was the reason for erecting all of the rest of the building; it was the object for which all else existed.

Now, Jesus is our Temple (John 2:19-21). His greatest work on earth was to be our altar (Heb. 13:10, 12). We love Him because He offers us forgiveness, and cleansing, and consecration, and fellowship. We see in Him the glory that speaks of His Father's glory.

We, too, are building a temple, as described in I Cor. 3:16; 6:19f. and I Peter 2:5: *we* are that temple. It would be well for us to begin in like fashion with the altar of sacrifice. Notice what Heb. 13:13-16 enumerates as our sacrifices: especially praise and sharing.

II. The Temple Is Rebuilt (3:1 — 6:22)

A. The altar is built, and the foundation laid.

1. The altar and the sacrifice are restored.

TEXT, 3:1-7

- 1 Now when the seventh month came, and the sons of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered together as one man to Jerusalem.
- 2 Then Jeshua the son of Jozadak and his brothers the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and his brothers arose and built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the law of Moses, the man of God.
- 3 So they set up the altar on its foundation, for they were terrified because of the peoples of the lands; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening.
- 4 And they celebrated the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the fixed number of burnt offerings daily, according to the ordinance, as each day required;
- 5 and afterward there was a continual burnt offering, also for the new moons and for all the fixed festivals of the LORD that were consecrated, and from everyone who offered a freewill offering to the LORD.
- 6 From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD, but the foundation of the temple of the LORD had not been laid.
- 7 Then they gave money to the masons and carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and to the Tyrians, to bring cedar wood from Lebanon to the sea at Joppa, according to the permission they had from Cyrus king of Persia.

COMMENT

Verse 1: "Now when the seventh month came." This would correspond roughly to our September; though that is our ninth month, the name comes from the Latin for "seven" (septem). There is no year stated, so it must be in the same year as the previous events. Verse eight will confirm this, since it refers to the start of the second year after their return. They had barely had time, at best, to set up residence in cities when this busiest month of the year in terms of religious obligation arrived: the month of Trumpets, Atonement, and Tabernacles. In Ezra 7:8, 9 the same trip from Babylon required four months, and their getting ready for the trip must have taken a substantial part of the other two, so the events of this chapter must have followed very closely their arrival in their homeland.

The number seven would be significant to Israel: the word itself signifies completion, or taking a vow. Every seventh day was holy; seven weeks separated two other feasts (Passover and Weeks) from each other; the seventh month as noted was particularly marked for religious observances; every seventh year was a Sabbath Year, and seven sevens of years (the fiftieth year) brought them to the Year of Jubilee.

Their assembling at Jerusalem would not have been a great hardship, for all the towns in which they had resettled were within a 25-mile radius of the Holy City.

In *verse 2* Jeshua and Zerubbabel are mentioned again, with their brothers. Obviously, all Jeshua's brothers would be priests also. Zerubbabel is called the son of Shealtiel; this presents a problem. I Chron. 3:16-19 calls him the son of Pedaiah, who is the son of King Jeconiah. Since Jeconiah's oldest son is Shealtiel, we can assume that this is an illustration of the Levirate law (Deut. 25:5ff.); when an heir would die without children, his wife was to marry his next brother, or his nearest available kin, and the first son of that marriage would be legally the heir of the woman's earlier husband. The story of Ruth (2:2) and of Tamar (Gen. 38) are examples of this principle. Thus Zerubbabel probably was legally the son of Shealtiel, but actually the son of Pedaiah.

But the center of focus in verse two is the altar. Since a second smaller altar was also located in the original Temple and used exclusively for incense offerings, it is necessary to specify that the altar which they built was the one for burnt offerings (animal sacrifices).

It is further specified that the pattern for their offerings was the Law of God given through Moses. One of the reasons for their bondage was that the Law had been neglected; now they set themselves scrupulously to observe it.

The timing for constructing the altar may need further explanation. Verse six indicates that sacrifice began on it on the first day of the seventh month; verse one says that they assembled in the seventh month, and then verse two describes the building of the altar. We may wonder how they could make sacrifice on it the first day if it was built during the month.

One possibility is in the translation of these words; they could just as accurately be rendered, "Now Jeshua . . . and Zerubbabel . . . had arisen and built the altar . . ."

A second possibility is that the altar which they constructed may have been temporary and very simple: a pile of dirt or stones as specified in Ex. 20:24f. Elijah had built a similar altar in a small part of a day (I Ki. 18:20ff.).

Verse 3 speaks of setting up the altar on its foundation, which would not need to be said unless to indicate that it was on the same foundation as the previous altar. This emphasizes their effort to be in continuity with the past. The reason given for it is their fear of the neighboring peoples; we will shortly see how justified this fear was. Stated positively, they were convinced that if they would complete this obligation to God, He would consequently protect them from their enemies.

With this verse begins a list of the different offerings and celebrations which they observed. The first of these, the burnt offering, is regarded as the most ancient and noble; it was placed first in the descriptions of sacrifices in Lev. 1-7, and it required the most expensive, most perfect animal. It is also appropriate as the first because it portrays dedication, or consecration, where the others speak more particularly of fellowship

or of expiation; so it would be most useful at dedications, or beginnings.

Verses 3, 4, 5 each mention the daily, or continual, burnt offering made morning and evening (Num. 28:3). Thus each day was made holy to God. In *verse 4* this is also said to be "according to the ordinance." A reading of Numbers chapters 28 and 29 will explain the different offerings and celebrations alluded to here.

Verse 4 also mentions their celebration of the Feast of Booths; this was one of the three major feasts of the year. If we wonder why they should begin their observance of the yearly feasts with this instead of with the Passover for example, an answer is quickly found. It was the first one that came up on the calendar, after their arrival in the land.

But what is undesigned by man may be designed by God. The Feast of Booths (Tabernacles) was the one which relived the experiences of Israel as they journeyed from Egypt to Canaan. Now they had arrived at home at the end of a similar journey, and the parallel would be especially meaningful. Matthew Henry¹ calls it "the feast . . . which had a peculiar reference to gospel times," and notes Zech. 14:16-18, a prophecy incidentally which was written very close to this same time. If the Passover found its fulfillment in the event of the Cross at the Passover season (John 19:14; I Cor. 5:7), and if the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost) was fulfilled for the Christian in the birth of the church at a Pentecost celebration, perhaps the Feast of Booths can speak to us of the age in which we live, as sojourners or ambassadors separated from but moving toward our permanent home which we will receive at the end of our journey or at our Master's return.

Verse 5, in addition to the burnt offering, speaks of the monthly or new moon offerings (Num. 28:11) and of the other festivals which are described in Num. 28, 29. Added also are the freewill offerings which were not restricted to any special times

1. *Commentary on The Whole Bible*, p. 1037.

or circumstances, but which arose out of the spontaneous gratitude and affection of the offerers; there is never a time when they are not appropriate.

Within *verses 3, 4, 5* are described offerings which came each day, each month, each year, and whenever the offerer chose. One periodic offering most conspicuous by its absence here is that which came each week, and marked each Sabbath (Num. 28:9, 10). Strangely enough, Ezra nowhere specifically mentions the Sabbath. However, it would be included in the phrase, "all the fixed festivals" (verse five).

Verse 6 states clearly that the sacrifices were renewed beginning with the first day of the seventh month; this was one of the lesser feasts, the Feast of Trumpets, though it is not mentioned here. The subject of the last half of the chapter is anticipated in the statement that the Temple foundation had not been laid; this stresses once more that they did not wait for a temple to be completed, or even started, before they began worship through sacrifice. (As noted in the *Interpreter's Bible*, David also had an altar without a temple.)²

Verse 7 continues this transition by showing the preparations made, the gathering of materials, for the beginning of construction. The citizens are paid with money for their work; the foreigners receive goods (food, drink, and oil) instead, which would be more useful to them. Food is a better international currency than money.

The materials were brought from Lebanon, as the materials had been originally in Solomon's time; we recall Hiram of Tyre. These would have consisted of timber; the stones of the old structure probably still remained. Sidon (also called Zidon) was close to Tyre, and had assisted also with the earlier structure (I Ki. 5:1, 6). Then, Hiram of Tyre and Solomon had been bound together by friendship; now both lands were under the heel of Cyrus. Joppa, as any reader of the book of Jonah would be aware, was the seaport closest to Jerusalem.

2. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 3, p. 588.

2. The foundation of the new temple is laid.

TEXT, 3:8-13

- 8 Now in the second year of their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak and the rest of their brothers the priests and the Levites, and all who came from the captivity to Jerusalem, began the work and appointed the Levites from twenty years and older to oversee the work of the house of the LORD.
- 9 Then Jeshua with his sons and brothers stood united with Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah and the sons of Henadad with their sons and brothers the Levites, to oversee the workmen in the temple of God.
- 10 Now when the builders had laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD according to the directions of King David of Israel.
- 11 And they sang, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, saying "For He is good, for His lovingkindness is upon Israel forever." And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.
- 12 Yet many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' households, the old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, while many shouted aloud for joy;
- 13 so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the shout of joy from the sound of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard far away.

COMMENT

Verse 8 refers to the following year, the second month: our April or May. Their religious year began with the beginning of

Spring, which would be easy to justify. No work had been done during the Winter months, but with the arrival of seasonable weather the construction began. This was also the month in which Solomon had begun his building (I Ki. 6:1).

Again we have the names of the two leaders, Zerubbabel and Jeshua, this time in reverse order from verse two. Perhaps the author is emphasizing their equality in importance and honor. They were assisted not only by their relatives and by the whole band of Levites, but by the total company who had returned to Jerusalem. There would be no restriction on the other tribes' entering the Temple till it was dedicated.

We may be surprised that the Levites were put to work beginning at the age of twenty (nineteen by our reckoning, since an Israelite was one year old through the first year of life). Previously we have been told that their responsibilities began at the age of thirty (Num. 4:46f.), or twenty-five (Num. 8:24). But David reduced this age to twenty (I Chron. 23:3, 24-27). They are the only group for whom the age requirement is made; perhaps this is to tell us of their care in conforming to the sacred ordinances. Also, it made good sense to assign the Levites, the tribe of priests, to positions of overseership as they would be more familiar with the services for which the House of God was designed, and they would be the ones making greatest use of these facilities.

In *verse 9*, the identity of Jeshua is not as simple as we might suppose. G. Coleman Luck³ believes him to be not the high priest, but the Levite named in 2:40, where he is also associated with Kadmiel, and where the name Hodaviah (very similar in its Hebrew spelling to Judah) also appears. Young's *Concordance* lists five different Jeshuas mentioned in Ezra!

This is certainly a possibility. Nevertheless, the mention of Jeshua the high priest with his kin in the previous verse leads more normally to seeing him here, setting an example to others by his involvement in the construction. Holy hands are not defiled by heavenly work.

3. G. Coleman Luck, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 28.

Verses 10 and 11 call attention to the revival of another long-standing tradition. King David had divided some of the Levites into twenty-four groups to provide music, each in their turn, at the House of God (I Chron. 6:31-48; 25:1-31). On the completion of the foundation the successors of these groups, with musical instruments and with their voices and accompanied by the priests, praised and gave thanks to God. This was another function of the Temple, and it was resumed without waiting for the building to be completed. The service of song has its God-given usefulness, as do the sacrifices, in inspiring and purifying the worshipers.

In *verse 11*, the words of their song are reminiscent of several of the Psalms: 106:1, 118:1, and 136, every verse, all speak of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord, "For he is good, for his lovingkindness is everlasting." The words, "toward Israel," could be deduced from Psa. 118:2. The response of the people was a great shout in celebration of the finishing of the foundation.

Verse 12 further describes this reaction as being of two kinds. Some of them, the more aged people, could recall seeing the previous Temple; it had been but a few more than fifty years since it had been destroyed and they had been led to Babylon. What they saw now must have been a pitiful reminder of the splendid Temple they had known before (Hag. 2:3). Or for some, even the small beginnings would bring a flood of holy memories that would be expressed in tears; they need not all be the tears of sadness. For some, this was the end of fifty years of frustration. And from others (even of the elderly; the verse does not specify that the younger persons had a monopoly on the rejoicing) rose a great shout of joy.

Verse 13 concludes the scene as the two emotions, the shout of joy and the sound of weeping, are blended into one indistinguishable but impressive tone. For in worship there is a place for both: the tears of sorrow, and the shout of joy.

WORD STUDIES

LAW: Torah (“Law of Moses,” verse 2). The idea of legalism is not present in this word. It is possible that the word is derived from a verb, “throw”: hence, to throw out the hand, to point out, to direct or instruct. It is more likely that it comes from the verb, “give light”: hence, enlightenment or instruction. “Law” in the O.T. is the kind of loving instruction which a father gives to his children to help them avoid unhappy consequences of bad choices, or to enable them to live happy lives.

ALTAR: Mizbeach. The verb from which it is taken means “slaughter,” either for food or for sacrifice. Most of the meat or food which was sacrificed in Israel, specifically of the peace and thank offerings, the meal or grain offerings, trespass or guilt offerings, and even certain sin offerings, was eaten by the offerers, or by the priests, or by both (Lev. 7). This excludes only the burnt offerings. Sacrifice in Israel was a time of festivity and fellowship.

TABERNACLE: Sukkah, or Sukkoth (“Feast of Tabernacles”): tent, booth, hut, or temporary shelter made of green boughs. This was the housing of the Israelites on their trek from Egypt to Canaan, and they were commanded to keep it fresh in their memories by living in such structures one week of each year.

LEVITE: the basic idea is to join, or cleave, or entwine. It was the function of the Levites to join the people to God, to cause them to cleave to Him, or to be entwined with Him.

SUMMARY

What a variety of material in one small chapter!

Ezra has informed us of the prompt and effective religious action of the people and their leaders. He has singled out for emphasis the one most important article in the holy surroundings: the altar. He has stressed the part played by the Law of the Lord in their renewal, and has taken us through a brief but detailed review of the ancient ritual. If he has left out

an item or two, we have not been offended; his number of the vessels in chapter one had included many which he had failed to name, and his final total of the returnees in chapter two was more than the names and numbers he had previously given.

Then he has shown us the gathering of materials and workmen, and the beginning of construction of the new Temple. We have thrilled to the sound of music, and we have felt the surge of a variety of emotions as they observed the first small results of their labors. So far there has been no significant opposition, and no enemy has been singled out by name.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How long was it after Israel returned before they began public worship?
2. Who were the individuals most responsible for the restoration of worship?
3. What observances or ceremonials did they keep?
4. What part did music fulfill in their renewal?

Chapter Four

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. What would have been the result if Israel had accepted the help of their neighbors?
2. What was the most effective tool which Satan used to stop the Lord's work?
3. Can you find any errors in the letter written by their enemies, and if so, how do you account for them?
4. Why was the Persian king so easily influenced?
5. Do you see any ways in which the people of Israel could have improved their methods?

OUTLINE

- B. The work is interrupted by Israel's enemies.
 1. Opposition develops, (vss. 1-5).
 2. Israel's enemies write letters to prevent rebuilding (vss. 6-16).
 3. Artaxerxes replies and orders the work stopped (vss. 17-22).
 4. This brings the restoration to a halt (vss. 23, 24).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- B. The work is interrupted by Israel's enemies.
 1. Opposition develops.

TEXT, 4:1-5

- 1 Now when the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the people of the exile were building a temple to the LORD God of Israel,
- 2 they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers' households, and said to them, "Let us build with you, for we, like you, seek your God; and we have been sacrificing to Him since the days of Esar-haddon king of Assyria, who brought us up here."

- 3 But Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest of the heads of fathers' households of Israel said to them, "You have nothing in common with us in building a house to our God; but we ourselves will together build to the LORD God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia has commanded us."
- 4 Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and frightened them from building,
- 5 and hired counselors against them to frustrate their counsel all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.

COMMENT

In chapter four we see opposition finally appearing and becoming clearly identifiable. It can be anticipated that when God's people get busy, Satan will raise opposition.

It is not just history we are reading, for "these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come" (I Cor. 10:11). If the O.T. teaches us valuable lessons about the nature and works of the Eternal, All-powerful, All-loving God, it also has something valuable to say about the nature of our enemy, and of the methods which he still uses.

Verse 1 mentions the enemies; they are more fully described in verses 2, 9, 10. We recognize them primarily as the Samaritans, known to us from the N.T. From this and other passages of the O.T. we can understand why the Samaritans were so bitterly resented by the Judeans in the N. T.

Verse 2 shows that the strongest opposition for God's people is from the half-godly.¹ The Samaritans claimed first that they worshiped the same God as Israel. While they called Him by the same name, they understood His nature in a much different way and their worship followed very different patterns. Their second claim will explain this: they asserted that they had been sacrificing

1. For N.T. parallels, see Rev. 3:9, 15ff.

to Israel's God since the days of Esar-haddon, 150 years earlier. When Israel had been conquered by the Assyrians in 722 or 721 B.C., the Assyrians had taken many of the people, especially the well-to-do, with them into captivity; then they imported other conquered peoples into their land, as a means of discouraging revolt. By shuffling populations around, they sought to put all of them into strange environments thus making revolt more difficult and unlikely. II Ki. 17 gives the full story of the beginning of these policies; note especially verses 24ff., and 33. This was followed by 1) marriages between the Israelites remaining in the land and the heathen immigrants, which God had forbidden; and 2) natural calamities in the land. The Assyrians sought to minimize these calamities by returning priests of the God of Israel to the land to teach proper forms of worship on the premise that there are many gods, each possessing different territories; and each god must be worshiped on the soil identified with him (compare II Ki. 5:17) or he would become angry and vent his rage on the land.

Sargon had been king of Assyria when Israel's capital, Samaria, fell. His policy of deportations was continued by the next two kings, Sennacherib and Esar-haddon. The persons speaking in verse two identify themselves as among the later groups of people imported into Israel's former territory, possibly after the fall of Tyre to Assyria in 671 B.C. These peoples and their successors continued to use only the books of Moses in their religious practices, even to modern times. The Samaritan woman whom Jesus meets furnishes an illustration of some of their likenesses and differences compared to Judea (Jn. 4:20, 25).

The Samaritans may have had a political motive for their actions as described here. "By joining the new Jewish group in their venture the Samaritans may have sought identification with them and thus a salvaging of something of their political position."²

2. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 596.

In *verse 3*, the response of Israel's leaders has been criticized as unnecessarily severe and uncharitable.³ However, some things may be said in their defense. 1) It was this same intermarriage with the people of the land, the Canaanites, and intermingling of Israel's religion with their heathen neighbors which had brought about their downfall (Jgs. 1:27ff.; 2:11ff.). Solomon's marriages to many foreign wives and his subsequent building of temples where they might worship their various gods (I Ki. 11:4-11) had sown the seeds that grew to the kingdom's division and eventual destruction. Note that Solomon built more than one temple. 2) The leaders of Judah and Benjamin had already shown a willingness to use the help of foreigners. They were not so ungracious as to refuse to employ foreigners for labor, or to refuse their contributions. The people of Tyre and Sidon had already given assistance (Ezra 3:8), and in an earlier era money had been received from Manasseh and Ephraim (II Chron. 34:9). This was not the issue. The real problem apparently was the character of the building, i.e., its control and leadership, and worship to which it would be put. 3) We might also question the sincerity of the Samaritans, who hadn't restored the Temple during the time when they were in total possession of the land.

Verse 4 marks the virtual halt of the project, because of 1) discouragement; and 2) fear. The account will continue to elaborate on the steps taken by their enemies, but the injury has already been done; the opposition has been effective.

In *verse 5*, the counselors have been compared to lobbyists in our times, hired to influence those who form government policies.⁴ The era from Cyrus to Darius, mentioned here, would include also the reigns of Ahasuerus and Artaxerxes.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 595. The writer conditions this on p. 599, questioning if, without these policies, "Judaism and the law and the prophets alike, (would) have survived amid the rising flood of Hellenistic syncretism through the centuries between the O.T. and the N.T."

4. G. Coleman Luck, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 31.

2. Israel's enemies write letters to prevent rebuilding.

TEXT, 4:6-16

- 6 Now in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.
- 7 And in the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, and the rest of his colleagues, wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the text of the letter was written in Aramaic and translated from Aramaic.
- 8 Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to King Artaxerxes, as follows:
- 9 then wrote Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe and the rest of their colleagues, the judges and the lesser governors, the officials, the secretaries, the men of Erech, the Babylonians, the men of Susa, that is, the Elamites,
- 10 and the rest of the nations which the great and honorable Osnappar deported and settled in the city of Samaria, and in the rest of the region beyond the River. And now
- 11 this is the copy of the letter which they sent to him: "To King Artaxerxes: Your servants, the men in the region beyond the River, and now
- 12 let it be known to the king, that the Jews who came up from you have come to us at Jerusalem; they are rebuilding the rebellious and evil city, and are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations.
- 13 "Now let it be known to the king, that if that city is rebuilt and the walls are finished, they will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and it will damage the revenue of the kings.
- 14 "Now because we are in the service of the palace, and it is not fitting for us to see the king's dishonor, therefore we have sent and informed the king,
- 15 so that a search may be made in the record books of your fathers. And you will discover in the record books, and learn that that city is a rebellious city and damaging to kings and provinces, and that they have incited revolt within it in past

days; therefore that city was laid waste.

- 16 "We inform the king that, if that city is rebuilt and the walls finished, as a result you will have no possession in the province beyond the River."

COMMENT

The Ahasuerus of *verse 6* is taken to be a title rather than a name; Young's *Analytical Concordance* gives its meaning as "King." He is identified as Cambyses in Persian history. The designation, Ahasuerus, is used again of a later king throughout the book of Esther, and of an earlier king in Dan. 9:1. No disposition of the letter mentioned here is recorded in the Bible; possibly it was ignored by the king.

Likewise in *verse 7*, Artaxerxes may be a title meaning "Great King," according to the same source. Another Artaxerxes will appear in Ezra 7, a generation later. These instances reinforce the likelihood that both of these are titles and not personal names.

The Artaxerxes of *verse 7* is thought to be Pseudo-Smerdis, who pretended to be a son of Cyrus and who usurped the throne for about seven months. We see the appropriateness, then, of the phrase, "in the days of," in place of the phrase, "in . . . his reign," applied to the former king in the previous verse. Thus the Bible subtly records the fact that the legitimacy of his rule was questioned. This dates the correspondence in 523 B.C., thirteen years after the work on the Temple had begun.

Bishlam, Mithredath, and Tabeel are unidentified in any contemporary historical source. Tabeel, judging from his name ("God is good") was a worshiper of God as the Samaritans would be. These three were apparently various officials of the Persian territory between the Euphrates River and the Mediterranean Sea (*verse 11*). Their letter is reproduced in *verses 11-16*. Reference is made to the text in Aramaic; the portion from 4:8 to 6:18 is in Aramaic, probably because the bulk of it is taken from official Persian documents, to which Ezra would have had

access. The language used by the Persians for their international correspondence was Aramaic.

While Aramaic is very similar to Hebrew, as Dutch is to German or Portuguese is to Spanish, nevertheless they are different languages. During the Captivity the common people of Israel began to speak in Aramaic; only the government officials had been acquainted with it before (II Ki. 18:26). Consequently the Hebrew spoken in Judea in the N.T. was actually Aramaic, as can be observed from some of the words used by Jesus ("Raca," Mt. 5:22; "Bar-jonah," Mt. 16:17; "Talitha Kum," Mk. 5:41; "Ephphatha," Mk. 7:34).

Rehum, in *verse 8f*, is not to be identified with the man in Ezra 2:2, who was a leader of the returnees. His title, "commander," would make him a counsellor of the Persian king. The next name mentioned, Shimshai the scribe, would be the royal secretary. Obviously, then, the lesser officials named in *verse 7* ("the rest of the colleagues" in *verse 9*) had gotten these more influential figures, closer to the king, to sign the actual letter.

Verses 9, 10 are the salutation of the letter. Erech, Babylon, and Elam (with Susa as its capital) in *verse 9* were some of the conquered peoples whom the Assyrians settled in Samaria. Osnappar in *verse 10* is probably a shortened form of Ashurbanipal, known as Esar-haddon's successor. The region beyond the river, as already noted, would be the territory ruled by Persia between the Euphrates River (Babylon) and the Mediterranean Sea, and under one general administration. The words, "And now," are used in Aramaic correspondence of that age to mark the transition between the salutation and the body of a letter.⁵

Verse 11 summarizes the salutation and concludes again with the customary phrase, "and now." Note that the writers identify themselves to the king as "Your servants": a claim to loyalty in contrast to the disloyalty which they claimed to warn him against.

5. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 599.

Verse 12 shows the bias and exaggeration of these foes. The words, "rebellious and evil city," are intended solely to discredit; there was nothing in Israel's conduct that warranted this judgmental title, at that time. The following words are of the same piece; God's people are accused of rebuilding the city walls, when they were authorized only to rebuild the Temple. In fact, the accusation treats with silence the work being done on the Temple. Lies are the Devil's progeny, as Jesus informs us (Jn. 8:44, 55). It is not until the time of Nehemiah, a half century later, that the Bible speaks of an organized effort to restore the city walls.

The exaggeration is all the more evident in that the words "are finishing" may be translated just as correctly "have finished," as in the KJV. The falsehood is obvious. In verses 13, 16, the letter itself acknowledges that the walls had not actually been finished.

We do not mean that every example of exaggeration is an evidence that a person is deliberately working for the Devil; exaggeration is used for a variety of purposes. A well-meaning Christian on occasion may innocently or unintentionally use this device. But it is God's nature that His speech coincides with reality and with constructiveness (Heb. 6:18 states this principle, and Gen. 1:3 gives an example); and the Christian seeks to be as much like God as possible (Lev. 11:44; I Pet. 1:16).

What we have in the verse before us, however, is a designed misstatement intended for destructive purposes.

Verse 13 reveals the equally false assumptions drawn from the first falsehood. Tribute, custom, and toll are different forms of taxes.⁶ The word "revenue" in verse 13 is a conjectural translation. It is more likely that it should read "at length"; thus, "at length (eventually) damage will be done to the king."⁷ Their method thus was to aim at the king's self-concern.

Verse 14 enlarges on this. The phrase, "we are in the service of the palace," is most expressive; literally it reads, "we eat the

6. For more detail, see "Word Studies," end of this chapter.

7. Ellicott's *Commentary on The Whole Bible*, III, p. 467.

salt of the palace.” This is first of all a recognition of their dependence on the king: our word “salary” incidentally comes from the Latin word for salt, and reflects the government policy of paying its servants with salt. But it is also a reference to the binding nature of a salt covenant (Num. 18:19; II Chr. 13:5).⁸ They were claiming that they were bound by covenant loyalty to reveal these threats to the king.

In *verse 15* they assert that a check of the records will verify their charges. Esther 6:1 shows how carefully the events of the palace were recorded and consulted. Similar Babylonian records were also available, and are indicated by the phrase, “your fathers (predecessors).” The “Babylonian Chronicle” has been recovered, and even lists food rations for the captives from Judah, including Jehoiachin by name.

Observe that there is no charge of contemporary wrongdoing in this part of the letter, for which they claim any substantiation. It is all what they have done “in past days”; they charge that this was the reason Jerusalem was laid waste after its defeat, some sixty-five years before.

Verse 16 concludes that if Israel is allowed to continue its rebuilding, the result is that they would undermine the Persian government’s control of the total area from the Euphrates to the Mediterranean. That is crediting the people of Jerusalem with tremendous military power or influence far beyond reason. It might easily be argued that the building of an army could lead to military action or revolt; it is hard to see how defensive measures, such as building a wall, would be a threat to the peace of neighboring nations.

8. Oriental custom required that when persons had eaten salt together, they were brothers and must defend one another at all costs. Note what a long-standing and binding custom Judas violated when he broke bread with Jesus and went out and betrayed Him the very same hour (Jn. 13:21-30). Consider also the meaning of the church’s breaking bread together.

More on this in “Word Studies,” end of this chapter.

3. Artaxerxes replies and orders the work stopped.

TEXT, 4:17-22

- 17 Then the king sent an answer to Rehum the commander, to Shimshai the scribe, and to the rest of their colleagues who live in Samaria and in the rest of the provinces beyond the River: "Peace. And now
- 18 the document which you sent us has been translated and read before me.
- 19 "And a decree has been issued by me, and a search has been made and it has been discovered that that city has risen up against the kings in past days, that rebellion and revolt have been perpetrated in it,
- 20 that mighty kings have ruled over Jerusalem, governing all the provinces beyond the River, and that tribute, custom, and toll were paid to them.
- 21 "So, now issue a decree to make these men stop work, that the city may not be rebuilt until a decree is issued by me.
- 22 "And beware of being negligent in carrying out this matter; why should damage increase to the detriment of the kings?"

COMMENT

Verse 17 is the heading and salutation of the letter. Rehum and Shimshai (cf. verse 8) are identified with the lands of Samaria and its neighbors. "Peace" (Shelam) would be the common greeting of their culture. Here again is the "And now" separating the salutation from the body of the letter.

Verse 18 acknowledges receipt of the Samaritans' letter. There is no mention of any defense offered by or sought from the people of Jerusalem. The handling of this case by Artaxerxes, who accepted the letter from Jerusalem's enemies at face value and did not go beyond the walls of his palace to check it for factual accuracy or to gather information from the other side, reveals something of the character of this man who had no

legitimate claim to the throne but who pretended to be someone whom he was not.

Verses 19 and 20 give us the results of the search. Usually when one looks for something long enough, he can find it; so evidence of Jerusalem's rebellious character was uncovered. It would be hard to find a record of any city in history which at some point had not resisted its conquerors.

The record of Jerusalem is unfortunate, however, in that much of the resistance and rebellion had been useless and ill-advised. The Prophets, and specifically Jeremiah, had cautioned against it from the times of Jehoiakim to Zedekiah (Jer. 21:8, 9; 27:1-23). Their disobedience to God at that point surely added to their burden now: More than a half century has passed, and God's people still pay a price for the sins of their leaders. In truth, it had been the failure of Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah to keep their words to their conquerors that had caused their city to be totally reduced to rubble. (II Ki. 24:1, 12, 20).

The mighty kings of *verse 20* most likely were David and Solomon. It is interesting that Babylon had noticed and recorded the extensiveness of their reigns. Apparently the Persian king believed that David and Solomon's collecting tribute, custom and tolls justified the charge made in vs. 13, that a healthy Jerusalem would endanger his ability to collect these for himself from this whole territory.

Verses 21 and 22 order the official issuance of the command to stop all work, and require strict compliance in carrying it out.

4. The work comes to a halt.

TEXT, 4:23, 24

23 Then as soon as the copy of King Artaxerxes' document was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their colleagues, they went in haste to Jerusalem to the Jews and stopped them by force of arms.

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

COMMENT

Verse 23 speaks of the total stoppage of work by force of arms. It was now 520 B.C.; judging from vs. 4f., it had virtually stopped a minimum of nine years before.

In *verse 24* it is the cessation of work on the Temple that is spoken of specifically; yet it was the wall and the city that were mentioned in the complaint. God's enemies often work by indirection and by subterfuge. Fortunately, it was but a few months till Darius, a more worthy king, ascended the throne. By the second year of his rule, his character would be known by his subjects even in Jerusalem, setting the stage for the events of the next chapter.

WORD STUDIES

1. ENEMY: Tsar: verse 4; the basic idea in the word is to exert pressure: hence, to press in on, or oppress. It is the word used in Psa. 23:5. Of course, most of the people who do this are our enemies; but even our friends or relatives, consciously or unconsciously, can add pressure to us. Many of Israel's most bitter enemies were peoples most closely related to her. God "prepares a table" (provides) for us in the midst of all these situations.
2. DISCOURAGE: Meraph Yadim: vs. 4; literally, as in KJV, "weaken the hands." It means to make the hands hang down, to relax, let fall, or weaken: thus, to discourage. The word is in the repetitive participial form indicating continuity of action; they "continuously again and again weakened the hands."
3. TRIBUTE: Mindah: verse 13; has the basic idea of a gift,

i.e., the kind of a gift measured out; it is always used of another nation, for example to avoid military attack.

4. CUSTOM: *Belo*: verse 13; payment in kind; i.e., a portion of the crops. This tax would usually be paid by a nation's own citizens.
5. TOLL: *Halak*: verse 13; "privilege to walk"; hence, payment for passage through a land.
6. SALT: *Melach*: verse 14. Possibly it means to be rubbed small, or pulverized. Since salt is used to preserve, it was used as a symbol of an enduring, permanent agreement, forever sacred and inviolable. Salt must always accompany offerings (*Lev. 2:13*), as a symbol of a perpetual bond of friendship and loyalty.

SUMMARY

In chapter four, the Samaritans and other neighbors of Jerusalem offer their assistance to rebuild the Temple, but their help is refused. They therefore seek to interrupt the project by using influence in the Persian court, especially by having a deceptive letter written. Their complaint was that the people were rebuilding walls as a threat of rebellion; they made no mention that the Temple was being built. This resulted in a sixteen-year period of progressively intensified delay, and the eventual order to stop all work. The report of the stoppage in verse 24 may be intended to cover more than one single incident; it was the objective of the continued efforts throughout the time period of this chapter, and was the result of all these incidents. Thus matters stood till the second year of Darius' reign.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Of what nationality were the people most opposed to the building?
2. What four kings of Persia are named?
3. What is meant by "beyond the River"?
4. How long was the work stopped?
5. What past kings of Judah were the cause of an extra burden to them now?

Chapter Five

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. What historical events or changing circumstances made it possible to resume construction?
2. How does Darius' character compare with the previous king's?
3. What part did the people credit to God in their varying fortunes?
4. Do you think the letter of Tattenai was written to seek instruction and information or to direct and influence opinions: to help or to hinder the reconstruction?

OUTLINE

In chapter five, the work of rebuilding the Temple is resumed.

- C. The work is resumed by the reign of Darius.
1. The work gets under way (vss. 1-5).
 2. A letter is sent to clarify the situation (vss. 6-17).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- C. The work is resumed by the reign of Darius.
1. The work gets under way.

TEXT, 5:1-5

- 1 When the prophets, Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them,
- 2 then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God which is in Jerusalem; and the prophets of God were with them supporting them.
- 3 At that time Tattenai, the governor of the province beyond the River, and Shethar-bozenai and their colleagues came to them and spoke to them thus, "Who issued you a decree

to rebuild this temple and to finish this structure?"

- 4 Then we told them accordingly what the names of the men were who were reconstructing this building.
- 5 But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until a report should come to Darius, and then a written reply be returned concerning it.

COMMENT

Verse 1 mentions the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah which prodded the people into resumption of the Temple reconstruction. To see how this was accomplished, read the books which bear these prophets' names, especially Hag. 1:4-11 and Zech. 1:16, 17. Zechariah is called the son of Iddo; actually he was his grandson (Zech. 1:1). This word, "son," is used in this way frequently in genealogies. Note again that the meaning of the word, "prophecy," is not restricted to foretelling, but has to do with the conveying of the total message of God: with being God's spokesman.

Speaking in God's name, as is mentioned here, meant more than affixing His name to the proclamation. "Name" indicates "character" in the Bible; to know one's name signifies a knowledge of one's character. The message of Haggai and Zechariah, then, reflected the character of God, according to Ezra's statement.

This verse is peculiar in that it contains several names for God's people: Jews, Judah, Jerusalem, and Israel, all used interchangeably. This could not have been done in every age, especially during the Divided Monarchy, but it was done from Ezra's time on; therefore it is the policy we will follow herein.

Some cultists today try to distinguish between Judah and Israel. They contend that the Jews rejected Jesus but Israel did not; they attempt to link the British (and Americans) with Israel, genealogically, and to say these are God's Chosen People today. It is obvious that Ezra knew nothing of such a distinction. Many other passages in Ezra call the returnees by the name

of Israel (or Sons of Israel): see 2:2, 59, 70; 3:1, 11; 4:3; 6:16, 21. He even calls them "all Israel" in 6:17, which see. We gather from the N.T. (Rev. 3:9) that God is not pleased with those who call themselves Jews and are not. Or Israelites, or Christians, we presume.

Those who returned from captivity were predominantly of the former tribe of Judah, with a healthy sprinkling of persons from the tribes of Benjamin and Levi. It is reasonable to suppose that many from Israel who were carried away by the Assyrians also joined the returnees from Babylon, particularly in the later expeditions. Even without these, however, the company of Judah contained representatives of the other tribes of Israel, who had not been able to go along with the Northern Kingdom's corrupted religious practices during the period of the Divided Monarchy, and who therefore fled to the Southern Kingdom of Judah long before the Captivity had begun (II Chr. 15:9).

This terminology is continued in the N.T., where Matthew (3:5) tells us that "all Jerusalem and Judea" went up to hear John the Baptist, and Luke (Acts 13:24) speaks of John the Baptist's preaching to Israel; and Paul, of the tribe of Benjamin, still refers to himself as an Israelite (Rom. 11:1).

For an explanation of the meaning of these names, see the Word Studies at the end of this chapter.

The main import of *verse 2* is that the influence of four persons, Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Haggai, and Zechariah, was combined to resume the rebuilding of the House of God. One of the events of history that probably affected it was that Darius had become king of Persia, as noted in Ezra 4:24. He was a man of much greater stature and nobility than the previous two; he was more in the mold of Cyrus, a decade earlier.¹ This may have

1. Historians are particularly generous in their estimates of Darius' reign. For a discussion of the comparative merits of these four rulers in Ezra, see Will Durant, *Story of Civilization*, "Our Oriental Heritage," p. 353, where Darius is called the greatest monarch whom Persia ever produced. In the National Geographic Society's *Everyday Life in Bible Times*, p. 291, it is said that at his death he left the greatest empire the world had ever known.

fostered a confidence that they would receive more generous treatment and support in the future.

In *verse 3* Tattenai and Shethar-bozenai are both known from, and their names and offices verified by, contemporary Aramaic correspondence.² Tattenai was governor of all the province west and south of the Euphrates River; on a map this triangle of land would include everything from the border of Babylon to the northeastern tip of the Mediterranean Sea, and down to the border of Egypt. The governors of Syria, Samaria (former Israel), and several other lands would be under his supervision. Shethar-bozenai seems to have been his secretary. The nature of their question was apparently not so much censure as a request for information. Governmental systems such as the Persians are always embarrassed if something is accomplished without their direction and control.

The reply, in *verse 4*, indicates the Jews' willingness to reveal the names of their leaders, with no effort to escape the consequences of their actions. The "we" in this passage is a puzzle, since Ezra was not involved at that stage. One suggestion is that this should be amended to "they"; there would be only a slight difference in the Aramaic, and the change could be accounted for as a scribal error. Or Ezra may be copying official accounts here, and the "we" may be the original participants. Or Ezra may be speaking of his nation as including himself; as a sports fan may say of his team, "We won the game." The fact is, the language of the O.T. abounds in such changes in the use of pronouns; the people did not make the precise differentiations which we are accustomed to in English. An example would be Psalm 23, with its switch from third to second person and back to third person again.

Translations differ also on whether the reference to the names of the men is a statement or a question, as in the KJV. If a question, then it would appear to be saying that they gave adequate answer, and then listed the question which they answered. The text indicates that they were asked the name of

2. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 608.

the person who authorized the construction; they replied with the names of the builders in charge of the reconstruction. Verses 9, 10 will show that both questions were asked by Tattenai.

Verse 5 relates that it was God's approval and power which was basically responsible for the continuation of the work without obstruction. All was being done under His watchful eye. They were determined now to continue their work unless prevented by official action of Darius in written form. Tattenai therefore allowed the work to go on while he continued his investigation.

2. A letter is sent to clarify the situation.

TEXT, 5:6-17

- 6 This is the copy of the letter which Tattenai, the governor of the province beyond the River, and Shethar-bozenai and his colleagues the officials, who were beyond the River, sent to Darius the king.
- 7 They sent a report to him in which it was written thus: "To Darius the king, all peace.
- 8 "Let it be known to the king, that we have gone to the province of Judah, to the house of the great God, which is being built with huge stones, and beams are being laid in the walls; and this work is going on with great care and is succeeding in their hands.
- 9 "Then we asked those elders and said to them thus, 'Who issued you a decree to rebuild this temple and to finish this structure?'
- 10 "We also asked them their names so as to inform you, and that we might write down the names of the men who were at their head.
- 11 "And thus they answered us, saying, 'We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth and are rebuilding the temple that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished.

- 12 'But because our fathers had provoked the God of heaven to wrath, He gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this temple and deported the people to Babylon.
- 13 'However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, King Cyrus issued a decree to rebuild this house of God.
- 14 'And also the gold and silver utensils of the house of God which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, and brought them to the temple of Babylon, these King Cyrus took from the temple of Babylon, and they were given to one whose name was Sheshbazzar, whom he had appointed governor.
- 15 'And he said to him, "Take these utensils, go and deposit them in the temple in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be rebuilt in its place."
- 16 'Then that Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem; and from then until now it has been under construction, and it is not yet completed.'
- 17 "And now, if it pleases the king, let a search be conducted in the king's treasure house, which is there in Babylon, if it be that a decree was issued by King Cyrus to rebuild this house of God at Jerusalem; and let the king send to us his decision concerning this matter."

COMMENT

According to *verse 6*, what follows is an actual copy of Tattenai's letter. It is not accusative nor angry; in fact, it praises Israel's workmanship. It appears to be an honest inquiry concerning a situation which had arisen, for which the governor had insufficient instruction to act.

In the KJV, the "Apharsachites" are mentioned. The KJV has a similar name at Ezra 4:9. Some see this as the name of an unknown tribe. The term is translated "officials" in the NASB. The problem here stems from the fact that the Hebrew alphabet has no separate capitals, therefore it is always difficult to tell

when such a word is a proper noun and should be transliterated, and when it is a description or title and should be translated. However, in the Hebrew text the word has the definite article, which usually means it is to be translated. Thus, "the officials" is preferred, as in the NASB.

Verse 7 gives the heading and salutation of the letter. The phrase, "All peace," is interesting; it is obviously an abbreviated form of a longer greeting such as, "I wish for you all the things that are included in the word, peace," or even, "In all your realm, may there be peace." It may have the force of our "Heartiest greetings."³ The salutation, "Peace," has been used before (4:17), without the additional "all." It has been called the most beautiful word in the Hebrew language. Its Greek equivalent appears in the salutation of almost every letter in the N.T.: in fact, more often than its usual twin, "Grace"! For a fuller treatment of its meaning, see the Word Studies which follow.

Verse 8 states the problem which caused the letter to be written: the resumption of construction on the House of God. A question arises about the placement of the adjective: is it the house which they called great, or is it God? To some, it seems more likely that foreigners would speak of the great temple, instead of the great (Hebrew) God.⁴

But the Temple was not an especially large building. Its dimensions, about 150 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet high (I Ki. 7:2), would provide floor space equal to a basketball gym seating a few hundred spectators, though it would be quite a bit taller. Many ancient buildings, particularly kings' palaces, were much larger than that. On the other hand, even these foreigners could acknowledge the greatness of the God who, from the testimony of the Jews, had influenced the mighty Cyrus to command the reconstruction of His Temple.

A description of the progress on the building follows. The basic material was stone. The wood beams probably were laid

3. Luck; *op. cit.*, p. 40.

4. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 610.

across to support additional floors and the roof. The writer also speaks with commendation for the quality and dispatch of the construction work.

Verse 9 shows their dilemma and repeats their question from verse 3. Rulers must be in charge of everything in their realm; something was going on without their leadership; therefore they must inquire into the authorization back of it.

The purpose of *verse 10* was to demonstrate to their superiors in Persia that they were faithfully looking after Persian interests, and were prepared to provide information about guilty persons if any crime was being committed.

In *verse 11 to 16*, the letter conveys the answer which the Jews gave to justify their actions. Three reasons are cited.

First, their action was a service to the Supreme God over all: heaven and earth (verse 11). The Persians would understand the reference to the God of Heaven; they used the phrase frequently themselves.

Secondly, *verse 11* continues, they were only repeating what one of their great kings (Solomon) had previously done. (The "thirdly" is in *verse 13*.)

Verse 12 is an answer to an unspoken theological question: if their God is supreme, why had He permitted His Temple to be destroyed in the first place, and made necessary the work they were doing at present? Their answer, that God had become angry with them and was punishing them for their sins, shows that they had indeed come to believe the message of their prophets (cf. Amos 2:4, 5 for example), which had seemed so futile when it was given.

Verse 13 gives the information for which the letter seeks confirmation or disproof. Thirdly, then (see *verse 11*), their action was claimed to be backed by the authority of a decree issued by Cyrus.

Verse 14 repeats the information of Ezra 1:7, 8 regarding the temple utensils. Sheshbazzar is named as the governor at the time. Now, and in *verse 16*, we hear once more the name of Sheshbazzar.

Verse 15 records the instructions that Cyrus gave to Sheshbazzar about the disposition of the utensils; this detail is lacking in the first chapter.

With *verse 16* the answer of the Jews is concluded. Sheshbazzar, we note, is credited with laying the foundations of the House of God. Yet Ezra 3:8-10 credits Zerubbabel with this act. Are these the same person, or are they two persons who successively held the same office? This is the last mention of either one in the book of Ezra; all the other references to Zerubbabel in Scripture (in Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah) recite incidents that occurred earlier; Sheshbazzar is mentioned nowhere else in the Scriptures. So at this point we have seen all that the Bible tells on the subject.

Every reference to Sheshbazzar has been in Babylonian or Persian surroundings. His name is itself an indication of Babylonian influence; it is a Babylonian name. In Ezra 1:8, 11 he is placed in charge of the returnees by Cyrus before they leave Babylonia. In Ezra 5:14, 16 his work is described in a letter to the Persian officials.

On the other hand, every reference to Zerubbabel is in Jewish surroundings. The name itself is Hebrew. He is listed in the genealogies of Hebrew kings in I Chr. 3:19. Ezra (2:12; 3:2, 8; 4:2, 3; 5:2) identifies him with the return to Jerusalem and the leadership in the reconstruction of the Temple. Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah also deal with the return and reconstruction from the Jewish point of view, and use only the name, Zerubbabel. Further, there is no passage in which both names appear together. Since the Jewish account of the laying of the foundations uses the name, Zerubbabel, and since the letter addressed to the Persians and written by a Gentile uses the name Sheshbazzar in describing the same event, it seems logical that these are but the Babylonian and Hebrew names of the same person.

Verse 16 closes with the information that the Temple was not yet completed; in the next chapter, *verse 15*, its completion will be reported.

In *verse 17*, Tattenai closes his letter with the request that

the government files be opened and search be made to see if Cyrus had indeed given such an order to rebuild the Temple at Jerusalem. Since it involved people who had been held by the Babylonians and who were being freed from bondage to them, therefore the logical place to look for the letter would be in the Persian offices in Babylon, which was one of the cities from which the Persians ruled their farflung empire.

WORD STUDIES

PEACE: Aramaic, Shelam; Hebrew, Shalom: verse 7. The main idea is wholeness; the verb form is used of being whole, sound, safe, secure, or perfect. Some verses where it is used emphasize health; some, completion; some, peace or friendship; and others, prosperity or reward. Thus the whole round of things, physical and spiritual, that comprise one's well-being, are included in this word.

JERUSALEM: the name was possibly derived from a phrase meaning either "Possession of Peace" or "Foundation of Peace." Some also suggest that the first part of the word may come from the word, "light." Abraham's home town of Ur had this as its name, possibly from the light of many windows, or of fires where people gathered to form a community. It became the word for "city"; coupled with the word just discussed above, it would mean, "City of Peace."

JEW: Yehudi: the adjective form of **JUDAH:** Yehudah. It means, "celebrated, lauded, praised" (of God).

ISRAEL: "Warrior (soldier) of God." The first three letters mean to set in a row: hence, when used of people, to strive or contend (as rows of soldiers do). The ending, El, is the title, God. The person who would set troops in rows would be their chief, or prince: hence the name can mean, "Prince of God," or, "God is Chief."

In two locations (Deut. 32:15; 33:5, 26; Isa. 44:2), Israel is called by a nickname: **JESHURUN**. In Israel's early alphabet

both names would begin with the same letters. The word, Jeshurun, means, "Little straight ones." There may be a contrast between the "straightness" in this word and the "crookedness" in the name, Jacob, which follows.

JACOB: the basic meaning is "heel." It was used of "one who took another by the heel" to trip him up in order to "supplant" him. Since the heel is where there is a crook in the foot, it also meant "crooked, deceiver, one who defrauds." Also, since the heel is the last part of the body to leave a spot, it meant, "end, wages, recompense." So Jacob, who took his brother by the heel to supplant him, became a deceiver and eventually received the natural recompense: he himself was deceived. After this happened, he wrestled with God's messenger and was "straightened out." Perhaps the O.T. shows us similarities between the man and the nation which descended from him: first in their relations with God, and then in their history.

HEBREW: this word comes from the preposition, "beyond," appearing for example in Ezra 4:10; hence it describes the people who came from beyond (the Euphrates, Abraham's original home; Gen. 14:13). The name is derived also from Eber (Gen. 10:24f.) who was one of Abraham's ancestors. The verb form means "to pass over"; appropriately enough, God had allowed them to pass over the Red Sea and the Jordan River in going from Egypt to the Promised Land. Now once more they were coming from beyond the Euphrates.

The name is used interchangeably with "Israel," except that the term, "Hebrew," appears to be the name by which they were known to foreigners, and "Israel" was the name which they called themselves.

The last two terms, Jacob and Hebrew, do not appear in this chapter directly, but are discussed here to give a complete picture.

SUMMARY

After years of inactivity, work on the Temple was resumed when two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, showed this to be

God's will. This raised questions among the next echelon of officials between them and Persia. The Jewish builders did not back down, but insisted that they had authority from the highest Persian ruler for their action, and that their subjection to the Supreme God further required it. A check of official documents was therefore initiated, while the construction work continued.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

Identify the following persons, showing how they were related to the reconstruction of the Temple:

1. Cyrus
2. Darius
3. Haggai
4. Nebuchadnezzar
5. Sheshbazzar
6. Shethar-bozenai
7. Tattenai
8. Zechariah

Chapter Six

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. How did the building that Cyrus authorized compare with the one which Solomon had built?
2. Can you find anything which Darius did, which Cyrus had not done?
3. What do you see in the story that reflects the religious training which was maintained during the captivity?
4. How did the sacrifices compare with those made at the dedication of the first temple?
5. What feasts or offerings are particularly mentioned, and how were they appropriate for the occasion?
6. What help did God give them in this enterprise?

OUTLINE

- D. The Temple is completed and dedicated.
1. The Royal Edict authorizing construction was found (vss. 1-5).
 2. Darius consequently issued a decree directing the construction (vss. 6-12).
 3. The work was completed and the building was dedicated (vss. 13-18).
 4. Services were resumed, especially the Passover (vss. 19-22).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

D. The Temple is completed and dedicated.

1. The Royal Edict authorizing construction is found.

TEXT, Ezra 6:1-5

- 1 Then King Darius issued a decree, and search was made in the archives, where the treasures were stored in Babylon.
- 2 And in Ecbatana in the fortress, which is in the province of Media, a scroll was found and there was written in it as follows: "Memorandum—

- 3 "In the first year of King Cyrus, Cyrus the king issued a decree: 'Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the temple, the place where sacrifices are offered, be rebuilt and let its foundations be retained, its height being 60 cubits and its width 60 cubits;
- 4 with three layers of huge stones, and one layer of timbers. And let the cost be paid from the royal treasury.
- 5 'And also let the gold and silver utensils of the temple of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took from the temple in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be returned and brought to their places in the temple in Jerusalem; and you shall put them in the house of God.'

COMMENT

Verse 1 speaks of Darius' directing the search for the document in question at the government library in Babylon, as requested in 5:17. It was not an unusual place to look for Persian records; here the "Cylinder of Cyrus" was found by recent archeologists. Nevertheless, their search was unproductive.

The fact that the archives were kept in the treasury building is characteristic of the times; the temples themselves often served the functions of our libraries in preserving ancient volumes, of our county courthouses in storing legal documents, and also of our banks in guarding the government funds and in making loans to the needy.

Verse 2 gives the location where the document was found: at Ecbatana (Achmetha). Cyrus had divided his time each year between three capitals, the one in Media being located in Ecbatana, the one in Persia at Susa, and one in the city of Babylon.

What follows in *verses 3-5* is either an extract or the full official written version of Cyrus' original order. Ezra 1:2-4 probably gives the oral version which was announced in Babylonian cities where the Hebrew captives lived.

Verse 3 gives the proposed dimensions of the reconstructed temple; it would have been twice as high, and three times as wide as Solomon's original (I Ki. 6:2). Since this is much larger than what was actually constructed, these figures must have been intended as maximums. Its size would have been most imposing: 90 ft. high, and 90 ft. wide; the length is not stated, but would presumably be double the width. The length of the former building would have become the width of the new.

Verse 4 duplicates the details of construction of the original edifice given in I Ki. 6:36. Work was to be financed from Persian government funds: this detail apparently was never carried out.

Verse 5 relates the order for the restitution of the temple furnishings, which the first returning captives brought with them (1:7-11). Darius would honor this decree of Cyrus, for reasons explained in Esther 1:19.

2. Darius' decree ordering the reconstruction.

TEXT, 6:6-12

- 6 "Now therefore, Tattenai, governor of the province beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and your colleagues, the officials of the provinces beyond the River, keep away from there.
- 7 "Leave this work on the house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site.
- 8 "Moreover, I issue a decree concerning what you are to do for these elders of Judah in the rebuilding of this house of God: the full cost is to be paid to these people from the royal treasury out of the taxes of the provinces beyond the River, and that without delay.
- 9 "And whatever is needed, both young bulls, rams, and lambs for a burnt offering to the God of heaven, and wheat, salt, wine, and anointing oil, as the priests in Jerusalem request, it is to be given to them daily without fail,

- 10 that they may offer acceptable sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the life of the king and his sons.
- 11 "And I issued a decree that any man who violates this edict, a timber shall be drawn from his house and he shall be impaled on it and his house shall be made a refuse heap on account of this.
- 12 "And may the God who has caused his name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who attempts to change it, so as to destroy this house of God in Jerusalem. I, Darius, have issued this decree, let it be carried out with all diligence."

COMMENT

Verse 6 begins abruptly, suggesting that the introduction of Darius' letter has been omitted, to get immediately to the issue. In effect, Tattenai and Shethar-bozenai are commanded in *verses 6 and 7* not to interfere. The phrase, "keep away from there," apparently was an Aramaic legal formula for such occasions.¹

Verse 8 specifies that tax money is to be provided from the general area between the Mediterranean Sea and the Euphrates River to pay the total cost. We may wonder why a Persian ruler would give first priority to this project; *verse ten* will furnish an answer.

Verse 9 lists the various items for Israel's sacrifices that were also to be furnished daily and financed from the public treasury. Evidently they had inquired of Israel's priests what would be needed. Since every day was to begin and end with a burnt offering (Num. 28:3-6), this need was specifically anticipated. Wine was a frequent part of offerings (Ex. 29:40f.; Lev. 23:13). And so was oil; it is mentioned particularly at the anointing of priests for service (Lev. 8:30). Incidentally, Darius is known to have ordered a similar list of supplies for the Hebrew community in Egypt.²

1. *Anchor Bible*, "Ezra-Nehemiah," p. 50.

2. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 618.

This list is notable in that it corresponds exactly with instructions in Leviticus: bulls, rams, lambs (Lev. 1:5, 10), accompanied by wheat and salt (Lev. 2:1).

In *verse 10*, two reasons are given for Darius' action. For the benefit of the community of Israel, the offerings would be pleasing to their God. For the benefit of the Persians, the priests were asked to pray for the king and his sons, that is, the total officialdom. This would not have been considered unreasonable; Jeremiah (29:7) had urged prayers for the Babylonian rulers when many of Israel's citizens were under this authority. Paul recommends the same course of action in the N.T. (I Tim. 2:1, 2) respecting Roman rulers. The surprise is that the mighty Persian ruler would request a handful of subjugated, impoverished people whom he was befriending to pray to their strange God for him!

Verse 11 threatens any violator with painful death, and the reduction of his home to an outhouse. This comes as a shock if we have become acclimated to expecting kindness from the Persians. The Assyrians and Babylonians were noted for their sadism, including the impaling of victims on pointed posts to induce lingering death; but the Persians followed a policy of benevolence toward their enemies to encourage rapid surrender. But this is another matter, having to do with the enforcing of justice.

It is obvious from Persian accounts that they were acquainted with both impalement and crucifixion as a means of punishing criminals. Herodotus,³ the Greek who recorded Persian history, speaks of Persian crucifixions, though they are like those with which Julius Caesar⁴ later punished pirates, in that the victims were first killed and then affixed to crosses.

In *verse 12* Darius invokes a curse in the name of Israel's God on anyone who would change his decree so that the temple would be destroyed. Dr. Ironside⁵ mentions that this curse was

3. *Great Books of The Western World*, Vol. VI, p. 123.

4. Suetonius, *The Lives of The Twelve Caesars*, p. 48.

5. Ironside, *ibid*, p. 55.

fulfilled in the case of Antiochus Epiphanes, of Herod (who altered the Temple), and of the Romans in AD 70. However, there is no need to insist on a literal fulfilment here; after all, the curse is only the pronouncement of the pagan Darius. (Nevertheless, the same idea is expressed in Gen. 12:3.) We may ask, has God bound Himself to carry out the curse pronounced in His name by a pagan? It is noteworthy that when Solomon dedicated the previous Temple, he recognized that God might destroy it because of the people's sins, and Solomon did not pray for the destruction in turn of its destroyers: only for Israel's restoration if they returned to God (I Ki. 8).

The mention in *verse 12* that God "has caused His name to dwell there" may be supported by Deut. 12:5, 11 and I Ki. 5:5. Here again the "name" means more than a word written on the front of a building; it is a promise of His personal presence.

3. The completion of the building, and its dedication

TEXT, 6:13-18

- 13 Then Tattenai, the governor of the province beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their colleagues carried out the decree with all diligence, just as King Darius had sent.
- 14 And the elders of the Jews were successful in building through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they finished building according to the command of the God of Israel and the decree of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia.
- 15 And this temple was completed on the third day of the month Adar; it was the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.
- 16 And the sons of Israel, the priests, the Levites, and the rest of the exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy.
- 17 And they offered for the dedication of this temple of God 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel 12 male goats, corresponding to the number of tribes of Israel.

18 Then they appointed the priests to their divisions and the Levites in their orders for the service of God in Jerusalem, as it is written in the book of Moses.

COMMENT

Verse 13 shows the result which Darius' decree had made: it was meticulously obeyed.

Verse 14, like the dedication plate on a new post office, lists all the people responsible for the construction, from the God of Israel who commanded it, through three administrations of kings, two prophets, Israel's governor and high priest, and down to the elders. The name of Artaxerxes raises questions. Surely this is not the Artaxerxes of 4:7, 23, who held up construction!

One alternative is to see a reference to the Artaxerxes of the next chapter (7:12, 21), whose cooperation gave life to the ceremonies in the new building. So Ezra may include him here because the restoration would have been incomplete without his contribution.

Another possibility is that all three names may be different titles for Darius.⁶

But the first idea is not impossible; it was a fact of history that a part of the construction had taken place during his rule, before he blocked its continuation. His being mentioned out of sequence and placed last may be just as an afterthought, suggesting his little importance to the project.

Verse 15 gives the date for its completion. Adar would be the twelfth month, about our February-March. Construction has occupied four and a half years.

In *verse 16* the description of the dedication begins. There are no tears as in 3:12: only joy. Dedications after extensive repairs had also been conducted by Josiah (II Chr. 30:17) and Hezekiah (II-Chr. 35:11).

6. *Anchor Bible*, p. 50.

Verse 17 describes two kinds of sacrifice. The one for dedication would be the burnt offering (Lev. 1), in which all of the edible meat of the animals would be consumed in fire, thus representing total consecration. This offering was always appropriate at dedication services.

The other, the sin offering, would be appropriate as they draw the curtain over the long years of suffering in exile because of their sins, as they celebrate God's forgiveness. We can't help noticing the number twelve, a goat for each of the tribes of Israel (cf. Num. 7). Again it is obvious that they regarded themselves as the remnant of all the tribes. It was an appropriate gesture, for this was the first time in almost four centuries, since the division of the nation under Rehoboam and Jeroboam, that all Israel had been able to worship together in one temple.

Admittedly, Elijah had called attention to the twelve tribes which had received God's word, when he built his altar of twelve stones (I Ki. 18:31). And some seventy-eight years before the incident recorded here, Israel had rejoiced together (Ezra 3:1-3, 11). But in neither case were they worshiping in a temple.

The 100 bulls, 200 rams, and 400 lambs (total 700) of the burnt offering may be contrasted by Solomon's 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep (total, 144,000) in I Ki. 8:63.

Also, there was no mention of fire descending from heaven, as at Solomon's dedication service (II Chr. 7:1, 2). But the people may have reflected on encouraging words from Haggai (2:9) that the temple would be more glorious in the future than it had ever been in the past.

Verse 18 witnesses the reinstatement of the priests and Levites to their duties in the House of God, as specified by Moses (Num. 3:6, 10; 8:9).

With verse 18, this Aramaic portion of Ezra ends.

4. The Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread observed

TEXT, 6:19-22

19 And the exiles observed the Passover on the fourteenth of the first month.

- 20 For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together; all of them were pure. Then they slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the exiles, both for their brothers the priests and for themselves.
- 21 And the sons of Israel who returned from the exile and all those who had separated themselves from the impurity of the nations of the land to join them, to seek the LORD God of Israel, ate the Passover.
- 22 And they observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the Lord had caused them to rejoice, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them to encourage them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

COMMENT

Verse 19 takes us to the next major event at the Temple: the observance of the Passover in the following month, after the pattern of Ex. 12. We see the appropriateness of the feast for the occasion as it is a reminder of the event which gave birth to their nation; now they were celebrating its rebirth.

Verse 20 reports a deviation from previous practice relating to the Passover: the Levites now slaughtered the lambs as a service to the people and even the priests.

In *verse 21*, it is not clear whether the sons of Israel and those who had separated themselves from the impurity of the nations are the same or two different groups. This could refer to Israel and to the Gentile proselytes or else Jewish backsliders. Or it could be commenting on the fact that Israel was now at last cleansed from her impure associations with the heathen. Since the second group joined the first, to seek Israel's God, it would be more reasonable to see here a host of foreigners, similar to the mixed multitude (Ex. 12:38) when Israel left Egypt, who joined with them now in the worship of the true God.

In *verse 22*, the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread followed and was a continuation of the Passover. As the removal of all

leaven from their houses symbolized the purging out of all their old sins, so now they were wiping the slate clean of heathen involvement going all the way back to the Canaanites and the conquest under Joshua, and which had reached its logical end in their being led away by foreigners.

The prayer of Solomon (I Ki. 8:50) was now answered, as God turned the heart of the king in sympathy toward them.

One problem remains: what is the king of Assyria doing here? This may be a way of referring to the king of the Persian empire, which had conquered the conquerors of Assyria and whose empire now succeeded and encompassed theirs. This loose kind of reference was common in that day, so it is possible. But why would the author choose the confusing term, king of Assyria, in place of the simple term which he had been using previously, i.e., the king of Persia? It may be a deliberate effort to remind the reader of that series of events that began with the Assyrian invasion of Israel, and that the entire era had now come to a welcome close. What one king of Assyria had begun to destroy, God caused another king over the land of Assyria to repair.

One further comment on the chapter: note the joy in verses 16 and 22. This we are assured was the result of their keeping the Lord's commands, and will be the result equally of our attention to His Word.

WORD STUDIES

DARIUS: Preserver, conservator. His name very aptly describes the character of his reign. Cyrus had brought the nation to greatness, and Darius preserved and extended that which Cyrus had begun.

BURNT OFFERING: that which ascends. (The base of this word appears in the second component of the name of the Israeli airline, EL AL.) Two ideas may be present: (1) the total offering ascended in smoke to God, or (2) the priest ascended to the altar with the offering.

PASSOVER: (Pasach: the word, "Paschal," comes from this.) To leap over, or pass over (a stream, for example). When God passed over the doors of the Israelites, they were spared, or delivered (Ex. 12:13, 27). Therefore the word almost always refers to this sparing or deliverance.

UNLEAVENED: (The word, "matzoth," comes from this): the word imitates the sound of sucking something out with relish: hence, something sweet, i.e., unleavened or unfermented.

SUMMARY

Darius initiated a search that turned up Cyrus' original order for the rebuilding of the Temple with government funds. He therefore ordered the co-operation of the officials in the total Beyond-Euphrates area, of which Israel was a part, in collecting funds and in permitting the reconstruction.

Violators were to be punished with the full severity of which the law was capable. All ranks of leaders in Israel, religious and secular, institutional (priests) and individual (prophets), got behind the project and speeded it to completion in a little more than four years. With joy the citizens of Israel celebrated at the dedication ceremonies; sin offerings, and renewal of the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread. All of these were done to follow the pattern of worship handed down by Moses.

Because this chapter marks the end of an era, some regard it as the end of the seventy years of captivity prophesied by Jeremiah. The beginning would be counted from 586 B.C., when Jerusalem was finally overthrown and the last of the captives carried off.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How was Cyrus involved in the Temple's restoration?
2. Where was Cyrus' decree found?
3. How had Cyrus wanted the work to be financed?
4. How long did it take to complete the work?
5. Whose writings guided them in their sacrifices?

Chapter Seven

The one theme which runs through chapter seven is the qualifications, or credentials, of the man Ezra. A new age is being born. As in the days of Moses, or David, or Elijah, or Jesus, attention must be focused on the question of legitimacy, or authority, of the new leader or new forms. Of course the forms need no confirmation: they are simply those from the time of Moses, being reinstated; but the man must be subjected to scrutiny.

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Why do you suppose Ezra put so much emphasis on his credentials? Who would have questioned these?
2. Why do you suppose Ezra wanted to go on this mission?
3. What qualifications did he have for the assignment?
4. What help did he get from God?

OUTLINE

Through chapters 7 - 10 we see Ezra's involvement in the restoration of Israel and its religious forms.

III. Ezra Becomes Involved In The Restoration of Israel (7:1—10:44)

A. Ezra leads a second band of returnees back to Israel, and gives God thanks.

1. Who Ezra was, and what he was doing (vss. 1-10).
2. Authorization from King Artaxerxes (vss. 11-26).
3. Ezra's thanksgiving and compliance (vss. 27-28).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

III. Ezra Becomes Involved In The Restoration of Israel (7:1—10:44)

A. Ezra leads a second band of returnees back to Israel, and gives God thanks.

1. Who Ezra was, and what he was doing.

TEXT, 7:1-10

- 1 Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, there went up Ezra son of Seraiah, son of Azariah,

- son of Hilkiah,
 2 son of Shallum, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub,
 3 son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Meraioth,
 4 son of Zerariah, son of Uzzi, son of Bukki,
 5 son of Abishua, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the chief priest.
 6 This Ezra went up from Babylon, and he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all he requested because the hand of the LORD his God was upon him.
 7 And some of the sons of Israel and some of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants went up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes.
 8 And he came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king.
 9 For on the first of the first month he began to go up from Babylon; and on the first of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, because the good hand of his God was upon him.
 10 For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD, and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.

COMMENT

In the fifty-seven-year break between the close of chapter six (515 B.C.) and the beginning of chapter seven (458 B.C.), the events of the book of Esther have taken place. Israel has been spared once more, and has responded by introducing the Feast of Purim.

Verse 1 takes up the story then with Artaxerxes (Longimanus), son of the Ahasuerus of the book of Esther. This is a different Artaxerxes from the one mentioned in 4:7. Ezra for the first time is mentioned as a participant of the events in the book. In this section he lists at least six qualifications or credentials which authorized his action. (1) In verses 1 through 5 he traces his ancestry back to Aaron, from whom all priests must be

descended. Like many of the genealogies of the O.T., it included only the more significant names; there are frequent omissions. By reversing the order of the names in Ezra 7:1-5 and comparing them with those in I Chr. 6:7-14, it will be seen that Ezra includes one name not in Chronicles, and Chronicles has seven names not in Ezra. "Son of" therefore often indicated "descended of" in the language of their time.

For example, in verse 1 Ezra is called the son of Seraiah. Seraiah is mentioned as the high priest during the time of Nebuchadnezzar, several generations before (II Ki. 25:6-10, 18-21). Ezra was a priest; this is specifically stated in verse 11, and in 10:10. Josephus¹ calls him the principal priest among the Jews in Babylonia, which is called Babylon in our next verse. It is to be observed, however, that the Bible text never calls him the high priest; the holder of that office is not named.

(2) *Verse 6* speaks of his personal skill in handling the law of Moses. This is the first mention of a scribe in the Bible: an order which Ezra may have helped to create. It would be his function not simply to make copies of the law, but to be an expositor of its meaning. The scribes are frequently mentioned in the N.T.

We note also the assertion that God had given the law to Moses.

(3) *Verse 6* continues by testifying that his authority came from the king, who approved his request for permission to go.

(4) *Verse 6* then adds the information that he had the favor of God Himself, and this had caused the king to approve of him.

(5) *Verses 7 to 9* say that he passed the pragmatic test: he succeeded. The group which accompanied him is described in *verse 7* as containing much the same kinds of people as in the first band, in chapter two.

Verse 8 states the time of their arrival, just four months after their departure as stated in *verse 9*. This was a reasonable amount of time for an expedition made up of people of various ages, although it is reported that merchants would make the trip in twenty-five days.² Total distance was about 900 miles, which

1. *Antiquities*, XI, 5.1, p. 271.

2. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 641.

would indicate a speed averaging nine miles a day.³

(6) In *verse 10*, there is the further authority that comes from adequate preparation. Three things Ezra had set his heart (i.e., mind, as also in vs. 27)⁴ to do, and these are models for any who would serve God today. He determined to begin intellectually by studying God's law. Added to that was action: to obey, or do, or practice it. Then he would share it with others; he would teach these statutes and ordinances to his brethren.

2. The letter of Artaxerxes

TEXT; 7:11-26

- 11 Now this is the copy of the decree which King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, learned in the words of the commandments of the LORD and His statutes to Israel:
- 12 "Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, perfect peace. And now
- 13 I have issued a decree that any of the people of Israel and their priests and the Levites in my kingdom who are willing to go to Jerusalem, may go with you.
- 14 "Forasmuch as you are sent by the king and his seven counselors to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God which is in your hand,
- 15 and to bring the silver and gold, which the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem,
- 16 with all the silver and gold which you shall find in the whole province of Babylon, along with the freewill offering of the people and of the priests, who offered willingly for the house of their God which is in Jerusalem;
- 17 with this money, therefore, you shall diligently buy bulls,

3. *Anchor Bible*, "Ezra-Nehemiah," p. 72.

4. In the O.T., the heart thinks and makes decisions: the feeling comes from the abdomen.

- rams, and lambs, with their grain offerings and their libations and offer them on the altar of the house of your God which is in Jerusalem.
- 18 "And whatever seems good to you and to your brothers to do with the rest of the silver and gold, you may do according to the will of your God.
- 19 "Also the utensils which are given to you for the service of the house of your God, deliver in full before the God of Jerusalem.
- 20 "And the rest of the needs for the house of your God, for which you may have occasion to provide, provide for it from the royal treasury.
- 21 "And I, even I King Artaxerxes, issue a decree to all the treasurers who are in the provinces beyond the River, that whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, may require of you, it shall be done diligently,
- 22 even up to 100 talents of silver, 100 kors of wheat, 100 baths of wine, 100 baths of oil, and salt as needed.
- 23 "Whatever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be done with zeal for the house of the God of heaven, lest there be wrath against the kingdom of the king and his sons.
- 24 "We also inform you that it is not allowed to impose tax, tribute or toll on any of the priests, Levites, singers, door-keepers, Nethinim, or servants of this house of God.
- 25 "And you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God which is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges that they may judge all the people who are in the province beyond the River, even all those who know the laws of your God; and you may teach anyone who is ignorant of them.
- 26 "And whoever will not observe the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be executed upon him strictly, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of goods or for imprisonment."

COMMENT

Verse 11 introduces us to Artaxerxes' letter giving Ezra his authority. Ezra is identified in full, by both of his positions, as a priest and a scribe.

Verse 12 is the salutation of the letter. Verses 12 through 26 are in Aramaic, indicating again that Ezra has inserted an official document. Artaxerxes is called king of kings, a title he may have borrowed from the Babylonians (Dan. 2:37).

Verses 13 and 14 are the heart of the letter, declaring authorization for Ezra to go, and to be accompanied by as many as desired, of his brethren.

Verse 14 has a reference to the structure of the government; the seven counsellors are also referred to in Esther 1:14.

Verses 15 to 20 portray the articles which they were to transport back to their homeland. *Verse 15* emphasizes that the king and his counsellors made a healthy contribution; this is another recognition by the state of the value which religion has in maintaining a wholesome society.

Verse 16 adds to this the free-will offerings particularly of their remaining brethren in Babylon, plus what they could find throughout the province: probably contributions from Babylonian individuals and businesses as a gesture of good will to these people who had been their neighbors for the past few generations.

Verse 17 recommends that they purchase necessary materials for sacrifice; the king could have learned from Ezra what would be acceptable; the list resembles that in 6:9.

Verse 18 gives them some leeway to make personal decisions, in harmony with the pleasure of their God, in the use of any superfluous funds for the decoration of the Temple. There is always a place for a little extra flourish in worship.

Verse 19 specifies that these articles must be faithfully delivered in Jerusalem.

Verse 20 gives authorization to call upon the royal treasury for any additional funds which they may need. The royal treasury would belong to the king himself; thus they are promised access to the highest government source of all.

Verses 21 to 24 give instructions to all the treasurers of the surrounding provinces to give Ezra their co-operation, within certain financial limits as specified.

The 100 silver talents of *verse 22* would come to a weight of

650 pounds;⁵ the 100 kors of wheat would be 1167 bushels; the 100 baths of wine, 900 gallons; the same amount of oil; and don't spare the salt!

These governments would have a ready store of such supplies to assist the travelers because much of their taxes were collected in produce rather than money.

Verse 23 explains the reason for this generosity: the Persian ruler would hesitate to incur the wrath of any deity lest his kingdom suffer the consequences. In fact, "Egyptian records reveal both Persian interest in the sacrificial cultus of their subjects and Persian generosity in supporting it."⁶

It was also their policy to try to keep their subject peoples contented, to assure the continued peace and prosperity of their empire. It may, indeed, be that God approved and blessed this policy, for "In the seventh year of Artaxerxes, B.C. 458, the tide of success turned for Persia against the Athenians in Egypt."⁷

Verse 24 adds the further support to the cause of religion that all of Israel's religious officials be totally exempted from taxation.

The last part of the letter, *verses 25 and 26*, were addressed directly to Ezra.

In *verse 25*, he was to be guided by the wisdom (i.e., laws) of God in appointing rulers and judges throughout his country. In this way Ezra was placed over all the Jews, that is, those who knew the law of his God. He could also instruct those who were ignorant⁸ of these laws; either he was given authority to seek to recover all Jews who had backslidden and had forsaken the law, or to proselytize all others within their country's borders who had other religions. In many ways these scriptures describe the Persian government as one of the most generous and enlightened of ancient times.

Verse 26 gave Ezra the right to employ the full weight of

5. These figures are taken from *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 629.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ellicott's Commentary on The Whole Bible*, Vol. III, p. 473.

8. See "Word Studies," end of this chapter.

government to punish all who violated either the religious or the civil law. The description which we have of Ezra's character suggests that he would be reluctant to use such powers.

3. Ezra's thanksgiving and compliance

TEXT, 7:27, 28

- 27 Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to adorn the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem,
28 and has extended lovingkindness to me before the king and his counselors and before all the king's mighty princes. Thus I was strengthened according to the hand of the LORD my God upon me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.

COMMENT

In *verse 27* Ezra pours out his heart in gratitude to God for inciting the king to do so much for the Temple at Jerusalem. Note the personal tone of these words!

Verse 28 continues Ezra's thanks, now for God's graciousness to him personally. Because the hand of God was upon him to bless (for the opposite expression, where the hand of God is against someone, see Ruth 1:13), Ezra was strengthened and encouraged to lead the band of returnees back to their homeland.

The reference to leading men from Israel is taken to be a designation of laymen, as opposed to Levites:⁹ see Ezra 2:2, 7:13. The next chapter will begin with this distinction.

⁹ H. E. Ryle, D.D., *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, "Ezra and Nehemiah," p. 98.

WORD STUDIES

SCRIBE: (vs. 6): to scratch, scrape, write; thus a secretary or scribe; then it became a designation of one skilled in the sacred books and in the law.

TEACH (vs. 10): Lamad (“Talmud” comes from this word). To beat with a rod, chastise, hence to train, teach, accustom. It is the name of the twelfth letter of the Hebrew or Aramaic alphabets, and in its early form it looked like a whip. This is apparently a recognition that to be taught, one must often be willing to accept some discomfort and discipline.

TEACH (vs. 25): Yeda: to cause to see, perceive, understand, know. Our word, “idea,” may come from it.

IGNORANT (vs. 25): not to know (see above). Some are ignorant because they have had no opportunity to know. Of course, some have rejected the opportunity to know (Hos. 4:6). One who simply does not know is an excellent prospect for teaching. This would be a good description of Gentiles, in the O.T.

(This is a different word from that used of “sins of ignorance” [Lev. 4:2], which indicates wandering or straying unconsciously.)

SUMMARY

Ezra chose to go up to Israel from Babylonia, taking more of the exiles with him. He was qualified as a leader since he was a priest, descended from Aaron. He had further prepared himself by study and practice, that he might be a leader of his people. God gave him favor before the king, who recognized his capabilities, approved his mission, and contributed substantially to the fund for supplies and furnishings for the Temple. Ezra proved his qualifications because the trip was successful; he brought the returning exiles, with the contributions from both the government and private sources, to Israel.

King Artaxerxes furnished Ezra with a letter permitting the transportation of all these materials, and ordering the full

co-operation of the neighboring tribes in the province in providing supplies for the expedition. Ezra is then put in charge of selecting officials and judges to govern Israel and to teach his religion throughout the community. Ezra expressed his gratitude to God, whose will he saw being done in all of this.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who was the king who commissioned Ezra to go to Israel?
2. List the three goals that Ezra had set for his life.
3. What responsibilities of government were placed upon Ezra?
4. What two reasons did Ezra have to be thankful to God?

Chapter Eight

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Do you think the figures in vss. 3-14 are round numbers or exact numbers? How many do not end in a zero?
2. Do you think Ezra would suggest (vs. 22) that the church rely less on government help, and more on God's care? Are the two always mutually exclusive?
3. Note the meticulous care that Ezra takes to organize everything, and to put others in charge of all valuables. Whom was he doing this for?
4. How was God's help apparent to them in making this trip?

OUTLINE

In chapter 8, details of the trip are given: the leaders of the returnees are listed, along with the treasures which they brought with them.

- B. Lists are given of returnees, and treasures which they carried back; the treasures are delivered.
 1. The list of exiles returning with Ezra (vss. 1-14).
 2. Addition of Levites to the company (vss. 15-20).
 3. Leave-taking ceremonies (vss. 21-23).
 4. The treasures, and how they were handled (vss. 24-30).
 5. The journey, and arrival at Jerusalem (vss. 31-36).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- B. Lists are given of returnees, and treasures which they carried back; the treasures are delivered.
 1. The list of returnees is given.

TEXT, 8:1-14

- 1 Now these are the heads of their fathers' households and the genealogical enrollment of those who went up with me from Babylon in the reign of King Artaxerxes:
- 2 of the sons of Phinehas, Gershom; of the sons of Ithamar, Daniel; of the sons of David, Hattush;

- 3 of the sons of Shecaniah who was of the sons of Parosh, Zechariah and with him 150 males who were in the genealogical list;
- 4 of the sons of Pahath-moab, Eliehoenai the son of Zerariah and 200 males with him;
- 5 of the sons of Shecaniah, the son of Jahaziel and 300 males with him;
- 6 and of the sons of Adin, Ebed the son of Jonathan and 50 males with him;
- 7 and of the sons of Elam, Jeshaiiah the son of Athaliah and 70 males with him;
- 8 and of the sons of Shephatiah, Zebadiah the son of Michael and 80 males with him;
- 9 of the sons of Joab, Obadiah the son of Jehiel and 218 males with him;
- 10 and of the sons of Shelomith, the son of Josiphiah and 160 males with him;
- 11 and of the sons of Bebai, Zechariah the son of Bebai and 28 males with him;
- 12 and of the sons of Azgad, Johanan the son of Hakkatan and 110 males with him;
- 13 and of the sons of Adonikam, the last ones, these being their names, Eliphelet, Jeuel, and Shemaiah and 60 males with them;
- 14 and of the sons of Bigvai, Uthai and Zabbud and 70 males with them.

COMMENT

Verse 1 states the intention of listing only the names of heads of households, and identifying the families, or clans, from which they were descended.

Verse 2 begins the list with three persons in a special category: priests and royalty. Note the contrast with the list in chapter two, which ended rather than began with priests.

Two lines of priests were descended from Aaron: one through his third son, Eleazar, and his grandson, Phinehas: Ezra was

included in this line (7:1-5). The other was through Eleazar's younger brother, Ithamar. Both lines had a representative here.

Royalty was represented by a descendant of David.

Although no numbers are given, there were obviously other members in these three families in this first group. Twelve other priests are alluded to, two by name, in 8:24.

Verses 3-14 apparently name the "leading men from Israel" mentioned in 7:28. Twelve groups are included, possibly as reminders of the twelve tribes, though not necessarily descended from them; no effort is made to link each with a separate specific tribe. While the names of individuals are new, all but one of the clans (i.e., Shelomith) are among those mentioned in Ezra 2:1-15. The total of all the families is 1496, plus Ezra and the three names of verse two.

2. Levites are added to the company.

TEXT, 8:15-20

- 15 Now I assembled them at the river that runs to Ahava, where we camped for three days; and when I observed the people and the priests, I did not find any Levites there.
- 16 So I sent for Eliezer, Ariel, Shemaiah, Elnathan, Jarib, Elnathan, Nathan, Zechariah, and Meshullam, leading men, and for Joiarib and Elnathan, teachers.
- 17 And I sent them to Iddo the leading man at the place Casiphia, and I told them what to say to Iddo and his brothers, the temple servants at the place Casiphia, that is, to bring ministers to us for the house of our God.
- 18 And according to the good hand of our God upon us they brought us a man of insight of the sons of Mahli, the son of Levi, the son of Israel, namely Sherebiah, and his sons and brothers, 18 men;
- 19 and Hashabiah and Jeshaiiah of the sons of Merari, with his brothers and their sons, 20 men;
- 20 and 220 of the temple servants, whom David and the princes had given for the service of the Levites, all of them designated by name.

COMMENT

Verse 15 names the staging area: the river to Ahava. While its precise location cannot be identified, it may have been a canal close by Babylon, possibly at a fork in the trade routes leading north and west. Here the Israelite worshipers may have been accustomed to meeting, for such sites are mentioned elsewhere. Psalm 137:1, for example, is descriptive of Israel's days in captivity:

“By the rivers of Babylon,
There we sat down and wept,
When we remembered Zion.”

Much later, a Jewish traveling preacher far from home sought out a riverside, supposing he would find others of his religious background there; and yes, there was such a faithful company gathered for prayer; and among them was Lydia (Ac. 16:13).

A look around the encampment uncovered a startling fact: no one was there of the Levites, those assigned by God to be servants in the Temple. There were only people and priests, in the verses above. Ezra, as a priest, would be painfully conscious of this omission.

Verse 16 gives his solution to the problem: leaders were chosen to seek out recruits. Only two of the names are the same as those in vss. 3-14, showing that these were farther down in the ranks of leadership.

In *verse 17*, these leaders are sent to Casiphia (location unknown) where a number of Levites and temple servants resided. The verse is a reminder that “minister” is another word for “servant.”

Verses 18-20 tell the result: the names of leaders, and number of those who decided to accompany them (total, 258). We may wonder why this group of people would be willing to cut themselves off from their homes and surroundings so abruptly, and how they could start off on a four-month trip with just a few days' notice. There would certainly be job security for them in employment at the Temple. There is always the basic desire to do something pleasing to God. While it may not be easy for

everyone to be ready to travel at a moment's notice, there are a few in any society who are capable of this. Those who were willing to go are certainly worthy of our attention and admiration.

Mahli, in *verse 18*, is the son of Merari, and the grandson of Levi according to Ex. 6:19. This demonstrates again how the term, "son," was used in genealogies.

Verse 19, oddly enough, does use the name of Merari, which was omitted between Levi and Mahli in the previous verse.

Verse 20: the order of the temple servants, assigned to the tribe of Levi by David, has been mentioned before in 2:43.

3. Leave-taking ceremonies were conducted.

TEXT, 8:21-23

- 21 Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from Him a safe journey for us, our little ones, and all our possessions.
- 22 For I was ashamed to request from the king troops and horsemen to protect us from the enemy on the way, because we had said to the king, "The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him, but His power and His anger are against all those who forsake Him."
- 23 So we fasted and sought our God concerning this matter, and He listened to our entreaty.

COMMENT

Verse 21 mentions that they fasted as a mark of their humility, in seeking God's care for their journey. Here we have definite mention that children were included in their band.

Verse 22 states Ezra's reticence to ask the king for any help further than what was already given. The reason expressed is that they had spoken of the great power of God, and to ask for

a guard would imply distrust in God's power to protect. Had Ezra opened his mouth rashly, and now found himself too embarrassed and too proud to seek necessary military protection? Was he forcing God to go to unusual measures to protect them? If this was the case, it would sound much like tempting God. It may well be that his action rose also out of a distrust of any military escort which may have been furnished; some have been known to be as thieving as any marauders they might encounter on the road. At any rate, Ezra's trust in God was greater than any trust in human help. If he had to choose between one or the other, we would judge he made the wiser choice.

Verse 23 indicates that God confirmed this decision of Ezra's.

4. They took along certain treasures, which were entrusted to priests on the journey and were delivered safely at Jerusalem.

TEXT, 8:24-30

- 24 Then I set apart twelve of the leading priests, Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and with them ten of their brothers;
- 25 and I weighed out to them the silver, the gold, and the utensils, the offering for the house of our God which the king and his counselors and his princes, and all Israel present there, had offered.
- 26 Thus I weighed into their hands 650 talents of silver, and silver utensils worth 100 talents, and gold talents,
- 27 and 20 gold bowls, worth 1,000 darics; and two utensils of fine shiny bronze, precious as gold.
- 28 Then I said to them, "You are holy to the LORD, and the utensils are holy; and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering to the LORD God of your fathers.
- 29 "Watch and keep them until you weigh them before the leading priests, the Levites, and the heads of the fathers' households of Israel at Jerusalem, in the chambers of the house of the LORD."
- 30 So the priests and the Levites accepted the weighed out silver and gold and the utensils, to bring them to Jerusalem to the house of our God.

COMMENT

Verse 24. Ezra sets a good example for preachers by putting all the valuables into the hands of others (more than one; twelve in fact) to assure their safe arrival; to avoid being suspected of dishonesty, or as a matter of record to give account to his Persian superiors. His choice of priests as the custodians may have been governed by several factors. If anyone were trustworthy, they would be. The articles were all for the use of the priests later on; they might as well have them in their keeping now. Also, he may have felt that marauders would be more hesitant to attack priests than ordinary citizens.

Verse 25 repeats the information of 7:15f., that the valuables were contributed by the king, his counsellors, and the people from Israel who lived in Babylon.

Verses 26, 27 give the amount and description of these valuables. *The Living Bible* converts these into American money: \$1,300,000 in silver; \$200,000 in silver utensils; \$3,000,000 in gold; and twenty gold bowls worth a total of \$5,000; plus two bronze or brass items whose purity and design made them as valuable as gold. Total weight would be about 30 tons: no small item for this band of travelers.

Verses 28-30 relate Ezra's charge to the twelve priests. Holy utensils must only be handled by holy men; what better reason for putting them into their safekeeping? The money likewise was given as an offering to God. They were responsible for them till delivery was made to the priests, Levites, and leading citizens at the Temple in Jerusalem.

5. The journey is made, and the goods are delivered at Jerusalem.

TEXT, 8:31-36

31 Then we journeyed from the river Ahava on the twelfth of the first month to go to Jerusalem; and the hand of our God was over us, and He delivered us from the hand of the enemy and the ambushes by the way.

- 32 Thus we came to Jerusalem and remained there three days.
 33 And on the fourth day the silver and the gold and the utensils were weighed out in the house of our God into the hand of Meremoth the son of Uriah the priest, and with him was Eleazar the son of Phinehas; and with them were the Levites, Jozabad the son of Jeshua and Noadiah the son of Binnui.
 34 Everything was numbered and weighed, and all the weight was recorded at that time.
 35 The exiles who had come from the captivity offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel: 12 bulls for all Israel, 96 rams, 77 lambs, 12 male goats for a sin offering, all as a burnt offering to the Lord.
 36 Then they delivered the king's edicts to the king's satraps, and to the governors in the provinces beyond the River, and they supported the people and the house of God.

COMMENT

In *verse 31* the journey is resumed after eleven days spent at the staging area; once more the book speaks of the hand of God: and the mention of the enemy and ambushes shows that God's protection was very necessary and very real.

Verse 32 speaks of three days, perhaps suggesting a time for rest and reorganization, or possibly a Sabbath observation before they reported their arrival and officially handed over the treasures.

Verses 33, 34: see the care taken in this entire operation. Of those who received the valuables, four men are named and identified by family and position. Everything is weighed as it is changing hands. Every piece receives a number, and all information is recorded on the spot.

The mention of Meremoth raises some interesting speculation. Here he is called the son of Uriah the priest. In *Neh. 3:4, 21* he is further identified as the grandson of Hakkoz. The sons of a man by the same name are mentioned in *2:61* as unable to supply genealogical records; therefore they were excluded from

the priesthood until the deficiency could be amended by God's answer through Urim and Thummim. Perhaps they were able to find the missing records; perhaps God corrected the deficiency and made His acceptance known; or perhaps there were two men named Hakkoz, and only one lacked proper credentials; at any rate, here is Meremoth, grandson of Hakkoz, discharging a high responsibility as a priest.

Verse 35 again stresses the number twelve and its multiples, as the new arrivals made an offering in behalf of all Israel; only the number 77 varies from the pattern.

We have seen that there were about 1500, plus 258, or roughly 1760 men on the trip; they sacrificed almost 200 animals; assuming that the total number of men, women, and children was about 7,000, that would be an animal for every nine men, or thirty-five people: a respectable offering.

With *verse 36* the mission is completed; all records are turned over to the officials whom the Persians had appointed over the Beyond-Euphrates area. Ezra had fulfilled his responsibility to the king (7:14), to his people and to God.

WORD STUDIES

AHAVA (vss. 15, 21): possibly means "water"; it may be akin to the Latin, "aqua."

BABYLON (vs. 1): gate, i.e., court, of Bel (the god of the Babylonians).

CASIPHIA (vs. 17): this comes from a word meaning "pale, silver, white, or shining." Perhaps it was a city known for its brightness, or for its money.

HOLY (Kodesh: vs. 28): pure, consecrated, separated. Because a thing was entirely or purely separated to one purpose, it was sacred for that use. With little change the word is used of men devoted to pagan temples and practicing the lowest vices and perversions. It makes a great deal of difference to what purpose, or God, a person devotes his life.

SUMMARY

The eighth chapter of Ezra furnishes details of the trip described in chapter seven. One note runs through it: there was a division of responsibility.

As the company prepares to leave Babylonia, we are made conscious of two priests, a descendant of royalty, and twelve heads of clans in charge. When Ezra needs recruits from among the Levites, he sends nine men and instructs them how to get them. When the trip begins, he calls for fasting and prayer and lays their whole safety in the hands of God. The treasures for the Temple he entrusts to twelve of the priests. When the trip is ended and everything has been turned over to the Temple officials, they celebrate with sacrifices and a full report is turned over to their superiors, along with the original orders.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How much time was spent getting the expedition underway?
2. How many leaders did Ezra select to go up with him?
3. What kind of persons did he trust with the gold and silver?
4. How many persons made the trip, and how did this compare with the company in Ezra two?

Chapter Nine

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Where in the Bible have Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites and Amorites been mentioned before?
2. What marks of a good leader did Ezra show when he was confronted with the people's sins?
3. What does Ezra's prayer reveal about Israel's economic conditions at this time?
4. Do you think Ezra was racially biased?

OUTLINE

In this chapter Ezra is made aware of the problem of mixed marriages: marriages of the people of Israel to foreigners.

- C. Ezra hears about some current sins, particularly marriage to foreigners, and he prays.
1. Ezra is informed of the problem (vss. 1-5).
 2. Ezra prays about it (vss. 6-15).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- C. Ezra hears about some current sins, particularly marriage to foreigners, and he prays.
1. Ezra is informed of the problem.

TEXT, 9:1-5

- 1 Now when these things had been completed, the princes approached me, saying, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, according to their abominations, those of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites.
- 2 "For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for

themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has intermingled with the peoples of the lands; indeed, the hands or the princes and the rulers have been foremost in this unfaithfulness.”

- 3 And when I heard about this matter, I tore my garment and my robe, and pulled some of the hair from my head and my beard, and sat down appalled.
- 4 Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel on account of the unfaithfulness of the exiles gathered to me, and I sat appalled until the evening offering.
- 5 But at the evening offering I arose from my humiliation, even with my garment and my robe torn, and I fell on my knees and stretched out my hands to the LORD my God;

COMMENT

Verses 1, 2 reveal how Ezra received the information.

Verse 1 indicates a space in time since the previous verse: it could have been a few weeks, but it couldn't have been much more than four months (cf. 10:9). It was the princes, the civil authorities and not the religious leaders who came to Ezra. They indicated that the three groups mentioned earlier in the book, the people of Israel, the priests, and the Levites, were all involved. They may have mentioned the people of Israel first to soften the blow for the priests and other religious leaders, or else because it was the group of which they were a part.

The people of the lands were of two kinds: (1) people who had not been driven out of Palestine when Israel had settled there originally, but who had remained even through the period of Israel's exile (Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Amorites. Josh. 9:1); and (2) neighboring nations (Moabites, Egyptians, and Ammonites). These had introduced abominations into Israel's culture.

The problem of mixed marriages has already been discussed in reference to the Samaritans at Ezra 4:3. It was nothing as simple as a marriage between a Baptist and a Presbyterian, or even between a Protestant and a Roman Catholic or a Jew.

These foreign people worshiped other gods in ways that were incompatible with Israel's worship, i.e., by sacred prostitution and human sacrifice. Remains of infants buried alive in jars throughout the land testify to the reality of this evil.¹ Thus the things that were most religious to them were absolutely irreligious to Israel. The O.T. never sanctions freedom of religions in this context.

For a further description of the sin involved in these marriages to foreign (strange) women, and of the warnings against them, see Prov. 1-9, especially 2:16; 5:20; 7:5, where "foreign" is used as a synonym of "adulterous."

There was a way to marry a person of another ethnic background, as the story of Ruth illustrates, if conversion had taken place. Rahab, the harlot at Jericho, entered the Messianic line (Mt. 1:5), and Uriah the Hittite married a Jewish girl (Bathsheba, later David's wife) and became one of the thirty most respected men in David's army (II Sam. 23:39). In the O.T. nationalities of persons are more descriptive of their religions than of their citizenship or ethnic origins.

Some of these people of the land may have been outside landholders,² and therefore wealthy. We know from Malachi (2:11, 14) that at a date not too far from Ezra a number of Israelites divorced their first wives, who were of their race, to marry foreign women. If this is the situation which Ezra is describing, then there was a second sin, of unfaithfulness and violation of a previous marriage, involved as well. The temptation would be strong; intermarriage would offer the people of Israel a chance to move up economically; it would offer the foreign peoples a way to enter the approved social structure of the country and solidify their holdings. In the process, spiritual and human values would be crushed.

It was all the more disgrace that the nation's leaders, religious as well as civil, were the leaders in this evil.

1. G. E. Wright, *Biblical Archaeology* (abridged), p. 12, mentions these, but minimizes them. Werner Keller, *The Bible As History*, devotes an entire chapter to the "abominations of the heathen," p. 270ff.

2. *Anchor Bible*, op. cit., p. 77.

Verses 3 to 5 portray Ezra's reaction.

Verse 3 shows Ezra alone, but in public view in the Temple compound, expressing his dismay. The tearing of garments was a method frequently used throughout the Bible for this purpose (Num. 14:6; Ac. 14:14). Pulling out a part of his hair and beard would be a much less frequent mark of profound humility, sorrow, or disgrace, since the beard in particular was a symbol of one's age and therefore wisdom and honor (Isa. 15:2). Note that Mephibosheth neglected his beard at a particularly evil time (II Sam. 19:24).

His sitting down and showing his horror (cf. Job 2:13) would continue to impress his feelings on the public.

Verse 4 testifies of the effect this had on the community. All of those who feared, i.e., revered God (trembled at the words of God), who were similarly dismayed at the conduct of the evil-doers, gathered about him as he continued to sit in an attitude of apparently speechless astonishment into the middle of the afternoon.

Verse 5 portrays Ezra's taking the problem to God in prayer, torn robe and all. Stretching forth the hands was the attitude of petition.

2. Ezra's prayer is set down for us.

TEXT, 9:6-15

- 6 and I said, "O my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed to lift up my face to Thee, my God, for our iniquities have risen above our heads, and our guilt has grown even to the heavens.
- 7 "Since the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt, and on account of our iniquities we, our kings and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, and to plunder and to open shame, as it is this day.
- 8 "But now for a brief moment grace has been shown from the LORD our God, to leave us an escaped remnant and to

give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our bondage.

- 9 “For we are slaves; yet in our bondage, our God has not forsaken us, but has extended lovingkindness to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us reviving to raise up the house of our God, to restore its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem.
- 10 “And now, our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken Thy commandments,
- 11 which Thou hast commanded by Thy servants the prophets, saying, ‘The land which you are entering to take possession of is an unclean land with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations which have filled it from end to end and with their impurity.
- 12 ‘So now do not give your daughters to their sons nor take their daughters to your sons, and never seek their peace or their prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it as an inheritance to your sons forever.’
- 13 “And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and our great guilt, since Thou our God hast requited us less than our iniquities deserve, and hast given us an escaped remnant as this,
- 14 shall we again break Thy commandments and intermarry with the peoples who commit these abominations? Wouldst Thou not be angry with us to the point of destruction, until there is no remnant nor any who escape?
- 15 “O LORD God of Israel, Thou art righteous, for we have been left an escaped remnant, as it is this day; behold, we are before Thee in our guilt, for no one can stand before Thee because of this.”

COMMENT

Verses 6-9 rehearse the story of the captivity to Ezra's time. *Verse 6* records his embarrassment over the people's sins.

Though he had not committed them, yet he uses the first person, "our," indicating his full identification with the people. This was the function of a priest, as a mediator, interceding in behalf of his people. This is the mark of any great leader, understanding those whom he leads, and sharing in their fortunes. So Moses had asked God to include him in any punishment of His people (Ex. 32:32).

Note the parallelisms so characteristic of Hebrew poetry in his prayer; "iniquity" paralleled by "guilt"; "risen" or "multiplied" paralleled by "grown"; "above our heads" paralleled by "to the heavens."

Verse 7 is particularly a confession of the sin of the people; by praying it in public he would hopefully be voicing or shaping the thoughts of all who heard. Ezra acknowledged that their military defeat and captivity had been occasioned by their sin. It may not be possible to say positively today that the nation which does not sin would be spared military defeat, but it would at least remove one of the causes.

Next, in *verse 8*, is a mention of God's grace, which must ever follow the acknowledgment of sin. By God's grace a remnant had been able to return from exile. By His grace they had been given a firm hold, or abiding place (this is the significance of the peg, or nail, driven in securely, on which other things could depend), within God's house. So the table of showbread with its twelve loaves (Lev. 24:5-9) within the Tabernacle and Temple had been a reminder that the twelve tribes had a place before God and were on His mind continually. By His grace the sparkle would be brought back to their eyes (that is what enlightenment accomplishes) and they would be renewed.

Verse 9 tells us that their bondage was not completely over. Their nation was still very much under the control of the Persians, and all their activities could only be undertaken with their permission. The wall referred to here is not the physical wall of stone which surrounded the city; that had not yet been rebuilt; it was that protection with which God surrounded His people. That protected not Jerusalem alone, but all Judah as well.

Verses 10-15 deal with the situation which was before Ezra at that very moment.

Verse 10 acknowledges that what the people had done was a violation of the commandments which God had made known previously to them.

Verses 11, 12 are a composite, made up of quotations from many Scriptures. The *Anchor Bible* lists a number of different passages:

- a) the land you are going to possess: Dt. 4:5ff
- b) a polluted land, polluted by the peoples of the lands: Lam. 1:17; Lev. 18:25ff; 20:22ff.
- c) their abominations: Dt. 18:9; II Ki. 16:3; 19:2; II Chr. 28:3; 33:2, and Ezekiel often.
- d) have filled it from one end to the other: II Ki. 21:16.
- e) do not give your daughters: Dt. 7:3.
- f) do not even seek their peace or welfare: Dt. 23:6.
- g) that you may be strong: Dt. 11:8.
- h) eat the good things of the land: Isa. 1:19; Gen. 45:18.
- i) bequeath it to your sons forever: Ezek. 37:25b.

This says something of Ezra's knowledge of the Scriptures, and of his expectation that they would be available or familiar to his hearers.

Moses is quoted (Dt. 7:3) among the prophets, for this is how he spoke of himself (Dt. 18:15). Add this to the fact that the books of Kings were classified among the prophets in the ancient Hebrew canon, and every one of these phrases can be found among the writings of the prophets.

Verse 13 calls to mind two gracious acts of God. (1) The punishment of the Captivity was merciful; it was less than they deserved. This evaluation varies from Isaiah's (40:2), who proclaims that God had meted out double for Israel's sin. There is no conflict between the two: Isaiah is speaking of the fact that God has counted the debt more than paid, and they may rest in the enjoyment of forgiveness. Ezra is showing humility in acknowledging that God would have been justified if He had required more. The person standing in the place of the sinner can

never claim that forgiveness is deserved or earned; he has no right, being the offender, to say what is a reasonable repayment for his offense.

(2) The second gracious act of God was in allowing them to return from captivity. History does not record the names of many nations as completely vanquished as Israel was, who have been spared and given another opportunity to rise to worldwide significance. Ezra has already listed the many ways in which God led a foreign power to assist their reconstruction.

Verse 14 draws the conclusion therefore that it would be most unwise for them to repeat the selfsame error that brought them to captivity before. It would be presuming too much to expect that God would spare them and deliver them again, or that He would leave the slightest remnant of their nation the next time.

Verse 15 repeats the conviction that God is righteous in the things He has done for them. The last half of the verse is in the frame of reference of a court scene; Israel stands before God having been taken in the very act of sin and known to be guilty. No one can stand, i.e., abide or be acquitted (cf. *Psa. 1:5* for similar language) before God, the judge from whom no transgression is hidden.

WORD STUDIES

PEG: Nail, tentpeg (vs. 8, *Yathed*): the basic idea is of that which is driven in firmly, or fixed fast, to render something stable. A good ruler or prince, on whom the welfare of the state depends (i.e., hangs down), would be described as a tentpeg (*Zech. 10:4*).

BONDAGE (vss. 8, 9): condition of laboring, working, serving. A servant or a slave would be described by this term. It occurs in the name Ebed, or Obed; remember David's grandfather in *Ruth 4:17*? It is used of tilling the ground also (*Gen. 4:2*). In slightly different form it is used in a religious sense, of our service or worship.

WALL (vs. 9, *Gader*): that which surrounds or encloses. The

three consonants appear in different order in our words “guard” and “garden.” So God guards His people, as His garden.

OFFERING (vss. 4, 5, Minchah): for a description of this particular offering see Ex. 29:38-46. The word emphasizes its nature as a gift or present. Although it can describe offerings of either meat or grain (it is used of both Abel’s and Cain’s offering, Gen. 4:3, 4), it usually designates the meal (grain) offering. By its nature as a gift, its chief purpose was to portray fellowship between God and His people.

SUMMARY

Ezra was informed by the rulers that a number of the people, including religious leaders as well as citizens and rulers, had violated God’s law and married foreigners. This would involve the introduction of pagan religion into their culture, and would endanger their social structure. Ezra reacted by tearing his clothes, pulling his hair, sitting in silence, and finally praying. People gathered about him as he confessed his countrymen’s sins, as he recalled how God had dealt with similar infractions in the past, and as he acknowledged that they had no excuse for their action and no reason for believing they could escape punishment.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was the particular sin the people were committing, and who were involved?
2. How did Ezra react to news of their sin?
3. What can we learn from Ezra’s prayer to make our own prayers more meaningful?

Chapter Ten

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. What particular idea do you think brought the people to tears?
2. Do you think Ezra was justified in advocating divorce?
3. Why do you suppose the priests are mentioned first among those who had committed this sin, and again of those who corrected their conduct?
4. Do you think the list of names is placed here as a means of punishing those who had sinned, or of honoring those who had repented?

OUTLINE

Topic of the chapter: How the problem of mixed marriages was resolved.

- D. The community is cleansed, and a list of offenders is given.
1. A decision is reached by those who heard Ezra pray (vss. 1-4).
 2. The decision is shared by the leaders, and an assembly is ordered (vss. 5-8).
 3. The decision is accepted by all, in the assembly (vss. 9-15).
 4. The decision is carried out (vss. 16-19).
 5. A list is made of those who complied (vss. 20-44).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

D. The community is cleansed, and a list of the offenders is given.

1. A decision is reached by those who heard Ezra pray.

TEXT, 10:1-4

- 1 Now while Ezra was praying and making confession; weeping and prostrating himself before the house of God, a very large assembly, men, women, and children, gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept bitterly.
- 2 And Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, answered and said to Ezra, "We have been unfaithful to our

- God, and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope for Israel in spite of this.
- 3 "So now let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law.
- 4 "Arise! For this matter is your responsibility, but we will be with you; be courageous and act."

COMMENT

In *verse 1* there is a switch from the first to the third person; we have observed (see comments on 5:4, where Ezra uses the first person where we would expect the third person) that this is frequently done in the O.T., sometimes for no discernible reason. It is always hazardous to build great critical theories on something as small as a personal pronoun, especially in Hebrew.

As Ezra wept, many others were attracted to the gathering (9:4 has already spoken of a number who had been attracted by Ezra's conduct) and joined him in weeping; probably because they joined him in making confession. Perhaps some were realizing for the first time the consequences which their sins could have for the entire nation, for sin and disobedience to God is never a merely private affair. They had probably gathered out of sympathy or curiosity, because of Ezra's obvious pain; but they would surely not have responded thus unless they were as convinced of the critical nature of the problem as he was.

Verse 2: Shecaniah came forward and took the lead in acknowledging the wrong, although he is not named among the offenders, nor was he a priest. Rather, he was of the family of Elam (8:7), of the people of Israel (common people distinguished from priests and Levites), though not its leader. The name of his father, Jehiel, appears again in vs. 26, also as one of the family of Elam; this raises the possibility that Shecaniah's own father was among those whose sin Shecaniah was confessing. It was a common name, however, and this cannot be said with certainty.

Verse 3 suggests the making of a covenant. This was an elaborate and serious process. More detail will be given under the

Word Studies for this chapter. It was suggested that the covenant require divorce ("putting away") as a solution to the problem. Certainly this was no easy solution nor was the problem an easy problem. When sin enters the picture there are bound to be some tragic results.

Reference has already been made (see 9:2) to the possibility of conversion to maintain the marriage.

Those who tremble at God's commandment have been mentioned before, at 9:4, assembling about Ezra as he began his prayer. The trembling may express a number of things in the O.T. In I Sam. 13:7 it is used of fear before a battle. In II Ki. 4:13 it is used of care and concern that a servant girl had for her master. There is still a place for fear as a part of reverence toward God as we think of the consequences of violating His word.

There were two groups, then, who gathered about Ezra: the public minded religiously concerned of 9:4, and the more diversified group in 10:1.

Verse 4 pledges the support of all those people for whom Shecaniah was the spokesman, in supporting Ezra in his demands before the country's leaders.

2. The decision is shared by the leaders, and an assembly is ordered.

TEXT, 10:5-8.

- 5 Then Ezra rose and made the leading priests, the Levites, and all Israel, take oath that they would do according to this proposal; so they took the oath.
- 6 Then Ezra rose from before the house of God and went into the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib. Although he went there, he did not eat bread, nor drink water, for he was mourning over the unfaithfulness of the exiles.
- 7 And they made a proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the exiles, that they should assemble at Jerusalem,

8 and that whoever would not come within three days, according to the counsel of the leaders and the elders, all his possessions should be forfeited and he himself excluded from the assembly of the exiles.

COMMENT

His next step was to invite compliance by all of the nation. He first got the support of the leaders of each of the three groups: priests, Levites, and all Israel. These were required to take an oath; for more on this, see the Word Studies that follow.

According to *verse 6* he spent the night in fasting and mourning in the quarters of one of the priests in the Temple. Here in all likelihood the two worked out the details of their course of action.

Some speculation has arisen whether the Jehohanan of this verse is the high priest Johanan mentioned in the Elephantine Papyri. The idea is tremendously fascinating, but if it is so it would require dating this part of Ezra fifty years later than we had supposed: later, in fact, than Nehemiah. As it is, the Jehohanan of verse 6 is not identified as the high priest; in fact, the book of Ezra never refers to any individual, even Jeshua, by this title.

With *verse 7* their plan begins to unfold; they call an assembly of all the exiles at Jerusalem.

Verse 8 specifies that they (the men) must appear within three days. This would not have been unreasonable since they still had not spread out very far from Jerusalem. The authority back of the order was that of the leaders and elders. Penalty for not appearing in person would be the loss of all their possessions, and their expulsion from the community. The land basically was the Lord's, and it was distributed among the people in His name for their use, though He continued to hold title to it: therefore their continued occupancy was conditioned on their obedience to Him.

3. The decision is accepted by all, in the assembly.

TEXT, 10:9-15

- 9 So all the men of Judah and Benjamin assembled at Jerusalem within the three days. It was the ninth month on the twentieth of the month, and all the people sat in the open square before the house of God, trembling because of this matter and the heavy rain.
- 10 Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have been unfaithful and have married foreign wives adding to the guilt of Israel.
- 11 "Now, therefore, make confession to the LORD God of your fathers, and do His will; and separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives."
- 12 Then all the assembly answered and said with a loud voice, "That's right! As you have said, so it is our duty to do."
- 13 "But there are many people, it is the rainy season, and we are not able to stand in the open. Nor can the task be done in one or two days, for we have transgressed greatly in this matter.
- 14 "Let our leaders represent the whole assembly and let all those in our cities who have married foreign wives come at appointed times, together with the elders and judges of each city, until the fierce anger of our God on account of this matter is turned away from us."
- 15 Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah opposed this, with Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite supporting them.

COMMENT

Verse 9 indicates full compliance with this order, from the men throughout the territory of Judah and Benjamin where the exiles had settled. The latter half of the ninth month would be in our December, which was the rainy season in their land. No building

would be large enough for the entire male population, so they met in the Temple yard, shivering because of the seriousness of the occasion and the discomfort of the rain.

In *verse 10* Ezra charged them with their sin.

Verse 11 speaks of two groups from which they were to be separated: (1) the people of the land, possibly referring here to the foreign men whom some of the women of Israel had married; and (2) the foreign wives, whom men of Israel had taken. The offense could work both ways (see 9:12), and both must be corrected.

Verse 12 voices their acknowledgement of the rightness of what had been said, and their decisive acceptance of the need of separation.

In *verse 13* the men point to mechanical problems in carrying out this command: the rain; discomfort of standing in the open; legal complications in correcting such a serious offense.

Their request (*verse 14*) was that enough time be given so that orderly procedures may be followed: appointments were to be made for all offending couples to come before the elders and judges of their cities (the elders had always had such responsibilities), till the task was completed. They evidently reasoned that if marriage was a public ceremony, then the separation also was to be made publicly.

Verse 15 gives the names of two who opposed this procedure, though their reason is not stated. We do not know if they objected to the delay, the procedure, or to the action itself, though *verse 12* indicated unanimous agreement up to that point. Their objections were apparently answered satisfactorily by two other speakers, as named.

4. The decision is carried out.

TEXT, 10:16-19

16 But the exiles did so. And Ezra the priest selected men who were heads of fathers' households for each of their fathers'

- households, all of them by name. So they convened on the first day of the tenth month to investigate the matter.
- 17 And they finished investigating all the men who had married foreign wives by the first of the first month.
- 18 And among the sons of the priests who had married foreign wives were found of the sons of Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brothers; Maaseiah, Eliezer, Jarib, and Gedaliah.
- 19 And they pledged to put away their wives, and being guilty, they offered a ram of the flock for their offense.

COMMENT

Verse 16 shows Ezra once more appointing men from the various households (clans) to help with this responsibility. These assembled within ten or eleven days. This is the point where we may ask what they had to investigate; was it only to discover every person in their communities who had offended or were they setting policies to check for sincere conversions among the parties involved?

Verse 17 relates the completion of the investigation three months later, on the first day of the year, exactly a year after Ezra had assembled his group of exiles to go up to Jerusalem (7:9).

Verse 18 demonstrates the extent of the sin, even within the priesthood. (Notice that again, as at verse 5, the priests are listed first.) The book began with recognition for the fine work of the high priest Jeshua, son of Jozadak (2:2; 3:2). It ends with the acknowledgment of the sin of some of his descendants and relatives. So the best of institutions must always be subject to reexamination.

According to *verse 19*, the offending priests gave their hands (literal meaning of "pledged") to put away their foreign wives; we are reminded how far back the binding nature of a handshake goes, along with some of our other customs. This would save their land from the continued burden of their error; but what about the wrong already done? The heathen women were themselves victims of an injury which could never be righted in

this world. Therefore, to atone for their guilt, the priests offered a trespass offering. Details of this are given in Lev. 5:14-19; Num. 15:22-31. It was, you will notice, for unintentional sins (Lev. 5:17f); there is no sacrifice in the O.T. for deliberate sins (Num. 15:30f). This suggests that those who were involved may not have been aware of the law; perhaps this particular law had not been sufficiently publicized. Or they may not have been impressed with the seriousness of their act. Evidently they had not deliberately intended to disobey one of God's laws. Most of our sins, then and now, probably would come under this category, because few people intend to do wrong deliberately. In most cases we are deceived, or misled, or thoughtless; but the consequences are still the same, and the damage is just as real.

While only the priests are mentioned as making this offering, it is possible that the other offenders did likewise.

5. A list is made of those who complied.

TEXT, 10:20-44

- 20 And of the sons of Immer there were Hanani and Zebadiah;
 21 and of the sons of Harim: Maaseiah, Elijah, Shemaiah, Jehiel, and Uzziyah;
 22 and of the sons of Pashhur: Elioenai, Maaseiah, Ishmael, Nethanel, Jozabad, and Elasaah.
 23 And of the Levites there were Jozabad, Shimei, Kelaiah (that is, Kelita), Pethahiah, Judah, and Eliezer.
 24 And of the singers there was Eliashib; and of the gatekeepers: Shallum, Telem, and Uri.
 25 And of Israel, of the sons of Parosh there were Ramiah, Izziah, Malchijah, Mijamin, Eleazar, Malchijah, and Benaiah;
 26 and of the sons of Elam: Mattaniah, Zechariah, Jehiel, Abdi, Jeremoth, and Elijah;
 27 and of the sons of Zattu: Elioenai, Eliashib, Mattaniah, Jeremoth, Zabad, and Aziza;

- 28 and of the sons of Bebai: Johohanan, Hananiah, Zabbai, and Athlai;
- 29 and of the sons of Bani: Meshullam, Malluch, and Adaiah, Jashub, Sheal, and Jeremoth;
- 30 and of the sons of Pahath-moab: Adna, Chelal, Benaiah, Maaseiah, Mattaniah, Bezalel, Binnui, and Manasseh;
- 31 and of the sons of Harim: Eliezer, Isshijah, Malchijah, Shemaiah, Shimeon,
- 32 Benjamin, Malluch, and Shemariah;
- 33 of the sons of Hashum: Mattenai, Mattattah, Zabad, Eliphelet, Jeremai, Manasseh, and Shimei;
- 34 of the sons of Bani: Maadai, Amram, Uel,
- 35 Benaiah, Bedeiah, Cheluhi,
- 36 Vaniah, Meremoth, Eliashib,
- 37 Mattaniah, Mattenai, Jaasu,
- 38 Bani, Binnui, Shimei,
- 39 Shelemiah, Nathan, Adaiah,
- 40 Machnadebai, Shashai, Sharai,
- 41 Azarel, Shelemiah, Shemariah,
- 42 Shallum, Amariah, and Joseph.
- 43 Of the sons of Nebo there were Jeiel, Mattithiah, Zabad, Zebina, Jaddai, Joel, and Benaiah.
- 44 All these had married foreign wives, and some of them had wives by whom they had children.

COMMENT

It is obvious that this is only a partial list, perhaps of the most influential of the people involved.

Verses 20-22 continue the list of names from the priesthood; *verses 23, 24* give names of Levites and their associates; *verses 25-43*, of Israel.

No mention is made in *verse 44* of what was done for the continued support of the women and children, whether they received some form of alimony or whether they married the men who had been divorced by their Israelite wives. Such problems could only be dealt with on an individual basis, and this would reach beyond the scope of Ezra's book.

WORD STUDIES

COVENANT (vs. 3, Berith): comes from the verb, "eat." To make (literally, cut) a covenant, persons butchered and cut up a domestic vegetarian (peaceful) animal (see Gen. 15) and arrived at their agreements around a table of good fellowship. Peace treaties, religious obligations, personal contracts were all sealed in this way. God's covenant with man always had this connotation of fellowship, or sharing, including His obligation to bless if the covenant was kept.

TAKE OATH (vs. 8, Shaba): swear, "to seven oneself." Seven, a sacred number, calls attention also to offerings that would be made to seal an oath (Gen. 21:28ff).

SUMMARY

As Ezra prayed a crowd gathered and entered into his feelings of guilt and sorrow and reverence. One of them, Shecaniah, spoke for all to encourage Ezra to lead in covenanting with God to correct the sin of marriage to heathen mates, believing that there was still hope. Leaders of the priests, Levites, and citizens took an oath to support Ezra in this reform. An assembly of all the males throughout the area of Judah and Benjamin was called, under penalty of forfeiting all their property. In a matter of days these assembled in spite of a heavy rain, and became convinced of the necessity of confessing their wrong and amending it. Ezra appointed leaders for each community to investigate each offending household. On the first day of the new year, about three and a half months after Ezra had prayed, the investigations were completed and the community of Israel had separated itself from entanglements with foreign spouses. The decision was completed with pledges and offerings to God; the list of those whose names were affixed to the agreement began with priests, contained Levites, and concluded with many of the prominent people throughout Israel.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who was the man who helped Ezra the most, to correct the evil?
2. What response did he get from the general population?
3. Whom did Ezra select to investigate and deal with offenders?
4. How long did the process take?

REFLECTIONS ON EZRA

The book of Ezra began with captives returning to Israel especially to rebuild their Altar and Temple. A second band returned and were especially involved in the purification of the religious life.

The book has presented us with a contrast between (1) growing awareness of and concern for the Gentiles, and (2) exclusiveness, forbidding marriages to Gentiles. On the one hand, help was obtained from a foreign king, his cabinet, and taxes on neighboring lands to help Israel build the Temple; even some of the labor came from other lands. Some foreigners may even have been included in the migration from Babylonia to Judah. Their continuation as a people depended on the day-to-day favor of foreigners.

On the other hand, help of the Samaritans had been flatly rejected, and marriages with foreigners had been annulled and forbidden for the future. Israel had to live between these two tensions.

But so must the church today. It must live in the world; it cannot withdraw from it, but must in fact mingle with the Pharisees and publicans, the pure and the impure, the household of Caesar and Simon the sorcerer and Saul the persecutor; it cannot obey its Lord, grow, or even survive without conversions from these sources.

But it must keep itself free from the entanglements and defilements of that world. It must maintain its principles and transform the lives that it touches into the likeness of its Master.

May the handling of the problems in the book of Ezra assist us in the handling of those which are distinctive to our day.

PROJECT

Can you recall, chapter by chapter, what is in the book of Ezra? The first and last chapters are easy: 1—Cyrus' proclamation permitting the return from captivity; 10—Mixed marriages abandoned. Next notice chapters 4 and 7: 4—Rebuilding of the Temple ceases; 7—Ezra arrives with more returnees. Now fill in the gaps: 2—List of returnees, first expedition; 3—Altar set up. After chapter 4 (Rebuilding of the Temple ceases) comes 5—Rebuilding is resumed; 6—Darius' decree, and completion of the Temple. After 7 (Ezra arrives with more returnees), 8—Names of returnees, and description of the trip; 9—Ezra hears of the problem of mixed marriages; then you remember 10.

Put these titles on separate cards without the chapter numbers, mix them up, and practice arranging them correctly.

DATES TO REMEMBER (All are Before Christ.)

- 538 Cyrus conquered Babylon
- 536 Cyrus freed captive Israelites to return home and rebuild Temple
- 536 Work on the Temple stopped
- 520 Temple work resumed
- 516 Temple work completed
- 475 Events of the Book of Esther
- 458 Ezra brought another band of returnees
- 457 Ezra's reforms were completed
- 445 Nehemiah's first mission to Jerusalem
- 433 Nehemiah's second mission to Jerusalem

Nehemiah

INTRODUCTION

THE MAN

The name, Nehemiah, means "Comfort of Jehovah" or "(Whom) Jehovah has comforted" (see Word Studies, end of the next chapter). The man himself was a government official, in contrast to Ezra, who was a priest. This results in a different methodology for accomplishing his goals, but there is no difference in compassion between the two men. The importance of the position which he held in Persia under Artaxerxes may be guessed from the fact that he could ask for the position of governor over Judah as a personal favor, and get it. The character of the man is revealed in that he even desired it, and that he served in that capacity, with all its complications and burdens in preference to the surroundings of the palace in the largest empire of his world. In this he reminds us of Moses.

The man's humility is evidenced by his hesitancy to tell us of his position as cupbearer till the end of the first chapter, and from his neglecting to tell us the position to which he was appointed until chapter 10, and then as a passing reference.

There are a number of similarities between Ezra and Nehemiah. Both utter intercessory prayers for the people. Both rest for three days on their arrival in Jerusalem. Both describe opposition by the Samaritans and an assortment of their neighbors. Both recognize the need of preserving the identity of Israel against intermarriage with foreigners. Both books consist of two halves, with a time lapse between, although Nehemiah is in both halves of his book, having returned after an interval in Persia. God had a use for both of these men, as He can use persons of all kinds of talents and backgrounds and methods of operation today.

THE BOOK

The title is taken from its opening sentence and from its chief character. In some versions, however, it is titled II Esdras, and

NEHEMIAH

Ezra is called I Esdras. In the Hebrew text these were at one time one book. Don't confuse these with I, II Esdras in the O.T. Apocrypha.

The major subject is the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem after the exile. The events described took place beginning twelve years after the close of the book of Ezra. Within a century the great Greek philosophers and generals will arrive on the world's scene to remold the political situation completely.

It is interesting that, if our dating for these two books is correct, the Jewish people made their first priority the rebuilding of their Temple and the restoration of their religious forms. Even when they had been impelled by fear of their neighbors, they had built an altar instead of a wall; they had trusted in God instead of their own strength (Ezra 3:3). But trust in God does not mean blindness to physical realities, nor doing nothing in the face of dangers; so now they rebuild the wall.

The book also deals with an effort to revitalize the population of Jerusalem; to renew the nation's spiritual life through public reading of the Law, with Ezra's co-operation; to restore the details of the observance of feasts and ceremonies and contributions described in the Law, and to require an oath of loyalty of all the citizens of the land. It closes with a grand portrayal of the dedication of the wall with marching choirs and impressive offerings, followed by the dissonant but necessary condemning of those who had been tempted into disobedience to the Law by contracting marriages to unbelieving foreigners.

AUTHORSHIP

From the amount of autobiographical material in the book, it is reasoned that Nehemiah was either its author or its most extensive contributor. Some ascribe its authorship to Ezra because it was combined with Ezra in the Hebrew Scriptures. However, "The Twelve," all the Minor Prophets, were in one book, and no one would ascribe all of them to one author. Others would assign it to the author of Chronicles because of similarity of materials,

INTRODUCTION

thus combining Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah under one anonymous authorship. We see no reason to doubt its intimate connection with Nehemiah.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

- I. The Wall is Rebuilt, and Reforms are Instituted at Nehemiah's First Visit: chapters 1-7
 - Ch. 1 Nehemiah hears of Jerusalem's helplessness.
 - Ch. 2 Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem.
 - Ch. 3 The rebuilding of the wall, section by section, is described.
 - Ch. 4 The enemies try ridicule and rumor to block construction.
 - Ch. 5 Internal difficulties arise and are overcome.
 - Ch. 6 The enemies resort to tactics of diversion, but the wall is completed.
 - Ch. 7 Nehemiah finds the list of the first exiles to return.
- II. The Law is Read in Public, and its Ceremonies are Resumed: chapters 8-10
 - Ch. 8 The Law is read, and the Feast of Booths is kept.
 - Ch. 9 The Levites lead in a psalm of confession.
 - Ch. 10 The people make vows of faithfulness.
- III. Persons Bound by Vows are Listed, and Reforms on Nehemiah's Second Visit are Described: chapters 11-13
 - Ch. 11 The genealogies of residents of Jerusalem and names of other cities are listed.
 - Ch. 12 The genealogies of priests and Levites are given, and the wall is dedicated.
 - Ch. 13 Foreigners are expelled and religious reforms are instituted to purify the nation.

Chapter One

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. What were Nehemiah's feelings toward his brethren in Israel?
2. What was his view of the character of God?
3. What pattern do you see in his prayer that could be of help to you in your prayers to God?
4. What was the immediate objective of his prayer?

OUTLINE

- I. The Wall is Rebuilt, and Reforms are Instituted at Nehemiah's First Visit: chapters 1-7
 - A. Nehemiah hears of Jerusalem's helplessness.
 1. Report on Jerusalem (vss. 1-4).
 2. Nehemiah's prayer (vss. 5-11a).
 3. Identity of Nehemiah (vs. 11b).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- I. The Wall is Rebuilt, and Reforms are Instituted at Nehemiah's First Visit: chapters 1-7
 - A. Nehemiah hears of Jerusalem's helplessness.
 1. Report on Jerusalem.

TEXT, 1:1-4

- 1 The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah.
Now it happened in the month Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capitol,
- 2 that Hanani, one of my brothers, and some men from Judah came; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped and had survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem.
- 3 And they said to me, "The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire."
- 4 Now it came about when I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

COMMENT

Verse 1 begins with a statement that its source is Nehemiah: adequate evidence that he is the author of the entire book, or at least the major part of it. The month Chislev, their ninth month, would correspond roughly with our December. The reference to the twentieth year is explained more fully in 2:1. The custom of the time was to date all events from the beginning of the rule of the present king; each king's rule would begin with the year one. Comparing this with Ezra 7:1, 8, and assuming that the Artaxerxes is the same person in each case, we can determine that the events of the book of Nehemiah begin thirteen years after Ezra's start for Jerusalem, or twelve years after the conclusion of Ezra's book, i.e., 445 B.C.

Susa was the city in Elam, 200 miles east of Babylon, where the Persian kings maintained a residence, and from which they ruled their kingdom for a part of each year (cf. comments on Ezra 6:2).

The Hanani of *verse 2* was probably Nehemiah's own brother: cf. 7:2. From the emphasis which is made in the sentence, it would appear that the visitors from Judah had not searched Nehemiah out with a grievance, but that Nehemiah had initiated the inquiry concerning his fellow-Jews who had "escaped," i.e. returned to their homeland, and concerning affairs at Jerusalem.

Their report in *verse 3* indicates both physical and mental distress, arising out of the condition of the city's walls and gates. The breaking down of the wall (chiefly of stone) and the burning of the gate (chiefly of timbers) had been done by Nebuchadnezzar, 141 years earlier. Some suppose that this is a reference to more recent events of which Nehemiah would not have been aware before this, and that therefore, the walls and gates had been partially restored after the Captivity. The Bible makes no mention of previous reconstruction of the walls, except in the false report of Israel's enemies in Ezra 4:12. If there had been any repairs, they surely could not have been very extensive.

Nehemiah's grief as portrayed in *verse 4* (It was perfectly acceptable for a man to weep because of mental anguish in their culture.) would be easily understood. Without walls the city would

have no defense against vandalism or military action, except what they could supply with watchful human bodies. They would be especially vulnerable to the Samaritans, their nearest neighbors. There was something he could do, however: he could fast and pray.

2. Nehemiah's Prayer

TEXT, 1:5-11a

- 5 And I said, "I beseech Thee, O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and loving-kindness of those who love Him and keep His commandments,
6 let Thine ear now be attentive and Thine eyes open to hear the prayer of Thy servant which I am praying before Thee now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Thy servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against Thee; I and my father's house have sinned.
7 "We have acted very corruptly against Thee and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which Thou didst command Thy servant Moses.
8 "Remember the word which Thou didst command Thy servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples;
9 but if you return to Me and keep My commandments and do them, though those of you who have been scattered were in the most remote part of the heavens, I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.'
10 "And they are Thy servants and Thy people whom Thou didst redeem by Thy great power and by Thy strong hand.
11a "O LORD, I beseech Thee, may Thine ear be attentive to the prayer of Thy servant and the prayer of Thy servants who delight to revere Thy name, and make Thy servant successful today, and grant him compassion before this man."

COMMENT

This prayer by Nehemiah is as noble as that of Ezra (9:6-15), though Ezra was a religious official and Nehemiah was a secular ruler. This speaks well of Nehemiah's habits of spirituality and fellowship with God: his practice of the ceremonies of religion.

The prayer begins in *verse 5* with praise to God for His (1) greatness and (2) character of loving kindness. So Jesus began His model prayer with praise: a good model for us today. The loving kindness mentioned in this verse is not merely sentimental; it "always implies faithful compliance with . . . the covenant . . ."

Verse 6 speaks of Nehemiah's persistence, day and night, and moves to confession. As Ezra had done (9:6), so Nehemiah also identified himself with their sins. The mention of "thy servant" and "thy servants" was the formula of polite address.

Verse 7 enumerates some of their sins. There were sins of commission ("we have acted very corruptly") and sins of omission ("and have not kept thy commandments . . ."). See the Word Studies, end of this chapter, for the difference in emphasis between commandments, statutes, and ordinances. Note that Nehemiah identifies Moses with God's giving of His law.

In *verse 8, 9* Nehemiah relies on one of God's promises in His word, assuming they have repented. As Ezra had enabled us to see his familiarity with the Scriptures in 9:11f, so Nehemiah's prayer at this point is also a composite of several Scriptures:

- 1) If you are unfaithful I will scatter you: Lev. 26:33.
- 2) But if you return to me: Dt. 30:2f.
- 3) I will gather them from there and will bring them: Dt. 30:4; 9:29.
- 4) to the place where I have chosen to cause my name to dwell: Dt. 12:5.

Verse 10 recalls actions in the past in which God has assisted his people.

Verse 11 asserts that the people were truly God's servants, that they qualified for His promises by their regard for His name

1. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 670.

(personality), and asks that the prayer may succeed on the basis of compassion or mercy beyond deservings. "This man" of verse 11 is a reference to Artaxerxes (2:1 ff), whom God should move to favor the request which Nehemiah would bring before him.

3. Identity of Nehemiah

TEXT, 1:11b

11b Now I was the cupbearer to the king.

COMMENT

The appearance of this statement here instead of in verse one is probably explained by Nehemiah's humility; he has not overawed us at the outset with his rank.

The duty of a cupbearer went far beyond that of serving the king's drink or food. He would be the taster who would assure that the food was safe and that no poison had been added by his enemies; he risked his life on the king's popularity or unpopularity at every meal, to protect the royal household. At the same time, he must be the most trusted person in the whole empire. If he added poison when the food had been brought to him, it would be beyond the last defense short of the king's palate. In addition, he had access to the entire palace, including the king's harem; no one else in the kingdom, outside the royal family, would be trusted farther than this. His position was next to that of the crown prince himself.

It is a credit to Nehemiah that, having attained this highest position open to him in the most powerful kingdom of his day, he was willing, like Moses, out of compassion for his brethren to make himself one of them for a sufficient length of time to improve their condition as far as he was able.

WORD STUDIES

SUSA (vs. 1; Shushan): lily, something brightly colored. It was named possibly from the lilies growing in its pools, or from the beauty of the city as the king's residence. Its base is the origin of the names, Susan, or Susanna, and of the headings for Psalms 45 and 80.

COMMANDMENT (vs. 7; Mitzvah): what has been set up, or put, or placed; that is, a monument. Something established, confirmed, appointed, ordained; hence commanded. By keeping these, one is enabled to stand, or endure: Ex. 18:23. "Bar Mitzvah," "son of the commandment," uses this word.

STATUTE (vs. 7): to cut in, hew, hack; engrave, or carve. Then, something decreed, prescribed, appointed, because it is carved in stone.

ORDINANCE (vs. 7): the primary idea is to set upright, or erect, or render justice; to govern or rule; hence, judgments.

NEHEMIAH: The last three letters represent the name of God: Jehovah. The first five letters portray drawing the breath forcibly, panting, sighing, or groaning; they come to mean "console, comfort." Thus the name means "Comfort of Jehovah" or "Jehovah has comforted." The word "comfort," also occurs in the names Menahem and Nahum. It is the first word in Isa. 40.

SUMMARY

Nehemiah was a Jew who had advanced to a position of great responsibility and trust within the government of Persia. His brother came on a visit with other Jews, and in reply to Nehemiah's concern told him about the defenseless, impoverished conditions in Jerusalem. Nehemiah wept, then he prayed. He recalled God's greatness and His lovingkindness to Israel in the past; he confessed that he and all Israel had sinned and had violated God's commandments; he asked that God keep His promise and restore them, as they were his servants. He further asked

that God would cause the king to respond favorably to the request which he was about to make before him.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Where was Nehemiah at the beginning of the book?
2. Who was Hanani, and how did he influence Nehemiah?
3. What were the conditions in Jerusalem at the time?
4. What was the position which Nehemiah occupied?

Chapter Two

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. What was the occasion on which Nehemiah brought his request before the king?
2. How was the king informed that Nehemiah wanted to make a request?
3. What was included in the request that Nehemiah made?
4. Why do you suppose Nehemiah made his tour of inspection by night?

OUTLINE

B. Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem

1. Nehemiah is given permission by Artaxerxes to make the trip (vss. 1-10).
2. On his arrival, he secretly inspects the city's walls (vss. 11-20).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTS

B. Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem

1. Nehemiah is given permission by Artaxerxes to make the trip.

TEXT, 2:1-10

- 1 And it came about in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, that wine was before him, and I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence.
- 2 So the king said to me, "Why is your face sad though you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart." Then I was very much afraid.
- 3 And I said to the king, "Let the king live forever. Why should

- my face not be sad when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire?"
- 4 Then the king said to me, "What would you request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven.
- 5 And I said to the king, "If it please the king, and if your servant has found favor before you, send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it."
- 6 Then the king said to me, the queen sitting beside him, "How long will your journey be, and when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me, and I gave him a definite time.
- 7 And I said to the king, "If it please the king, let letters be given me for the governors of the provinces beyond the River, that they may allow me to pass through until I come to Judah, and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress which is by the temple, for the wall of the city, and for the house to which I will go." And the king granted them to me because the good hand of my God was on me.
- 9 Then I came to the governors of the provinces beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen.
- 10 And when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about it, it was very displeasing to them that someone had come to seek the welfare of the sons of Israel.

COMMENT

Verse 1: Nisan was the first month of the year, corresponding to our March-April, the beginning of Spring. It was the twentieth year, but Neh. 1:1 has spoken of the twentieth year, the ninth month! One explanation is that if Artaxerxes began to rule between the first and ninth months, for example in the fifth, then the twentieth year of his reign would begin in a fifth month and end a year later in a fourth month; thus the ninth month (Chislev) of the twentieth year would come before the first month (Nisan) of the twentieth year. Also, there were two calendars in use: the religious,

which began with Nisan, (springtime), and the agricultural, which began six months later, in the Fall, after harvest was completed. Nehemiah may have used this. The Jewish year still begins with Rosh Hashonah, the first day of the seventh month (about our September).

This would indicate a space of four months since Nehemiah had gotten the disturbing news described in the previous chapter. Evidently Nehemiah had been spending the time in prayer, awaiting the propitious moment to introduce his subject, or else the king had been occupied in another city for these months (See comments on Ezra 6:2.), and this was Nehemiah's first opportunity to come before him with his request. The delay would have heightened Nehemiah's tension and concern.

King Artaxerxes in this passage is traditionally identified with Artaxerxes Longimanus, who ruled from 465 to 424 B.C. The time had arrived for the serving of the wine to the king; Nehemiah had evidently tasted it and was in the act of serving it to the king.

Verse 2 reveals something of the intimacy that would have existed between a king and his cupbearer. The king observed Nehemiah's obvious sadness; he surmised it was caused by grief; his question was a mark of his concern. Nehemiah's fear arose most likely from his recognition of the responsibility to be cheerful, particularly at that point in the meal or banquet.

In *verse 3* we see Nehemiah's method of conveying his message to the king. First there is the polite form of address: "Let the king live forever," which even the top ranking servant must not forget. Then there was the reference to the desolation of the cemetery of his ancestors, which would strike a responsive cord in an oriental monarch's mind; one's ancestors must always be respected.

In *verse 4*, when the king asked what request this was leading up to, Nehemiah prayed. It is a small intimate detail from Nehemiah's diary, and it reminds us of the possibility of our being so conscious of God's constant presence that we may breathe a short prayer even between hearing a question and responding.

Verse 5 again shows Nehemiah's close conformity to court decorum. The pleasure of the king is foremost. The only compulsion laid upon him must arise out of his favorable regard for his

servant, based on his satisfactory past performance. The request is that Nehemiah be sent to Judah, where the aforementioned cemetery is located, to rebuild his home city, which he still has not identified. There is no mention of the walls either, which had been the subject of an earlier controversy (Ezra 4:13).

In *verse 6* details are spelled out. The mention of the queen's presence¹ speaks of two things: (1) it was a very intimate and private moment, rather than a public occasion. The queen ordinarily would not appear in public; she was not a public official, but rather the king's consort, meeting his personal needs, in the oriental manner. (2) The fact that she is mentioned suggests that she added her influence to make up the king's mind.

The two questions in the text are not answered, but the meaning back of them is explained. The question, "How long will your journey be?" is a way of saying "It pleased the king to send (him)"; and "when will you return?" indicated the king's desire to make it only a temporary mission; whereupon Nehemiah set a date for his return. Many of our questions also are disguised statements.

In *verse 7* Nehemiah asked for the necessary papers to get him to his destination; he would need documents showing his authority and the backing of the Persian court to pass through various provinces along the Euphrates and Jordan valleys.

In *verse 8* he asked for supplies to accomplish his objective on his arrival; timber from the king's forest, possibly in Lebanon or in Solomon's ancient gardens or elsewhere close by Jerusalem. This he would need to (1) rebuild the fortress by the Temple, probably in the N. T. the Tower of Antonia just to the north; (2) repair the walls, that is, towers and gates in particular; (3) build himself a house as his own headquarters as governor. He believed it was God's approval that caused the king to grant his wishes.

Verses 9, 10 trace his progress through the provinces, especially Samaria and Ammon, on his approach to Jerusalem. While

1. The position of the queen sitting by or before the king corresponds with representations in the monuments. Compare especially the representation of Ashurbanipal reclining at a banquet, his queen being seated on a chair at the foot of his couch." *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, "Ezra-Nehemiah," p. 162.

these two lands in particular were hostile to him, his possession of papers from their superiors and his in Persia, and especially the Persian military guard accompanying him, would convince them of the necessity of allowing his passage. This was in contrast to Ezra's trip without escort (Ezra 8:22).

Sanballat, in *verse 10* was the governor of Samaria; his name appears in contemporary literature, the Elephantine Papyri from Egypt; the Jewish colony there asked for his support in building a temple to Jehovah there, but received no assistance. His name means "Sin (an Assyrian moon god) gives life"; it is not clear whether he worshiped the god Horon, or whether "Horonite" indicates that he was from Horonaim, in Moab; at any rate, his very name would be an offense to a loyal Israelite.

Tobiah (The name means "Pleasing to Jehovah"; a similar name, Tabeel, "Pleasing to God," is in Ezra 4:7.) was possibly a half-descendant of the Jews, appointed to govern the Ammonites north and east of Judah. Ruins of a place with his name clearly carved into the stone by the doorway has been located a ways east of the Jordan; from here his descendants, many with the same name, continued to rule for several centuries.²

The word "official" here is literally "slave" (cf. Word Studies for Ezra 9); in this context it would represent high rank, as a head of a province, though he was still subservient to the Persian king.

2. On his arrival, he secretly inspects the city's walls.

TEXT, 2:11-20

11 So I came to Jerusalem and was there three days.

12 And I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. I did not tell any one what my God was putting into my mind to do for Jerusalem and there was no animal with me except the animal on which I was riding.

2. For a description see the article, "The 'Araq el-Emir and the Tobiads," *Biblical Archaeologist*, Sept., 1957, pp. 63-76.

- 13 So I went out at night by the Valley Gate in the direction of the Dragon's Well and on to the Refuse Gate, inspecting the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which were consumed by fire.
- 14 Then I passed on to the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was no place for my mount to pass.
- 15 So I went up at night by the ravine and inspected the wall. Then I entered the Valley Gate again and returned.
- 16 And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done; nor had I as yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, or the rest who did the work.
- 17 Then I said to them, "You see the bad situation we are in, that Jerusalem is desolate and its gates burned by fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem that we may no longer be a reproach."
- 18 And I told them how the hand of my God had been favorable to me, and also about the king's words which he had spoken to me. Then they said, "Let us arise and build." So they put their hands to the good work.
- 19 But when Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard it, they mocked us and despised us and said, "What is this thing you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?"
- 20 So I answered them and said to them, "The God of heaven will give us success; therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no portion, right, or memorial in Jerusalem."

COMMENT

In *verse 11*, the three days may be compared with Ezra's after a similar journey: Ezra 8:32. It may mean only that Nehemiah arrived one day, rested the next, and after sundown (beginning of the third day) he began his inspection rounds.

Verse 12 describes the complete secrecy of this part of the operation. He went under cover at night; he took only a few with him;

he told no one why he was going; he took only one animal to ride, to make as little sound as possible. The secrecy was justified, as we gather from *verse 19*, from the opposition that arose when his tour became known.

All of the locations in *vss. 13-15* apparently were at the south end of Jerusalem, where two valleys converge to draw the city down to a narrow point. The refuse gate was to the south, possibly directed toward the Valley at Hinnom, the city's garbage dump (*Gehenna*). The piles of debris effectively blocked his passage eventually, and he was forced to double back before continuing.

Verse 16 re-emphasizes his secrecy; he did not even dare to trust any of his countrymen, whether priests, rulers, or labor contractors ("the rest who did the work") with his purpose or plans.

In *verse 17* he finally shares his burden, probably with those mentioned in *verse 16*. Note the first person: "the bad situation we are in . . . Come, let us rebuild. . . ." Two reasons seem to be on his mind: (1) to improve their physical situation, and (2) to improve their morale, i.e., take away their reproach, their reason for lacking self-respect and being ashamed.

We watch, in *verse 18*, as an idea begins with God ("the hand of God"), moves to Nehemiah ("had been favorable to me"), reaches the king ("and also about the king's words . . ."), and arrives at the people ("Then they said, 'Let us arise and build.'"). Then things began to move.

In *verse 19* opposition arises. Sanballat and Tobiah we met at *verse 10*; Geshem was their counterpart, known from contemporary literature as the governor of Arabia, though again he would not necessarily have been an Arabian. The territory then included Edom, which had been a thorn in the side of Israel for centuries (cf. the book of Obadiah).

The method which the Jews' enemies used at this point was ridicule; they especially charged them with trying to rebuild the walls in order to mount a rebellion which, it was implied, would be futile.

Nehemiah's reply, in *verse 20*, was one of hope and assurance of God's blessing: they would succeed because they were

His servants, while their enemies had no portion (property rights), no right (jurisdiction), or memorial (reason why any of the residents should remember their past connection with the city, their contribution was so small during the century and a half they had been able to occupy it).

WORD STUDIES

FOREST (vs. 8, *Pardes*): "PARADISE": a park or pleasure-ground, a place planted with trees, pleasure-garden, enclosed hunting-ground, a park with wild animals, around the residence of the Persian monarchs; region of surpassing beauty; park around the house. The word is used only here and in Song of Solomon 4:13 and Ecc. 2:5.

REPROACH (vs. 17: noun, *Cherpah*; verb, *Charaph*): has the basic idea of pulling, plucking, picking or gathering (fruit). We pick at people, and pull them apart. Our descriptive words, "carp" and "harp" (criticize, reproach, upbraid), may be derived from it. Since the picking of fruit also implies the approach of winter, it speaks of a frigid treatment, a scornful attitude.

SUMMARY

After about four months, Nehemiah stood before Artaxerxes to serve the wine. The king observed his dejected expression and asked the reason for it. Nehemiah replied that the city, gates, and cemetery of his ancestors lay in ruins. He asked that the king allow him a leave of absence and an appointment to go and help rebuild: he would also need supplies from government preserves. The wishes were granted and Nehemiah made his way from Persia through Ammon and Samaria to Jerusalem, meanwhile becoming aware of the enmity of Tobiah and Sanballat, governors of the two lands. In complete secrecy he journeyed by night around a part of the city's ruined walls; then he returned to the city and announced to some of its leaders a plan to restore the walls, with God's direction. The plan was adopted, the enemies responded

with ridicule and accusation of plotting rebellion, and Nehemiah predicted that God would crown their project with success.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who was the king of Persia?
2. What was the first thing Nehemiah did when he was asked to make his request?
3. Who heard of Nehemiah's trip, and what was the reaction?
4. What proposal arose out of Nehemiah's tour of inspection?

Chapter Three

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Do you think the people repaired the part of the wall they chose, or that they were assigned the part they were to work on? Would they have cast lots, so that they could not blame anyone else if their part was more difficult than others?
2. How do you suppose the work was financed?
3. Where did the materials come from?
4. Do you suppose they all had the same motive for what they were doing, or the same enthusiasm?

OUTLINE

There is only one topic in this chapter: Description of the rebuilding of the wall, section by section.

We will depart from our usual method in this chapter, and arrange the material topically for our discussion, hoping that it will be of greater interest and usefulness if treated in this manner. Each section will include parallels, or applications, for today. Three headings will be used:

1. Who the builders were,
2. What part they built, and
3. How they built.

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

TEXT, 3:1-32

- 1 Then Eliashib the high priest arose with his brothers the priests and built the Sheep Gate; they consecrated it and hung its doors. They consecrated the wall to the Tower of the Hundred and the Tower of Hananel.
- 2 And next to him the men of Jericho built, and next to them Zaccur the son of Imri built.

- 3 Now the sons of Hassenaah built the Fish Gate; they laid its beams and hung its doors with its bolts and bars.
- 4 And next to them Meremoth the son of Uriah, the son of Hakkoz made repairs. And next to him Meshullam the son of Berechiah the son of Meshezabel made repairs. And next to him Zadok the son of Baana also made repairs.
- 5 Moreover, next to him the Tekoites made repairs, but their nobles did not support the work of their masters.
- 6 And Joiada the son of Paseah and Meshullam the son of Besodeiah repaired the Old Gate; they laid its beams and hung its doors, with its bolts and its bars.
- 7 Next to them Melatiah the Gibeonite and Jadon the Meronothite, the men of Gibeon and of Mizpah, also made repairs for the official seat of the governor of the province beyond the River.
- 8 Next to him Uzziel the son of Harhiah of the goldsmiths made repairs. And next to him Hananiah, one of the perfumers, made repairs, and they restored Jerusalem as far as the Broad Wall.
- 9 And next to them Rephaiah the son of Hur, the official of half the district of Jerusalem, made repairs.
- 10 Next to them Jedaiah the son of Harumaph made repairs opposite his house. And next to him Hattush the son of Hashabneiah made repairs.
- 11 Malchijah the son of Harim and Hasshub the son of Pahathmoab repaired another section and the Tower of Furnaces.
- 12 And next to him Shallum the son of Hallohesh, the official of half the district of Jerusalem, made repairs, he and his daughters.
- 13 Hanun and the inhabitants of Zanoah repaired the Valley Gate. They built it and hung its doors with its bolts and its bars, and a thousand cubits of the wall to the Refuse Gate.
- 14 And Malchijah the son of Rechab, the official of the district of Beth-haccherem repaired the Refuse Gate. He built it and hung its doors with its bolts and its bars.
- 15 Shallum the son of Col-hozeh, the official of the district of Mizpah, repaired the Fountain Gate. He built it, covered it,

- and hung its doors with its bolts and its bars, and the wall of the Pool of Shelah at the King's Garden as far as the steps that descend from the city of David.
- 16 After him Nehemiah the son of Azbuk, official of half the district of Beth-zur, made repairs as far as a point opposite the tombs of David, and as far as the Artificial Pool and the House of the Mighty Men.
- 17 After him the Levites carried out repairs under Rehum the son of Bani. Next to him Hashabiah, the official of half the district of Keilah, carried out repairs for his district.
- 18 After him their brothers carried out repairs under Bavvai the son of Henadad, official of the other half of the district of Keilah.
- 19 And next to him Ezer the son of Jeshua, the official of Mizpah, repaired another section, in front of the ascent of the armory at the Angle.
- 20 After him Baruch the son of Zabbai zealously repaired another section, from the Angle to the doorway of the house of Eliashib the high priest.
- 21 After him Meremoth the son of Uriah, the son of Hakkoz repaired another section, from the doorway of Eliashib's house even as far as the end of his house.
- 22 And after him the priests, the men of the valley, carried out repairs.
- 23 After them Benjamin and Hasshub carried out repairs in front of their house. After them Azariah the son of Maaseiah, son of Ananiah carried out repairs beside his house.
- 24 After him Binnui the son of Henadad repaired another section, from the house of Azariah as far as the Angle and as far as the corner.
- 25 Palal the son of Uzai made repairs in front of the Angle and the tower projecting from the upper house of the king, which is by the court of the guard. After him Pedaiah the son of Parosh made repairs.
- 26 And the temple servants living in Ophel made repairs as far as the front of the Water Gate toward the east and the projecting tower.

- 27 After him the Tekoites repaired another section in front of the great projecting tower and as far as the wall of Ophel.
- 28 Above the Horse Gate the priests carried out repairs, each in front of his house.
- 29 After them Zadok the son of Immer carried out repairs in front of his house. And after him Shemaiah the son of Shecaniah, the keeper of the East Gate, carried out repairs.
- 30 After him Hananiah the son of Shelemiah, and Hanun the sixth son of Zalaph, repaired another section. After him Meshullam the son of Berechiah carried out repairs in front of his own quarters.
- 31 After him Malchijah one of the goldsmiths, carried out repairs as far as the house of the temple servants and of the merchants, in front of the Inspection Gate and as far as the upper room of the corner.
- 32 And between the upper room of the corner and the Sheep Gate the goldsmiths and the merchants carried out repairs.

COMMENT:

The construction of the entire wall is described here, as though it was all completed immediately. More details of the work, and the hazards they overcame, occupy the next three chapters; at Neh. 6:15 we are told of the completion of the work.

In this chapter the arrangement of materials is not necessarily chronological, but geographic, moving from the Sheep Gate on the north side of the city counterclockwise section by section in order till we are brought back again to the Sheep Gate. For this reason this chapter furnishes the most extensive description of the city of Jerusalem that appears anywhere in the Bible.

Much of the material needed would be lying all about them: the stones from the old wall. Nehemiah had gotten permission to bring other material from the king's forest (2:8). Labor would be the largest item: digging, discarding debris, shaping, moving, lifting, fitting. What money was needed may have been contributed by each group.

1. The builders were from many backgrounds.

(1) There were men whose profession was religion. The chapter begins (3:1) with a mention of the high priest Eliashib and his brothers the priests. Nehemiah, a government official, does them the honor of placing them first. It is probable also that they were the first to begin the project. Meremoth, in *verse 4*, was identified with the priesthood by Ezra (8:33); other priests appear in *verses 22, 28*, possibly indicating residence in other quarters of the city.

We may ask if it is necessary to understand that they actually handled rocks and timbers. Perhaps they only supervised, or financed certain parts of the construction. But this is not stated; they had as much at stake in the city's future as any others, and it need not be a surprise if they were toiling side by side with their fellow-citizens. This is especially suggested by the phrase, "arose and built."

Levites are also mentioned (*vs. 17*), and temple servants (*26*) who lived in Ophel, the part of the city where the Temple was located.

(2) There were government officials located not only at Jerusalem (*vss. 9, 12*), but in nearby cities as well (*vss. 14-19*). Besides their families, they would have at their disposal many persons under their pay or authority. One who is also mentioned, who was of a lower rank than these, was the keeper of the East Gate (*vs. 29*). The entire function of government could be improved by good walls, so these men helped.

(3) Then there were businessmen. The goldsmiths (*vss. 8, 13, 32*) would compare with our jewelers. The perfumers (*vs. 8*) would be similar to our druggists. The merchants (*vs. 32*) would be our grocers, taylor, hardware dealers, storekeepers in general. Walls of security would be vital to them, and they were willing to expend the necessary energy and effort to provide them.

(4) There were people who came from other districts and cities: Jericho (*vs. 2*), Tekoa (*vss. 5, 27*), Gibeon and Mizpah (*vs. 7*), and many others (*vss. 13-19*). Their survival would be more likely with a strongly fortified city close by.

(5) Even women were included (*vs. 12*). It is nothing new for

ladies to work in field or factory, office or classroom, militia or commerce, when they are needed.

2. They built in many different environs.

Because some of the locations are especially appropriate to the people who made the repairs (close to their own homes, Levites at Ophel, priests at the gate where sheep were brought in, close to the Temple), we would guess that they had some choice of where they would work. It is also true that persons work the best at things they are interested in; while the wall would be monotonously the same all around the city, the surroundings would be exceedingly varied and would furnish a point of interest. Perhaps, then, we can try to guess why they repaired at these particular sites; perhaps those who give of their effort to the church today have a similar range of interests.

(1) Most prominently mentioned are the gates. There are ten of them: Sheep (*vss. 1, 32*), Fish (*vs. 3*), Old (*vs. 6*), Valley (*vs. 13*), Refuse (*vs. 14*), Fountain (*vs. 15*), Water (*vs. 26*), Horse (*vs. 28*), Inspection (*vs. 31*), and the keeper of the East Gate appears, though the gate itself is not mentioned in the locations.

Two other gates are mentioned later on in the book: the Gate of Ephraim, and of the Guard (12:39). So the city had twelve gates in Nehemiah's time; this may show how fitting it was for John to speak of the twelve gates of the city in time to come (Rev. 21:12ff).

Gates were often more than entrance ways. They could be large rooms, with walls subdividing them and with benches where elders could sit to hear disputes between neighbors. Note in *vs. 15* that one gate was provided with a cover, or roof. Here the merchants came each evening to make their goods available to the inhabitants (Neh. 13:19-21). So the gate would be important for commerce or for justice. We do see a goldsmith (jeweler) by the Inspection Gate (*vs. 31*), which is also close to the house of the merchants; and other goldsmiths and merchants by the Sheep Gate (*vs. 32*). So today there are those who serve the church

because they see benefits in it for their business, or they see its value in upholding justice, social or otherwise.

(2) Others worked close to the official seat of the governor (of the entire province, when he visited the city on business, *vs. 7*); by the king's garden (*vs. 15*), or by the upper house of the king and the court of the guard, i.e., prison (*vs. 25*). The church commends itself today to some because it fosters general subservience to the government, and makes the government's job easier.

(3) But the king's garden (*vs. 15*) would also be a place of great beauty, and an excellent environment for the one interested in esthetics. So music and art and even a vase of flowers have their place in the church's service.

(4) Half a dozen of the builders looked after the wall close to their own houses (*vss. 10, 23, 28, 29, 30*). The home is an important institution today, and many are appreciative of the role of the church in laying down patterns for enduring homes.

(5) Business interests, or industry, were represented; some labored by the Tower of Furnaces (*vs. 11*). The word is descriptive of baking ovens rather than smelting furnaces; it appears also in *Hos. 7:4ff*. Some industrialists have expressed a preference for hiring church members. Thus the church today attracts support from this kind of people who built Jerusalem's walls.

(6) The tombs of David, the cemetery section, came in for attention. It was this particularly that Nehemiah had used to catch the interest of the king of Persia (2:3). All of the traditions of the past, respect for one's elders, respect for the bravery of the forefathers (the House of the Mighty Men, *vs. 16*, was close by), all of these are involved here; and the church reaches many because of its identification with the traditions of the past.

(7) The ascent of the armory (*vs. 19*), the military training and supply center, drew notice also. While some see our military forces as our first line of defense, they may also see the church and our trust in God as our last line of defense.

(8) Religion was also at stake. Some repaired to the high priest's doorway (*vs. 20*), and to the residence of the temple servants (*vs. 31*). It is certain that some would have seen the need of strong walls then to protect their religious institutions; there are people today

who need no other reason than the need of religion, for their support of the church.

Even this does not exhaust the list. There is still the Artificial Pool (*vs. 16*) and the steps that descend from the City of David (*vs. 15*), the southern section of Jerusalem.

What shall we do about the persons who are drawn to the church by such a variety of motives? Criticize them for their inadequate motives? Or welcome them for the variety of contributions they make to the church all of which are necessary that the total wall, so to speak, can be built? And meanwhile, we seek to educate and improve and clarify their motives.

3. There were differences in how they built.

(1) When the priests launched the project by building a section of the wall, they held a service of consecration. They also included a stretch adjacent to where they had built. This would be characteristic of them; apparently no other part of the wall received that kind of treatment at that time. Perhaps it was because they were priests (although such actions don't follow in *vs. 22* and *28*); or perhaps it was to mark the beginning with dedication ceremonies to ask God's favor on the remainder of the project.

(2) One man, and only one, is remembered for building zealously (*vs. 20*).

(3) The Tekoites built in spite of lack of co-operation from their nobles (*vs. 8*; see Word Studies). They were not dissuaded by the apathy of their leaders, but recognized their obligation to their higher officials of state.

(4) Two of them repaired "another section" after finishing a first (*vs. 21*, cf. *4*; *27*, cf. *5*). It seems that some must always carry double the ordinary load, if the Lord's work is done; it is especially noteworthy that the Tekoites, faced with the unconcern of their most capable, still went ahead with a second portion.

(5) Differences in the condition of the walls can be distinguished. In some places they must be totally rebuilt (*vs. 2*); in others they could simply be repaired (*vs. 4*); in others, they needed only to be

restored: the KJV has "fortified." The sense of this word is vague; literally it means "freed, cut loose, or left" (vs. 8).

The one thing apparent, from first to last, is the careful organization, the willingness of each group to do its small part, to contribute to the whole. A city wall with one gap is useless. An undertaking this large was impossible, except by an extra large amount of co-operation. For a hundred years and more the wall had been in ruins; now, because one man was sufficiently interested, the community was organized to pull together and do the work.

The next three chapters take us back a step and trace the achievement through some of its more difficult hours.

WORD STUDIES

SUPPORT (vs. 5): "put necks to." On the neck or shoulders are placed burdens (yoke: Gen. 27:40). When an ox braces itself to pull, it thrusts its neck or shoulders forward against the yoke. The Tekoite nobles were not doing this; they hadn't "knuckled down" to shoulder their part of the burden.

WALL (vs. 8: Chomah): the word emphasizes what is brought together, rather than what is kept out. The verb form means "to join together, join in affinity; surround with a wall; keep or hold together things conjoined."

A kindred word from the same base means "to bring together, congregate, conjoin." Another from the same base means, "become thick, curdle, coagulate (like milk)." Also from the same base are the words meaning "people," "kinsman," "collect," and the preposition "with."

This is an entirely different word from that which appears in the Word Studies for Ezra nine.

SUMMARY

It is difficult or useless to try to summarize a chapter with so many small details. It has been shown that those who worked on

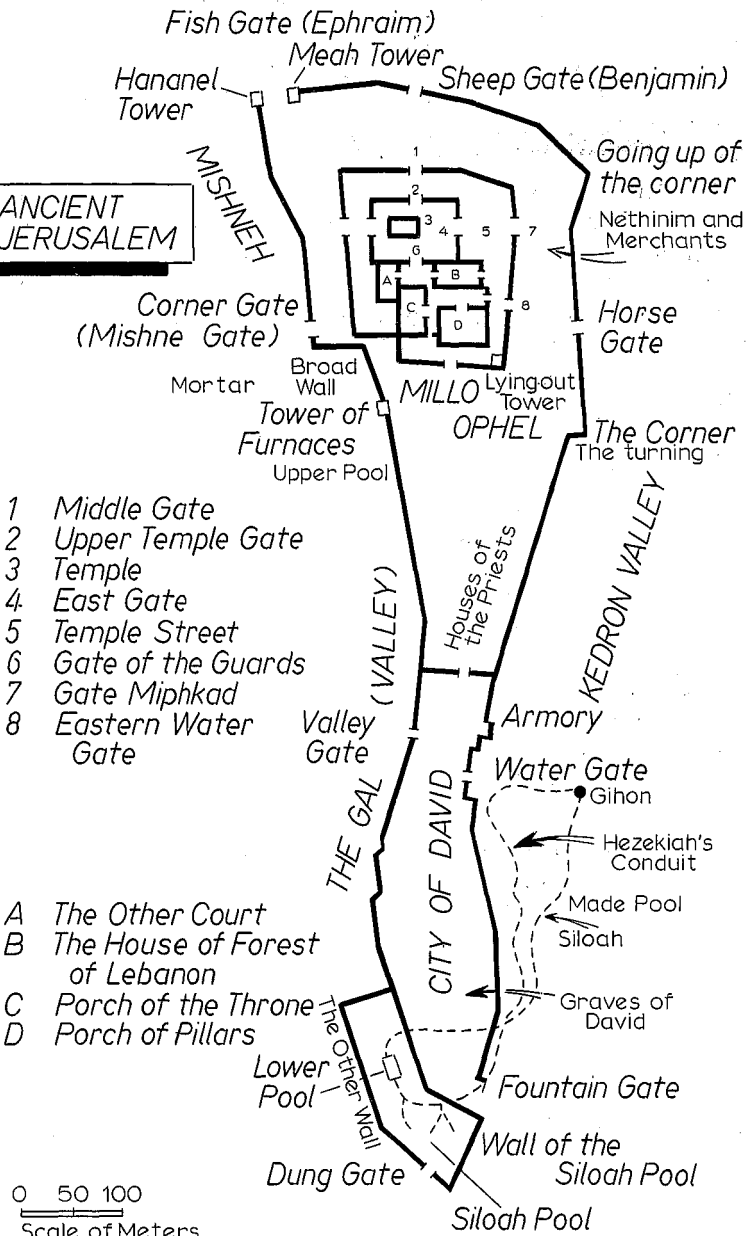
the wall were from very divergent professions and social levels: priests, jewelers, druggists, government officials, women, Levites, temple servants, merchants, and citizens of neighboring towns. They worked in a variety of environments: the gates, government headquarters, their own houses, down by the bakery, over at the cemetery, alongside the armory, close to the priest's house and the dormitories for the temple servants. They showed a variety of temperaments: reverence, zeal, stubbornness in the face of apathy, doggedly helping with a second section after finishing their first assignment; building anew, repairing, or just cleaning up and passing along.

The church can use all these types, for all these situations, and can watch as its members serve with their humanity showing through the chinks in their armor.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

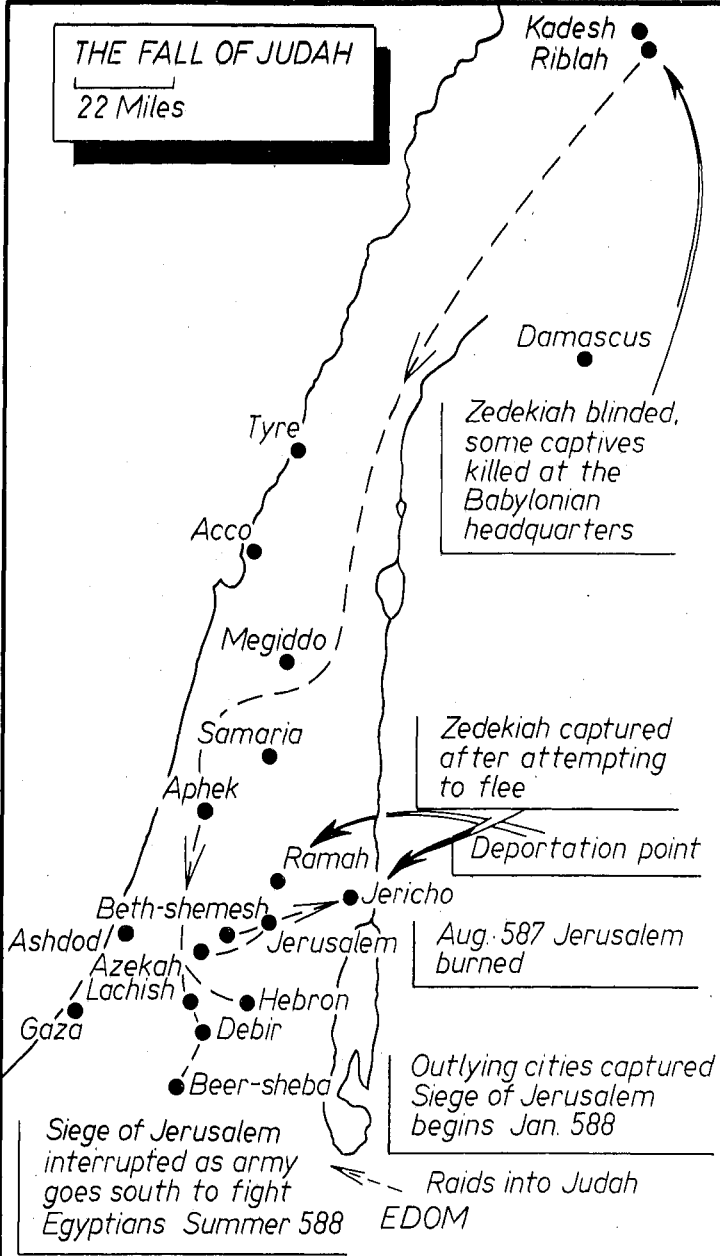
1. What part did priests take in the work?
2. Why do you suppose they consecrated what they built? Why didn't they consecrate all of it?
3. Were there some who did more than others?
4. Were there people from outside the city who helped?

ANCIENT JERUSALEM



THE FALL OF JUDAH

22 Miles



Zedekiah blinded, some captives killed at the Babylonian headquarters

Zedekiah captured after attempting to flee

Deportation point

Aug. 587 Jerusalem burned

Outlying cities captured
Siege of Jerusalem begins Jan. 588

Siege of Jerusalem interrupted as army goes south to fight Egyptians Summer 588

Raids into Judah EDOM

Chapter Four

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Why do you suppose Sanballat didn't want a wall around Jerusalem?
2. How many times did Jerusalem's enemies attack the city?
3. What do you think was Israel's most important tool for overcoming obstacles?
4. What percentage of the men worked, and what percentage were on military duty?

OUTLINE

Chapters 4 - 6 describe the building of the walls with varying obstacles and opposition.

- D. The enemies try ridicule and rumor to block construction.
1. Their enemies try to block them with ridicule (vss. 1-6).
 2. They spread rumors of impending attack (vss. 7-14).
 3. Work progresses in spite of these (vss. 15-23):

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- D. The enemies try ridicule and rumor to block construction.
1. Their enemies try to block them with ridicule.

TEXT, 4:1-6

- 1 Now it came about that when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became furious and very angry and mocked the Jews.
- 2 And he spoke in the presence of his brothers and the wealthy men of Samaria and said, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Are they going to restore it for themselves? Can they offer sacrifices? Can they finish in a day? Can they revive the stones from the dusty rubble even the burned ones?"
- 3 Now Tobiah the Ammonite was near him and he said, "Even what they are building—if a fox should jump on it, he would break their stone wall down!"

- 4 Hear, O our God, how we are despised! Return their reproach on their own heads and give them up for plunder in a land of captivity.
- 5 Do not forgive their iniquity and let not their sin be blotted out before Thee, for they have demoralized the builders.
- 6 So we built the wall and the whole wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.

COMMENT

In *verse 1* we read of Sanballat's anger on hearing of progress on construction of the wall. Many times the enemy of the Lord's work exposes himself by this means today. Perhaps he did not want the wall built because it would make it difficult for him to attack and rob the city; his opposition is hard to explain otherwise. Strong defenses at Jerusalem could pose no threat to the safety of Samaria. His first stage of opposition consequently was ridicule; so must the Lord's people be prepared to deal with this tool which the Devil still uses.

Verse 2 gives the details of his mockery. See if any of it sounds familiar today. (1) The reference to the Jews as feeble (drooping, languishing) may be a subtle suggestion that if they had been tending their crops instead of working on the walls, they wouldn't be as weak from hunger now. What food for his stomach does one get from building walls, or going to church to listen to sermons? (2) The meaning of the next phrase, "restore it for themselves," is vague, and translations vary: it contains the ambiguous word from 3:8, which literally means, "to cut loose or free, leave." One thing is clear: the emphasis on "for themselves." What did they think they could do by themselves, without Sanballat's help? (3) The next two phrases may go together, and imply that the Jews would be foolish to think that by making sacrifices to God they could gain His favor and be able to finish their work quickly, "in

a day”; i.e., worship is futile, and such ideas are nonsense. Or we may see in the phrase, “can they offer sacrifices?” the implication that since the wall is not needed to enable them to make sacrifices, they must be building it to lead to a rebellion. Then the next phrase, “Can they finish it in a day?” has the contemptuous idea that the Jews would lose heart and would not stay with the work to its completion. (4) The last remark was an invitation to look at the rocks and rubbish before them; that would be enough to discourage anybody!

Verse 3 indicates the close tie between Sanballat of Samaria and Tobiah of Ammon, on opposite sides of the Jordan. The evaluation of the wall, that it would be no match for even a fox, i.e., jackal, was pure caricature and not argument.

The tone of *verses 4, 5* indicates that all of *vss. 2, 3* were spoken audibly before Jerusalem. Nehemiah’s instantaneous reaction was a brief prayer. This characteristic of the man appeared before, at 2:4; it will crop up several more times.

Nehemiah’s requests were that God would be conscious of the way they were being ridiculed, and that their enemies be repaid for their evil blocking of God’s approved plan. The imprecatory nature of the prayer is similar to that in a few of the Psalms (69:27f, for example). Let us not judge him by a morality which God would reveal through His Son several centuries later; we are bound, as he was not, to pray for our enemies; but it is true that the consequences which he asked are the natural outcome in this world of the kinds of evil being committed by their enemies. It is well for us to be warned, lest we suffer a similar fate.

Verse 5 happily records that because the people put their heart into their work (“mind” is literally “heart”), the work progressed to the halfway stage. The word “height” is a conjecture; it is missing in the Hebrew text: we could substitute “width” or simply say it was half-finished just as accurately. Work was progressing throughout its whole length, according to chapter three. Note also Nehemiah’s taking no credit to himself; it was the people who were responsible.

2. The Jews faced the menace of an attack.

TEXT, 4:7-14

- 7 Now it came about when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites heard that the repair of the walls of Jerusalem went on, and that the breaches began to be closed, they were very angry.
- 8 And all of them conspired together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause a disturbance in it.
- 9 But we prayed to our God, and because of them we set up a guard against them day and night.
- 10 Thus in Judah it was said,
 “The strength of the burden bearers is failing,
 Yet there is much rubbish;
 And we ourselves are unable
 To rebuild the wall.”
- 11 And our enemies said, “They will not know or see until we come among them, kill them, and put a stop to the work.”
- 12 And it came about when the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times, “They will come up against us from every place where you may turn,”
- 13 then I stationed men in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, the exposed places, and I stationed the people in families with their swords, spears, and bows.
- 14 When I saw their fear, I rose and spoke to the nobles, the officials, and the rest of the people: “Do not be afraid of them; remember the Lord who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses.”

COMMENT

Now begins the second stage of opposition, the threat of actual hostility.

Verse 7 spells out the sources of their opposition, from all four

directions. To the north was Sanballat, representing the Samaritans. To the northeast was Tobiah and the Ammonites. The Arabs would include Edom, to the south and east; and Ashdod lay to the southwest of Jerusalem, along the coast, among the descendants of the Philistines. This opposition arose before the gaps in the wall had been entirely closed.

In *verse 8*, their conspiracy was not directed to the military destruction of Jerusalem: they had insufficient armies for that, thanks to Persia's control over all of them; but they could create confusion and stop the work in that manner.

Nehemiah's response in *verse 9* was prayer, first of all. But it was combined with works; he posted an around-the-clock guard.

The poetic form of *verse 10* shows that it was an oft-repeated saying. If we see discouragement in it, the frustration of long hours already invested and still as many hours of toil lying ahead, there is also hope and confidence in it; it is the kind of song that would encourage them to grit their teeth and continue on. The reference to failing strength may be another clue to the fasting and privation necessitated by their work.

In *verse 11*, we hear their enemies threaten, perhaps pretending secrecy but intending for the threats to be reported to the Jews, to appear from nowhere and destroy the builders.

Verse 12 shows that their message was reported to the Jews. The persons doing the reporting were the workmen who came from outlying towns; people from Tekoa eleven miles south, from Gibeon and Mizpah a comparable distance to the north, and from half a dozen other localities mentioned in chapter three were all helping. The "ten times" is just a way of saying "repeatedly": cf. Gen. 31:7.

Verse 13 gives more information on Nehemiah's defense. Since the city lacked a professional army, he stationed people from the various families (clans) at the more vulnerable locations.

We see the reality of the situation in *verse 14*: the visible fear, and Nehemiah's effort to reassure them and spur them on. His arguments were good ones: (1) remember the power and greatness of God (from which their strength came), and (2) think of the

brothers, children, wives, and homes they were fighting to protect (which would give them an immediate, visible incentive).

3. Work progresses in the midst of precautions.

TEXT, 4:15-23

- 15 And it happened when our enemies heard that it was known to us, and that God had frustrated their plan, then all of us returned to the wall, each one to his work.
- 16 And it came about from that day on, that half of my servants carried on the work while half of them held the spears, the shields, the bows, and the breastplates; and the captains were behind the whole house of Judah.
- 17 Those who were rebuilding the wall and those who carried burdens took their load with one hand doing the work and the other holding a weapon.
- 18 As for the builders, each wore his sword girded at his side as he built, while the trumpeter stood near me.
- 19 And I said to the nobles, the officials, and the rest of the people, "The work is great and extensive, and we are separated on the wall far from one another.
- 20 "At whatever place you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us."
- 21 So we carried on the work with half of them holding spears from dawn until the stars appeared.
- 22 At that time I also said to the people, "Let each man with his servant spend the night within Jerusalem so that they may be a guard for us by night and a laborer by day."
- 23 So neither I, my brothers, my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me, none of us removed our clothes, each took his weapon even to the water.

COMMENT

Verse 15: If it had been the plan of Judah's enemies to create confusion to hinder the work, the plan failed: they heard that the

Jews responded to the threats by organizing adequate defenses. Nehemiah gives credit to God for the outcome; the emphasis is not on their avoiding attack, but on their being able to continue their work. All we have seen so far are threats; their enemies may not have had the heart, or intention, to risk health or life for their evil ends.

Nehemiah's servants, *verse 16*, may have been his bodyguard of Persian soldiers. The presence of the captains behind the house of Judah could be physical; but it could speak more pointedly of their moral support.

The workmen in *verse 17* could continue hauling materials with one hand, and could use the other hand for weapons.

The workmen in *verse 18*, stone masons most likely, would need both hands for their work, so they kept their weapons close by.

At the end of *verse 18* and in *verses 19, 20*, communication was provided for. It was well over half a mile from the northern to the southern extremities of the wall, so a loud signal was needed if they were to be summoned to one another's defense. The shofar (trumpet), made of the curved horn of a cow or ram, was the answer. With this reassurance against surprise attack, and with the added assurance of God's assistance, they could work more efficiently.

In *verse 21*, though their work force was cut in half by their need of defense, they could make up a part of this by working from dawn to dusk.

According to *verse 22*, additional efficiency would be obtained by keeping all the workers within the city each night. The teaming of a skilled and unskilled laborer may be suggested by the mention of a man and his servant. The availability of the workmen as guards during the night is cited; there would be other advantages to the stratagem. It had been the workers who came from outside the city who brought the rumors in *verse 12*; this would cut off that avenue of subversion. It would also prevent defections from their work force, and at the same time speed construction by eliminating travel time. There may be a hint in this passage on how to get along with people; the only reasons which Nehemiah expressed for keeping men in the city were those which showed no

lack of confidence in, or disrespect for, his workmen. The practice of hospitality by the residents of the city would be needed to make this method succeed.

Verse 23 emphasizes once more the urgency of their work, that they kept their clothes on continuously. The last phrase of the verse is obscure. Literally it reads, "each one his weapon to the water." The KJV interprets it to mean that they did remove their clothes to wash them; sanitation must not be neglected. The *Anchor Bible* assumes that it is necessary to make some small corrections in the text; it reads, "each one had his spear in his right hand," to indicate constant readiness. The *Cambridge Bible* adds still more and suggests, "each one with his weapon in his hand for a full month of days." The NASB stresses that they took their weapons everywhere, even to get a drink or to bathe. The *Living Bible* simply tries to capture the sense: "And we carried our weapons with us at all times."

WORD STUDIES

WEALTHY (vs. 2: Chayil): in various contexts, it can mean (1) strength, might, valor; (2) forces, army; (3) ability, wealth; (4) integrity, virtue. It is usually translated "army," but "wealth" in Ruth 2:1, where it describes Boaz.

The two most important letters in the word are the "h" and "l"; these appear in our words "heil," "hale," "heal," "health," "whole," and even "holy": words having the same sense as the Hebrew, in certain contexts. They also occur in a word of very different derivation, but with the same connotations, in our slang "(big) wheel"; we wonder if this is only a coincidence. Try that expression in verse 2!

TRUMPET (vs. 20: Shofar): scratch, scrape, rub, polish. This leads to the idea of brightness, brilliance, and a brilliant tone. The word for "scribe" (Sepher) is akin to it (cf. Word Studies on Ezra 7: note the resemblance in primary meaning). There seems to be a connection between what a person communicates by writing or speech, and what he conveys by musical tones.

SUMMARY

This chapter tells of the effort of Israel's enemies to block progress on the wall by ridicule and rumor. First, Sanballat of Samaria made fun of these feeble people trying by themselves to push stones around; stones which already had been pushed over and burned, showing their ineffectiveness. Tobiah joined in by saying it wouldn't support a fox. Nehemiah prayed, and the people kept on working till the wall was half built.

Then their enemies came from four directions and threatened to do battle. Again Nehemiah prayed, and this time he set a guard. The workers were becoming tired and discouraged. A rumor of ambush spread, and as the people became frightened, Nehemiah calmed them and encouraged them to be willing to fight for God and home. Half of the workers were put on guard while the other half worked; even these had their weapons in their hand or within reach. At the sound of a trumpet, all were to rush to that point to defend their fellows. They worked from dawn to dusk, they remained close to their work instead of going home, some slept in their clothes, and they stayed alert.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. When did these events happen, compared to the previous chapter?
2. What methods were used by Israel's enemies to prevent building?
3. What tribes of people opposed them?
4. What is the first thing Nehemiah did to overcome them? The second thing?

Chapter Five

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. What were the reasons for the people's distress?
2. What had they done to relieve their hardships?
3. What would have been the result if no further solution were found?
4. How much expense was Nehemiah willing to go to?
5. How do interest rates compare, then and now?

OUTLINE

- E. Internal difficulties arise and are overcome.
1. The problem stated (vss. 1-5).
 2. The solution (vss. 6-13).
 3. Nehemiah's own example (vss. 14-19).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- E. Internal difficulties arise and are overcome.
1. Selfishness and greed create a problem.

TEXT, 5:1-5

- 1 Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers.
- 2 For there were those who said, "We, our sons and our daughters, are many; therefore let us get grain that we may eat and live."
- 3 And there were others who said, "We are mortgaging our fields our vineyards, and our houses that we might get grain because of the famine."
- 4 Also there were those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards."
- 5 "And now our flesh is like the flesh of our brothers, our children like their children. Yet behold, we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters

are forced into bondage already, and we are helpless because our fields and vineyards belong to others.”

COMMENT

Chapter five presents a new kind of problem: the work is threatened by internal dissension. Somewhere along the line this almost always has to be faced. It may be pointed out that the problem is not identified exclusively with the rebuilding of the wall. The only mention of the wall in this chapter is in verse 16, and may be merely a statement that Nehemiah had helped on the construction at some time past. The problem of usury was probably larger and more extensive than the brief period of their work on the wall. It would give even more point to their complaint, however, if this was going on while the walls were being built. The presence of the chapter at this point does have its weight and does suggest a connection. It does follow logically from the things that have gone before.

With great numbers of workmen busy from dawn to dusk repairing the wall in the shortest time, and with their being forbidden even to go out of the city to take care of crops, some would begin to suffer hardship. The workers received no income apparently, and this kind of toil produced no consumer goods; hunger was the inevitable result. Opportunists arose and took advantage of the situation to make themselves wealthy at the expense of the hard pressed.

Verse 1 identifies the opportunists as some of the more wealthy Jewish brethren. Some of these may have been of the number who had married the “peoples of the lands” (cf. comments on Ezra 9:1), and had become prosperous as a result. It made the load no lighter that those who were oppressing them were of their own race and religion.

Verse 2 states the people’s appeal to the government for relief, and identifies the first of three of their burdens: some had large families. “Let us get grain” may be their threat to steal to keep from starving, or it may be only a request for food to help them survive this time of desperation.

Verse 3 gives the second source of their grief: many had gone in debt and mortgaged their property, and were in danger of default and the loss of everything. The famine alluded to may not have been a general condition; the word is used in other places occasionally of private hunger, so it may be only a suggestion of the conditions imposed on some persons by the circumstances mentioned above. These in themselves would be enough to produce the situation of hunger.

Their third burden, in *verse 4*, was taxes. Some had borrowed money, jeopardizing their lands and pledging their future crops to pay the Persian tribute; their subjection to Persia was an ever-present reality.

Verse 5 is their plea, on the basis of compassion. If their creditors loved their children, they could be sure that the poor loved their children in the same manner. Some families had already been driven to sell their sons and daughters into slavery, and to part from them. In addition, some of their daughters had been forced into bondage. This may have been an euphemism for rape¹; at the least it would imply marriages which were not of their choosing, since women were often sold into slavery for this purpose (Ex. 21:7-11).

Of course all of this was legal: the Law of Moses made provision for a person to sell his children into slavery to pay his debts (Lev. 25:39-43). He could even sell himself; he could not sell his wife separately, for "the twain shall be one flesh."

And slavery was not as onerous as it became in more recent centuries. A Hebrew slave, male or female, was to be released after a maximum of six years (Dt. 15:12-18), though slaves were not always freed as they should have been (Jer. 34:14-17). If he suffered any injury or abuse, he was to be released (Ex. 21:27). He had the further option of running away, in which case he was to be protected and not returned to his former owner (Dt. 23:15f). In effect, he was a slave only as long as he wanted to be a slave. Neither is today's employee in industry compelled to report to his job any longer than he wishes; but he won't get help in paying his

1. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 708.

expenses and his debts unless he does. Why, then, would they bemoan the enslavement of their children? Even at best there was the reality of separation from them.

2. Nehemiah protests, and offers a solution.

TEXT, 5:6-13

- 6 Then I was very angry when I had heard their outcry and these words.
- 7 And I consulted with myself, and contended with the nobles and the rulers and said to them, "You are exacting usury, each from his brother!" Therefore, I held a great assembly against them.
- 8 And I said to them, "We according to our ability have redeemed our Jewish brothers who were sold to the nations; now would you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us?" Then they were silent and could not find a word to say.
- 9 Again I said, "The thing which you are doing is not good; should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?"
- 10 "And likewise I, my brothers and my servants, are lending them money and grain. Please, let us leave off this usury.
- 11 "Please, give back to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, also the hundredth part of the money and of the grain, the new wine, and the oil that you are exacting from them."
- 12 Then they said, "We will give it back and will require nothing from them; we will do exactly as you say." So I called the priests and took an oath from them that they would do according to this promise.
- 13 I also shook out the front of my garment and said, "Thus may God shake out every man from his house and from his possessions who does not fulfill this promise; even thus may he be shaken out and emptied." And all the assembly said,

“Amen!” And they praised the LORD. Then the people did according to this promise.

COMMENT

Note the personal tone of *verse 6*.

In *verse 7*, he makes two appeals. The first is addressed to the nobles and rulers, i.e., the persons making the loans at excessive interest, and buying the slaves (perhaps collecting exorbitant taxes, too). The second is to the people themselves (this is labeled a characteristic of Nehemiah²), whose support and good will is always ultimately essential to any rulers. The complaint is against usury (Ex. 22:25; Lev. 25:35ff; Dt. 23:19). The purpose for making a loan should be to help the needy, not to enrich the lender.

Verse 8, before the assembled people, informs us that Nehemiah and others had bought Jews back from slavery to foreigners, to the limit of their means, either in the lands of their captivity or more recently in Judah. Now their fellow-Jews were selling them back into slavery. There was nothing illegal about this, but it just didn't make sense.

Verse 9, still before the assembly, appeals to their creditors on the basis that their action was bringing aid and comfort to their enemies, who would hear reports of every oppression. There is the implication also that what they were doing was not consistent with reverence to God.

In *verse 10*, Nehemiah appeals to them on the basis of his own example. His brothers would be his relatives or associates whom he had brought with him from Persia; the servants would be the soldiers sent as his bodyguard. Each of these were making loans of food and money to the poor. There is a kindly compulsion in his words as he includes himself in the exhortation, “Please, let us leave off this usury.”

Verse 11 suggests that the property which had been mortgaged

2. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 709.

and subjected to foreclosure, plus the crops and personal belongings, be returned to their original owners. The hundredth part of the money presents a problem. He may have asked them to drop all interest requirements, in which case the 1% would be the monthly rate. Even so, this would be low interest in a world where 20% was the standard figure (Lev. 5:16; 6:5). One suggestion is that one letter had slipped out of a word, and the text should be emended to read, "also the *claim* on the money and the grain . . ."³ However, the interest rate is not that unbelievable; Latin sources speak of the same monthly rate of 1%, or annual rate of 12%.⁴

Verse 12 indicates their consent to this proposal. To avoid a change of heart later on, they were required to go through the formalities of taking an oath (see "Take Oath," Word Studies for Ezra 10).

In *verse 13* we see Nehemiah employ a "visual aid." The folds of his garment served as pockets for the personal belongings he would carry; with a dramatic gesture he shook these out before his audience as a symbol of the loss of possessions which God would cause the person to suffer who violated his oath. The assembly cheered; they all praised God; and their creditors kept their promise.

3. Nehemiah vindicates his own conduct.

TEXT, 5:14-19

14 Moreover, from the day that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, for twelve years, neither I nor my kinsmen have eaten the governor's food allowance.

15 But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people and took from them bread and wine besides forty

3. *Anchor Bible*, "Ezra-Nehemiah," p. 129.

4. *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, "Ezra-Nehemiah," p. 212.

shekels of silver; even their servants domineered the people. But I did not do so because of the fear of God.

- 16 And I also applied myself to the work on this wall; we did not buy any land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work.
- 17 Moreover, there were at my table one hundred and fifty Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us.
- 18 Now that which was prepared for each day was one ox and six choice sheep, also birds were prepared for me; and once in ten days all sorts of wine were furnished in abundance. Yet for all this I did not demand the governor's food allowance, because the servitude was heavy on this people.
- 19 Remember me, O my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people.

COMMENT

From *verse 14*, it is obvious that this note was written after Nehemiah's second journey to his brethren in Israel, described in 13:6ff. It would also appear from this verse (and through the end of the chapter) that Nehemiah was a man of considerable means who could afford to live on his income as a Persian official without ever drawing his salary as governor of Judah, for himself or for his assistants. This is also the first disclosure that Nehemiah has made of the rank which had been assigned to him by Artaxerxes; again we see something of his reserve. We can also guess what kept his enemies in the surrounding regions from attacking.

Verse 15 contrasts this with other administrations in which large (daily) demands had been made on the people, both by the rulers and by their appointees. The forty shekels of silver was probably the value of the bread and wine, rather than in addition to it; assuming that a shekel was an average day's wage for a working man, the ruler would be well paid. Add the burden of the appointees' domineering attitude (underlings in government have historically been among the most overbearing), and we can guess

the benefits which Nehemiah's administration had in contrast. The reason he gives for his unassuming character was his fear of the Lord.

Verse 16 lists three more things to his credit. (1) He himself helped with construction on the wall; even if this meant only superintendence of the work, it was beyond the call of duty for a governor. (2) Neither he nor his associates bought up any of the land at cheap prices from the desperate workers. (3) His own soldiers busied themselves with the building.

Meanwhile, in *verse 17*, there were the considerable expenses of official hospitality. It is suggested that the 150 Jews were the officials spoken of; read, "Jews, that is, officials." There were still others from surrounding lands who came and went.

The daily menu, in *verse 18*, has been estimated as sufficient to feed 400 to 500 people; that would be no small food bill. Here also is his concern not to be a burden on the people. It is always a blessing when those who give themselves to the service of others do not need to be compensated by oppressive salaries from those whom they volunteer to serve.

In *verse 19* Nehemiah's only request for recompense for his work was from God. His nobility speaks for itself.

WORD STUDIES

REDEEM. Of the three main words translated "redeem" in the O.T., two appear in Nehemiah. Qanah, 5:8: "set upright, erect." This is a means of "founding, creating," by which then we "get, acquire" something, as Eve "got" Cain; hence to get by purchase, buy, buy off, or redeem.

Padah, 1:10: the basic idea is to cut off, or cut loose; thus, to let go free, or set free. This happens when one is ransomed, or redeemed.

The third word, Gaal (noun, Goel, Redeemer) is implied in the whole process of being sold into slavery as described in 5:5, or in

5. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 714.

mortgaging property (5:3). A near relative always has the right; if he were sufficiently wealthy and equally concerned (see Ruth 4:1-6 for one who wasn't), to buy a person back from slavery (Lev. 25:48f; Ex. 6:6); he could always redeem land which had been sold or foreclosed (Lev. 25:25). All firstborn males were to be given in sacrifice to God in memory of the sparing of the firstborn in Egypt; but a person could not be sacrificed, so a redemption price was paid and his life was spared (Ex. 13:2, 13). If a person had suffered a crime or had been murdered, his next kinsman was to track down the guilty and avenge his brother; this threat would preserve justice in the land (Num. 35:19). Or if a married man died without children, his next younger brother or kinsman was to marry her and continue his brother's name and inheritance (Ruth 3:13).

So our redeemer restores our inheritance, recovers us from sin's bondage, rescues us from death, protects us from injustice, and gives us an everlasting name.

SUMMARY

The next obstacle which Nehemiah and the builders had to surmount was caused by the Jews themselves: their selfishness and greed and oppression of one another. Some had been forced by the economic situation to borrow money, mortgaging and losing their property. Others had sold their children into slavery. Still others had encumbered their property to borrow the money to pay their taxes.

When Nehemiah heard how they were abusing one another when they all equally needed the protection of the wall and its completion was in jeopardy, he went to their creditors and politely insisted that they return the slaves and things taken in security, that they eliminate the usurious interest rate, and thus honor God and quit giving comfort to their enemies. Walls or no walls, the presence of a class of impoverished people never makes a contribution to the wealth of the well-to-do; ultimately the well-being of all is related. Observing Nehemiah's own example they

agreed, and took an oath to continue this policy into the future.

Nehemiah himself assessed no tax on the land to pay his salary or his lavish hospitality bills. He required similar generosity of his associates and soldiers, and he and they actually assisted in the construction of the wall.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who had caused the people's distress?
2. How did Nehemiah propose that this be relieved?
3. What example did Nehemiah himself set?
4. Was the solution successful?

Chapter Six

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Can you find two occasions when Nehemiah prayed?
2. What was the basis of the information which his enemies had?
3. What saved Nehemiah from their plots?
4. How long did it take to repair the wall about Jerusalem?
5. What were the results to their enemies?

OUTLINE

- F. The enemies resort to tactics of diversion, but the wall is completed.
1. Sanballat and Geshem plot treachery through invitation to a conference (vss. 1-4).
 2. They try again through spreading rumors of rebellion (vss. 5-9).
 3. Tobiah tries his hand at discrediting Nehemiah (vss. 10-14).
 4. Success is achieved in spite of some differences with Tobiah (vss. 15-19).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

F. The enemies resort to tactics of diversion,
but the wall is completed.

1. Sanballat and Geshem plot treachery through invitation to a conference.

TEXT, 6:1-4

- 1 Now it came about when it was reported to Sanballat, Tobiah, to Geshem the Arab, and to the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall, and that no breach remained in it although at that time I had not set up the doors in the gates,
- 2 that Sanballat and Geshem sent a message to me, saying, "Come, let us meet together at Chephirim in the plain of Ono." But they were planning to harm me.
- 3 So I sent messengers to them, saying, "I am doing a great

work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?"

- 4 And they sent messages to me four times in this manner, and I answered them in the same way.

COMMENT

In *verse 1* the full threesome from Neh. 2:19 are present once more, plus other enemies. Geshem, ruler over Arabia though not necessarily an Arabian, may have been the most powerful figure of them all, as his territory was larger than the others. The statement that the doors had not been hung in the gates is another indication that chapter 3 had carried the story clear through, and chapters 4-6 go back and fill in the details.

In *verse 2* the name of Tobiah is missing, which has provoked speculation that he refused to be implicated in a plot which involved him in violence against a Jewish ruler. Or it may be that he was just waiting his turn with his own scheme. The plot apparently was to single Nehemiah out from his defenders, entice him away from the city to a secluded spot, and assassinate him, or at least give him a sound beating.

Verse 3 gives Nehemiah's reply: he would not be diverted from his work. It was not an out-and-out refusal, but at least he would not consider it until his present work was done; one must not lose sight of his priorities.

Verse 4 indicates that a similar ploy was used, with similar results, three more times.

2. They try again by spreading rumors of rebellion.

TEXT, 6:5-9

- 5 Then Sanballat sent his servant to me in the same manner a fifth time with an open letter in his hand.
6 In it was written, "It is reported among the nations, and

Gashmu says, that you and the Jews are planning to rebel; therefore you are rebuilding the wall. And you are to be their king, according to these reports.

- 7 "And you have also appointed prophets to proclaim in Jerusalem concerning you, 'A king is in Judah!' And now it will be reported to the king according to these reports. So come now, let us take counsel together."
- 8 Then I sent a message to him saying, "Such things as you are saying have not been done, but you are inventing them in your own mind."
- 9 For all of them were trying to frighten us, thinking, "They will become discouraged with the work and it will not be done." But now, O God, strengthen my hands.

COMMENT

In *verses 5-7*, the fifth try introduces two variations: the letter is unsealed, and it contains definite charges.

The use of an open letter, in *verse 5*, may have had several motives. (1) It may have been designed to frighten Nehemiah because he would observe that its contents were known to others; thus he could not ignore it or dismiss it as easily as he had the others. (2) The people of the city who were aware of its contents might be terrified and might abandon active co-operation in the work to avoid suspicion of rebellion. (3) Some of them might actually try to dispose of Nehemiah seeking to do the king a favor and receive a reward for destroying a traitor; if Sanballat could get someone else to adopt this risky mission, he would be spared its dangers. (4) Meanwhile he would contribute to the spread of rumors and might force Nehemiah to come to him in hopes of resolving the charges.

Verse 6 credits two sources: "they say," and "Gashmu says." In other words, these were rumors. Gashmu is a dialectical difference in spelling for the name Geshem. There is a similar variation in spelling the name Tobiah as "Tobiyahu" (II Chr. 17:8), which the English text does not reveal. Many other names (Jeremiah and

Hezekiah among them) also have similar variant forms.

The rumor (apparently being initiated by Geshem on the spot) was that "you are building the wall" ("you" is singular) as a prelude to leading the Jewish people in a rebellion. Another part of it was that Nehemiah planned to make himself king, which would be treason. If the rumor spread far enough, it might even bring the armies and the king of Persia against Nehemiah!

Verse 7 adds other details to the rumor, that Nehemiah had hired prophets to proclaim him king and to rally the people behind him. It was always possible that one somewhere might actually be doing this. During Zerubbabel's rule some believed that he could be the Messiah promised of God (Hag. 2:23), and later during Jesus' ministry some sought to make him king.

The inference which they were making was that the rumors would get to the Persian court unless Nehemiah came to them, whereupon they would be reassured and could clear his name of suspicion and defend him from these charges. If Nehemiah had not been absolutely sure of his standing with the king of Persia, and of Artaxerxes' complete confidence in him, he could have been misled.

Verse 8 indicates that he saw through the scheme and dismissed it as coming out of Sanballat's imagination. A ruler out of touch with his subjects never could have acted with such confidence.

Verse 9 shows that Nehemiah was aware also of the purpose to discourage and alienate the workers. It concludes with another prayer just a breath long. It is all the more remarkable as an almost unconscious prayer because of the absence of "O God," which is inserted by the translators.

3. Tobiah tries his hand at discrediting Nehemiah.

TEXT, 6:10-14

10 And when I entered the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabel, who was confined at home, he said, "Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and

let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you, and they are coming to kill you at night.”

- 11 But I said, “Should a man like me flee? And could one such as I go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in.”
- 12 Then I perceived that surely God had not sent him, but he uttered his prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him.
- 13 He was hired for this reason, that I might become frightened and act accordingly and sin, so that they might have an evil report in order that they could reproach me.
- 14 Remember, O my God, Tobiah and Sanballat according to these works of theirs, and also Noadiah the prophetess and the rest of the prophets who were trying to frighten me.

COMMENT

In *verses 10-14* Tobiah's plan is unveiled. Perhaps his absence in the previous paragraphs is to be explained by the necessity for him to be setting up his stand-by plan.

Shemaiah, in *verse 10*, is not identified further than by naming his father and grandfather. Some suppose that he was a priest¹ because he proposed that he and Nehemiah hide in the Temple, which was forbidden territory for anyone but priests; Shemaiah would have been spared, but Nehemiah could have been executed for such an infraction of the law. Laymen had the right of sanctuary at the altar, but not inside the building. Others see him as a prophet, specifically a false prophet, because his proposition is in the form of poetry (it is so arranged in the *Anchor Bible*²), as most prophecies were (especially false prophecies); and because it is called a prophecy in *verse 12*. If he were not a priest, he would have needed some other ruse to get Nehemiah into the building while he stayed outside, for example. It is useless to speculate beyond what the Bible has recorded, and it does not tell which he was.

1. *Ellicott's Commentary on The Whole Bible*, Vol. III, p. 492.

2. *Anchor Bible*, “Ezra-Nehemiah,” p. 122.

Shemaiah's being shut up has also been variously interpreted. Perhaps the most likely explanation is that he was seeking to overcome Nehemiah's suspicion of him by pretending to be in as much danger as he; they would both need to go into the Temple to save their lives.

In *verse 11*, Nehemiah was not taken in by this trick. First, he trusted his position as a Persian official to give him more protection than could be provided by stealth: "Should a man like me flee?" Secondly, he saw the proposition as involving the violation of a sacred law (Num. 18:7); the preferred reading then is, "Could one such as I go into the Temple and live?"

Verse 12 may subtly suggest a third reason: he discerned (by a flash of insight perhaps) "that surely God had not sent him." All true prophecies must come from God; a prophet was not allowed to originate his own message, to speak from himself (Dt. 18:20); Shemaiah had not used the formula, "Thus saith the Lord!" Sometimes a knowledge of the Scriptures can save a man's life. This proved to be a good hunch; Sanballat and Tobiah had hired the man to speak this deception.

In *verse 13*, Nehemiah speaks of the plot only as an effort to discredit him and cause him to sin. This would have been enough to end the effectiveness of his particular ministry; his death would have been incidental.

Verse 14 provides a pause in the action, and another of Nehemiah's quickie prayers. He asks that God keep in mind what his enemies have done. Noadiah is not known from any other reference. The mention of women prophets is rare, but there were some whom God used (Jgs. 4:4; Lk. 2:36).

4. Success is achieved in spite of some differences with Tobiah.

TEXT, 6:15-19

15 So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of the month Elul, in fifty-two days.

- 16 And it came about when all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations surrounding us saw it, they lost their confidence; for they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.
- 17 Also in those days many letters went from the nobles of Judah to Tobiah, and Tobiah's letters came to them.
- 18 For many in Judah were bound by oath to him because he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah the son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah.
- 19 Moreover, they were speaking about his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him. Then Tobiah sent letters to frighten me.

COMMENT

Verse 15 reports the completion of the wall; the date, in the month of Elul, would correspond with the middle of September. Total time required for the work was fifty-two days. This seems incredible to many; Josephus supposes it to have taken two years and four months.³ This seems unnecessary.

There is a childhood riddle that goes, "If it takes a hen and a half a day and a half to lay an egg and a half, how long would it take for fifty hens to lay fifty eggs?" It was always a delight to hear someone respond "Fifty." But the correct answer is a day and a half; it takes no longer for fifty hens to lay fifty eggs than it takes for one hen to lay one egg (or 1 to lay 1). To come back to the wall, the work required no longer than it took for one crew to complete one unit, as long as each crew did its part, and there are at least 42 crews named in Neh. 3! That is the marvel of organization, and that may just be what Nehemiah is telling us.

Verse 16 records the result. (1) Their enemies in the surrounding nations were humbled. (2) God was glorified.

Verses 17-19 are parenthetical, giving more information on some of the intrigues, especially involving Tobiah, which went on

3. *Antiquities of The Jews*, Book XI, chap. 5, p. 274.

and in spite of which the wall was completed promptly.

Verse 17 reveals that Tobiah had much influence and much correspondence with government leaders in Judah.

Verse 18 gives a reason for this, in the intermarriage of his family with Israel's leading priests. Shecaniah is mentioned in Ezra 2:5, and Meshullam in Neh. 3:4, 30.

Verse 19 reflects Nehemiah's difficulties within his own ranks as a result of divided loyalties. "Words" ("they . . . reported my words to him") may be translated "goings forth"; hence, his activities.

This ends the story of rebuilding the wall.

WORD STUDIES

REMEMBER (vs. 14: Zakar): from the idea of "pricking or piercing" comes the idea of "penetrating or infixing"; thus "remembering, recalling, considering."

GESHEM (vs. 1): violent storm, severe shower.

STRENGTHEN (vs. 9: Chazaq): the primary idea is to bind fast, to gird tight; then to cleave, or adhere firmly.

Things are strengthened by being bound together; a spear may be made stronger by winding it round with a cord. One's strength seems greater when he has fastened a girdle about his loins.

A very free translation might be, "Give my hands stick-to-it-iveness!" Or, "Link our hands together (with others, or Yours)!" Or, "Hitch up my belt!" Or just "Give me strength."

SUMMARY

As the wall neared completion, Sanballat and Geshem tried to lure Nehemiah into a trap, but he would not leave his work. They used rumors to try to frighten him, or bring him to them, or discourage the workers, but he was not fooled by their lies. Then Sanballat and Tobiah hired Shemaiah to trick him into violating a law of God, thus putting his life in jeopardy or destroying the

faith which the people had in him. Again Nehemiah saw through their scheme. As a result the wall was finished fifty-two days after work began, to the glory of God and the embarrassment of their enemies. Meanwhile Tobiah, who had relatives among the leaders and priests, was in frequent communication with Jewish leaders, learning Nehemiah's moves; he even sent letters to Nehemiah himself to frighten him.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who were the three neighboring rulers who plotted against Nehemiah in this chapter?
2. How many times did they communicate with Nehemiah?
3. What was different about the last letter?
4. Who was the man hired to destroy Nehemiah by trickery, and who hired him?

Chapter Seven

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Why do you suppose Nehemiah appointed his brother to an important government post?
2. Who else besides his brother was appointed?
3. How thickly was Jerusalem populated at this time?
4. Why did Nehemiah stress that God put it into his heart to take a census?

OUTLINE

- G. Nehemiah finds the list of the first exiles to return.
1. Nehemiah makes arrangements for the continued defense and administration of the city (vss. 1-4).
 2. He retraces the genealogies of the first returning exiles (vss. 5-73).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- G. Nehemiah finds the list of the first exiles to return.
1. Nehemiah makes arrangements for the continued defense and administration of the city.

TEXT, 7:1-4

- 1 Now it came about when the wall was rebuilt and I had set up the doors, and the gatekeepers and the singers and the Levites were appointed,
- 2 that I put Hanani my brother, and Hananiah the commander of the fortress, in charge of Jerusalem, for he was a faithful man and feared God more than many.
- 3 Then I said to them, "Do not let the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun is hot, and while they are standing guard, let them shut and bolt the doors. Also appoint guards from the inhabitants of Jerusalem, each at his post, and each in front of his own house."

- 4 Now the city was large and spacious but the people in it were few and the houses were not built.

COMMENT

The occasion for Nehemiah's activity was probably his anticipated return to his duties in Persia. Since the purpose for which he had come was now completed, he could return things to the hands of the permanent residents.

Verse 1 speaks of the appointing of gatekeepers; we seldom read of these in the Bible, but we know they were there. These were times when their work was especially important.

Levites and singers are also mentioned, probably to help man the watchtowers, since the population of the city now consisted of such a disproportionate number of temple personnel.

Verse 2 records two personal appointments. Nehemiah's brother, Hanani, who had alerted him to the problem at the book's beginning (1:2), was one, and Hananiah, a military leader known for his religious profession and consistency, was the other.

Verse 3 bespeaks the continued tension in the city; the gates were not to be opened until the citizens were well awake and active, rather than at the first rays of dawn. The doors were not to be shut only, but bolted for security, as in times of active threat. Sentries were to consist of security police and a citizen patrol.

Verse 4 is another reminder that the city's greatness in the past far outstripped the present. There was still a need for restoring more of the houses for the residents and for prospective growth.

2. Nehemiah retraces the genealogies of first returning exiles.

TEXT, 7:5-73

- 5 Then my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials, and the people to be enrolled by genealogies. Then I found the book of the genealogy of those who came up first in which I found the following record:

- 6 These are the people of the province who came up from the captivity of the exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away, and who returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his city,
 - 7 who came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Azariah, Raamiah, Nahamani, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispereth, Bigvai, Nehum, Baanah.
- The number of men of the people of Israel:
- 8 the sons of Parosh, 2,172;
 - 9 the sons of Shephatiah, 372;
 - 10 the sons of Arah, 652;
 - 11 the sons of Pahath-moab of the sons of Jeshua and Joab, 2,818;
 - 12 the sons of Elam, 1,254;
 - 13 the sons of Zattu, 845;
 - 14 the sons of Zaccai, 760;
 - 15 the sons of Binnui, 648;
 - 16 the sons of Bebai, 628;
 - 17 the sons of Azgad, 2,322;
 - 18 the sons of Adonikam, 667;
 - 19 the sons of Bigvai, 2,067;
 - 20 the sons of Adin, 655;
 - 21 the sons of Ater, of Hezekiah, 98;
 - 22 the sons of Hashum, 328;
 - 23 the sons of Bezai, 324;
 - 24 the sons of Hariph, 112;
 - 25 the sons of Gibeon, 95;
 - 26 the men of Bethlehem and Netophah, 188;
 - 27 the men of Anathoth, 128;
 - 28 the men of Beth-azmaveth, 42;
 - 29 the men of Kiriath-jearim, Chephirah, and Beeroth, 743;
 - 30 the men of Ramah and Geba, 621;
 - 31 the men of Michmas, 122;
 - 32 the men of Bethel and Ai, 123;
 - 33 the men of the other Nebo, 52;
 - 34 the sons of the other Elam, 1,254;
 - 35 the sons of Harim, 320;
 - 36 the men of Jericho, 345;
 - 37 the sons of Lod, Hadid, and Ono, 721;

- 38 the sons of Senaah, 3,930;
- 39 The priests: the sons of Jedaiah of the house of Jeshua, 973;
- 40 the sons of Immer, 1,052;
- 41 the sons of Pashhur, 1,247;
- 42 the sons of Harim, 1,017.
- 43 The Levites: the sons of Jeshua, of Kadmiel, of the sons of Hodevah, 74.
- 44 The singers: the sons of Asaph, 148.
- 45 The gatekeepers: the sons of Shallum, the sons of Ater, the sons of Talmon, the sons of Akkub, the sons of Hatita, the sons of Shobai, 138.
- 46 The temple servants: the sons of Ziha, the sons of Hasupha, the sons of Tabbaoth,
- 47 the sons of Keros, the sons of Sia, the sons of Padon,
- 48 the sons of Lebana, the sons of Hagaba, the sons of Shalmal,
- 49 the sons of Hanan, the sons of Giddel, the sons of Gahar,
- 50 the sons of Reaiah, the sons of Rezin, the sons of Nekoda,
- 51 the sons of Gazzam, the sons of Uzza, the sons of Paseah,
- 52 the sons of Besai, the sons of Meunim, the sons of Nephuseshim,
- 53 the sons of Bakbuk, the sons of Hakupha, the sons of Harhur,
- 54 the sons of Bazlith, the sons of Mehida, the sons of Harsha,
- 55 the sons of Barkos, the sons of Sisera, the sons of Temah,
- 56 the sons of Neziah, the sons of Hatipha.
- 57 The sons of Solomon's servants: the sons of Sotai, the sons of Sophereth, the sons of Perida,
- 58 the sons of Jaala, the sons of Darkon, the sons of Giddel,
- 59 the sons of Shephatiah, the sons of Hattil, the sons of Pochereth-hazzebaim, the sons of Amon.
- 60 All the temple servants and the sons of Solomon's servants, were 392.
- 61 And these were they who came up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addon, and Immer; but they could not show their fathers' houses or their descendants, whether they were of Israel:
- 62 the sons of Delaiah, the sons of Tobiah, the sons of Nekoda, 642.

- 63 And of the priests: the sons of Hobaiah, the sons of Hakkoz, the sons of Barzillai, who took a wife of the daughters of Barzillai, the Gileadite, and was named after them.
- 64 These searched among their ancestral registration, but it could not be located; therefore they were considered unclean and excluded from the priesthood.
- 65 And the governor said to them that they should not eat from the most holy things until a priest arose with Urim and Thummim.
- 66 The whole assembly together was 42,360,
- 67 besides their male and their female servants, of whom there were 7,337; and they had 245 male and female singers.
- 68 Their horses were 736; their mules, 245;
- 69 their camels, 435; their donkeys, 6,720.
- 70 And some from among the heads of fathers' households gave to the work. The governor gave to the treasury 1,000 gold drachmas, 50 basins, 530 priests' garments.
- 71 And some of the heads of fathers' households gave into the treasury of the work 20,000 gold drachmas, and 2,200 silver minas.
- 72 And that which the rest of the people gave was 20,000 gold drachmas and 2,000 silver minas, and 67 priests' garments.
- 73 Now the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, some of the people, the temple servants, and all Israel, lived in their cities.

And when the seventh month came, the sons of Israel were in their cities.

COMMENT

Most of the remainder of this chapter is a repetition of material in Ezra 2, and therefore will need no further comment. Some additional differences beyond those noted there will be observed.

Verse 5 explains the situation which brought the genealogical records to light. Probably with a view to increasing the population of Jerusalem, Nehemiah was led of God to initiate a census

of the land. His emphasis on the Lord's leading may be explained if he was familiar with David's experience, arising out of pride, in II Sam. 24. In the course of these preparations he ran across the public register of those who had come with Zerubbabel, almost a hundred years before. These would be useful as a beginning point, as a means of comparison, and as a tool for exerting pressure to maintain or increase the population of the city and province.

Verse 6 begins the repetition of Ezra 2. Slight differences in spelling and the addition of the name of Nahamani have already been noted in Ezra 2. This additional name was on the genealogical list which Nehemiah consulted, and brings the number of men who had led the returning expedition to twelve. This parallels the first chapter of Numbers, where twelve men had been chosen to share leadership with Moses in bringing Israel to the Promised Land. They must have thought of themselves as their spiritual descendants, making a new beginning for Israel as much like the old as possible. However, Nehemiah's list does not identify each name with a specific tribe. This is another step toward the principle frequently observed in the O. T., and expressed by Paul in Rom. 9:6-8, that descent from the right forefathers is not only insufficient but also unnecessary. Some further comment on the change from Rehum (Ezra 2:2) to Nehum (Neh. 7:7) may be excusable. The letters N, L, and R are somewhat interchangeable in Hebrew; a familiar example is the spelling of Nebuchadnezzar and its variant, Nebuchadrezzar.

There are two words using these letters, which portray one's heart going out to another. One, Naham, means "comfort"; the other, Raham, means "compassion"; the distinction in meaning is rather small. Do you suppose that Nehemiah, in running across the name, Rehum (note the consonants only), may have recognized a variant spelling of the first component of his own name, and consciously or unconsciously spelled it like his own? We emphasize, many of these names were spelled correctly in more than one way.

In addition, there are several discrepancies in the number of people in various groups (example: sons of Arah, 775 in Ezra 2:5, in Neh. 7:10, 652. One suggestion is that Ezra quoted Babylonian

sources relative to those who planned to come; Nehemiah, with the Jerusalem records before him, those who actually arrived.¹ However, Nehemiah mentions one person, Nahamani (Neh. 7:7) whom Ezra doesn't list. Perhaps he made up his mind to go at the last minute! Also, the total would be expected to be less in Nehemiah if this were the case; but the total is identical (47,360 in Ezra 2:64 and Neh. 7:66). We suggest the possibility that some individuals may have been related to two clans and could be counted under either. The absence of one man's name, further, could be accounted for in that neither list claims to be complete.

The largest difference is in the list of materials: Neh. 7:70ff cf. Ezra 2:68f. But perhaps both lists are partial, and each author decided to include what impressed him.

The last part of *verse 73* has no parallel in Ezra. It really belongs topically with chapter 8 since it anticipates these events, and gives the date (seventh month, our September or thereabouts) when they began.

SUMMARY

Now Nehemiah appointed leaders to carry on the city's affairs, apparently in preparation for his return to Persia. The gates were not to be opened in the morning till it was safe; and were to be bolted when shut. Guards were posted on the wall and throughout the city.

Nehemiah sought to increase the number of the city's residents; he found the genealogical list of the first returnees from 91 years before, originally recorded in Ezra 2. This would be helpful in tracing down the present population. The remainder of the chapter duplicates this list, with some variations.

WORD STUDIES

HANANI and HANANIAH (vs. 2): these names are, as you can see, identical except for the ending which means "Jehovah" on the end of one of them. The base, represented by the first two consonants, means "grace, favor, kindness." Add another letter

1. Luck, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

and it becomes "bend, bow down, incline"; bowing is an act of graciousness. Add a different letter and it becomes, "incline, be favorably disposed, be gracious, merciful, compassionate." Nehemiah's brother Hanani's name then comes out, "Gracious"; the commander's name, "(Whom) Jehovah has graciously given."

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What precautions were taken regarding the gates?
2. How did Nehemiah run across the genealogical list included here?
3. Where else in the Bible is the list substantially recorded?

Chapter Eight

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Whose idea was it to read the Law?
2. How long did the reading continue, on the first day? Any other days?
3. What happened when the Law was read? What did it cause the people to do?
4. What do you suppose a visitor to the city would have noticed during this time?

OUTLINE

- II. The Law is Read in Public, and its Ceremonies are Resumed: chapters 8-10
 - A. The Law is Read and the Feast of Booths is Kept.
 1. Ezra instructs the people in the Law (vss. 1-8).
 2. The people celebrate with joy and feasting (vss. 9-12).
 3. The Feast of Booths is rediscovered (vss. 13-18).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- II. The Law is Read in Public, and its Ceremonies are Resumed: chapters 8-10
 - A. The Law is Read and the Feast of Booths is Kept.
 1. Ezra instructs the people in the Law.

TEXT, 8:1-8

- 1 And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel.
- 2 Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women, and all who could listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month.
- 3 And he read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of men and women, those who could understand;

- and all the people were attentive to the book of the law.
- 4 And Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand.
 - 5 And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people for he was standing above all the people, and when he opened it, all the people stood up.
 - 6 Then Ezra blessed the LORD the great God. And all the people answered, "Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.
 - 7 Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiiah, and the Levites, explained the law to the people while the people remained in their place.
 - 8 And they read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading.

COMMENT

The highlight of this chapter is the reading of God's word. Dr. Ironside,¹ in writing on this chapter, notes that "In every genuine revival . . . the revealed Word of God has had a large place." He points to several examples, including the Reformation and its emphasis on translating and publishing the Bible to make it a book of the people.

Verse 1 speaks of the people's assembly "as one man," referring to their unanimity of purpose rather than their 100% attendance. The assembly was at a city square, not the Temple, suggesting that it arose out of popular demand instead of religious command. Observe also that the people made the request that the Law of Moses be brought and read to them. Nehemiah is in the background now, and Ezra is on the stage. Interestingly, *The Cambridge*

1. Ironside, *op. cit.*, p. 87. His seven-point outline of this chapter is delightful, though a bit fanciful.

Bible sees the people striking a blow against the monopoly of religion by the priests.² The *Expositor's Bible* sees just the opposite. "As the civil ruler thus takes a lower ground in the presence of the religious leader, we seem to be anticipating those days of the triumph of the Church when a king would stand like a groom, to hold the horse of a pope."³ Why see conflict in it? Perhaps Ezra and Nehemiah were working together in harmony. Evidently Ezra was known to them, and he was the logical one to go to with their request. This is the first mention of him in Nehemiah.

There had evidently been an ebb in the spiritual conditions during the twelve years since the close of Ezra's book. Some suppose that this could only be accounted for if Ezra had returned to Babylon during this time, returning only for this occasion. Others believe that his work had been effective only briefly.

The people's reverence for the Word is seen in their conviction that their Lord had given it to His people Israel; they were the People of the Book.

Verse 2 indicates the extensive interest in the reading: men, women, and all who could understand. This is presumed to include children, but it also may be translated, "from man to woman, that is, all who (are able) to hear with discernment." Similar phraseology in *verse 3* also does not necessitate the presence of children, though it is possible to translate the passages to include them. Even the involvement of women in a religious service or festival in the O.T. was rare; this was indeed an exceptional occasion.

The date, the first day of the seventh month, may have been significant for two reasons. It was the date for the Feast of Trumpets (Lev. 23:23ff, Ezra 3:1), though its name is never mentioned and one wonders if any but the religious leaders were conscious of this (cf. vss. 9, 10). Also, the first day of every month was holy and was marked by the joyous sound of trumpets (Num. 10:10).

Verse 3 implies that the book of the law from which Ezra read

2. *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

3. Walter F. Adenay, *Expositor's Bible*, "Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther," p. 274.

was of extensive length; it required five or six hours, from dawn to noon. The verses that follow indicate, however, that much of the time may have been taken up by explanation and even discussion. The attention of the people was noteworthy enough to deserve special comment.

Verses 4-8 expand the information given in *verse 3*.

Verse 4 is the first mention in the Bible of a raised platform constructed for speaking. It was built large enough to accommodate fourteen men; these others probably assisted Ezra in the reading, since *verse 7* gives an entirely different list of those who did the teaching and explaining. Or they may have been there to add their testimony and influence to the occasion. That these men were laymen is suggested by several factors. (1) They are not identified as priests or Levites as the men in *verse 7* are. (2) Their names do not appear in any of the lists of priests or Levites elsewhere in the book. (3) This was, as noted in *verse 1*, a popular meeting rather than a religious one, and the leaders therefore were probably from among the people.

Versè 5 gives a reason for the raised platform, that the people might see. It also indicates that the people stood in reverence when the Law was opened up. It is not clear from this passage whether they continued to stand as the scroll was being read.

In *versè 6* the expression, "the great God," is taken to reflect Babylonian influence;⁴ the two words appear elsewhere in the Bible, but always with another adjective between. Whatever its source, it is a reverent and true designation. The lifting of hands could indicate petition (Lam. 2:19; Psa. 141:2); blessing (Psa. 134:2); affirmation or oath (Gen. 14:22 footnote); note particularly its association here with "Amen." Bowing with faces lowered indicated adoration.

Verse 7 gives the names of teachers on this occasion. The "and" should probably be omitted (this is permissible on the basis of the Hebrew), particularly since several of these names can be identified as Levites from other sources, in 12:8 for example. The Levites were given the responsibility in the Law to teach their brethren.

4. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 736.

The last phrase, "remained in their place," could be translated "stood."

In *verse 8* it appears that the thirteen mentioned in the previous verse participated in the reading of the Scripture, and made explanations or translations as they went along. It is possible that they took turns reading and speaking. It is also possible that the assembly divided into smaller classes or discussion groups, with one in charge of each, thus giving each person an opportunity to pry until he completely understood a passage. Some see this verse as evidence that the exiles returned speaking Aramaic instead of Hebrew, and therefore the older text had to be translated for their understanding. Others note that Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi were written to the Jewish people after the Captivity, and they are in Hebrew; therefore exposition of the Scriptures is involved here. It is known that they had adopted Aramaic, the more general dialect of the area, by the time the N.T. was written,⁵ but not before Jerusalem had resisted the onslaught of Assyrian armies after the fall of Samaria (II Ki. 18:26).

2. The people celebrate with joy and feasting.

TEXT, 8:9-12

- 9 Then Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the law.
- 10 Then he said to them, "Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our LORD. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

5. This is a point that Joseph Smith overlooked when he had Jesus speaking an Aramaic word (Raca, 3 Nephi 12:22) to the supposed descendants of immigrants to America who had left Jerusalem before the Captivity, when they were still speaking Hebrew. See comments following Ezra 4:7, page 52.

- 11 So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for the day is holy, do not be grieved."
- 12 And all the people went away to eat, to drink, to send portions and to celebrate a great festival, because they understood the words which had been made known to them.

COMMENT

In *verse 9* the people wept, apparently at their shortcomings now revealed by the reading of the Law. But Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites all acted together in asking the people to cease, because the occasion was to be one of joy. (Note the comments on *verse 1* dealing with Ezra's and Nehemiah's working together in harmony.) Every Jewish feast was unsuited for sorrow (Dt. 12:7, 12); it is noteworthy that all but one of Israel's holy days were feasts instead of fasts; theirs was to be a religion of joy. But this was especially true of the Feast of Trumpets or of the first of the month; note again Num. 10:10.

One reason which has been suggested for this joy prescribed in the Law was to counteract the Canaanite weeping for Tammuz.⁶ The women planted anemones ("pleasant plants") as reminders of the god Tammuz, whose death brought on the winter. Then every Spring, when the new green shoots came from the anemone bulb, supposedly marking the god's return to life, they rejoiced and staged an orgiastic celebration to assure the fertility of the soil. But there are also enough positive reasons in Judaism for their rejoicing frequently before God.

In *verse 10* the method of celebration, by feasting and sharing, is part of the pattern for their festivals, specifically the Feast of Weeks and Booths (Dt. 16:11, 14). The fat part of the meat would be regarded as the daintiest morsels, the most tender; it would be rich food compared to their ordinary fare. It is estimated that in their culture meat was a luxury enjoyed only once every few weeks. The sweet would refer to any sweet drink, of the vine, or

6. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 738.

other fruit or honeyed juices, especially unfermented. (The word is related to "unleavened": see Word Studies, Ezra 6.) The food was shared not only with the poor but with any of the people who had not prepared any. Their delight in the Lord would give them strength. There is a power that comes through joy.

In *verse 11* the Levites are portrayed as marshals, keeping order at the feast.

Verse 12 indicates that the people caught the significance of the command to rejoice.

3. The Feast of Tabernacles, or Booths, is rediscovered.

TEXT, 8:13-18

- 13 Then on the second day the heads of fathers' households of all the people, the priests, and the Levites were gathered to Ezra the scribe that they might gain insight into the words of the law.
- 14 And they found written in the law how the LORD had commanded through Moses that the sons of Israel should live in booths during the feast of the seventh month.
- 15 So they proclaimed and circulated a proclamation in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, "Go out to the hills, and bring olive branches, and wild olive branches, myrtle branches, palm branches, and branches of other leafy trees, to make booths, as it is written."
- 16 So the people went out and brought them and made booths for themselves, each on his roof, and in their courts, and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the Water Gate, and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim.
- 17 And the entire assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in them. The sons of Israel had indeed not done so from the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day. And there was great rejoicing.
- 18 And he read from the book of the law of God daily, from the first day to the last day. And they celebrated the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly according to the ordinance.

COMMENT

Verse 13 describes a more restricted session the following day, not for the total assembly but for the heads of households or clans, the priests, and the Levites: those leaders, both religious and secular, who would need to know the laws so that they could enforce or apply them. Ezra was their special instructor.

According to *verse 14*, it was at this point that they discovered a detail which had been overlooked for many centuries (cf. vs. 17) concerning the Feast of Booths, which began on the fifteenth day of the seventh month. The feast itself had been kept; it is noted in particular in Ezra 3:4; but the people had not been building their temporary living quarters out of branches, in imitation of the living accommodations during the Wilderness Wanderings, as specified in the Law (Lev. 23:40-43).

The story goes immediately in *verse 15* to the gathering of foliage to begin this celebration. Some writers⁷ have expressed concern that no mention is made of the Day of Atonement, the one fast day in Israel's calendar (Lev. 23:27-32), which would come on the tenth day. This does not necessarily mean that it wasn't held; there may only have been a lack of any significant departure from regular practice, thus no comment was needed.

It is also noted that the kind of branches which they were told to gather corresponds only in a general way with the instructions in Lev. 23:40; but perhaps that list was not understood to be exclusive, but only suggestive. The Law was never interpreted in an exclusivistic, legalistic manner until the Pharisees so employed it, under Roman influence.

The reader of *verse 16* will be able to imagine a most unusual transformation in the appearance of Jerusalem as these leafy shelters sprang up everywhere: people constructed them on their flat roofs or in their yards; priests and Levites were probably the ones who raised theirs in the Temple courtyard; the homeless, or visitors from surrounding cities, probably filled the public square; in and around the gate on the road to Ephraim would be

7. *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges, op. cit.*, p. 250.

a natural place for the travelers to erect their booths.

Verse 17 speaks of the total participation of all who had returned from the Captivity, whether they lived in Jerusalem or not. This particular feature of building brush shelters was what had not been done since Joshua's day; note the use of tents in II Chr. 7:10. The building of a booth is a feature of Jewish celebration in America today.⁸ The result of keeping God's Law was joy.

The daily reading of the Law throughout the feast is taken to indicate that this was a Sabbatical Year (Dt. 31:10f). But, judging from the previous tone, it might have been a spontaneous thing which required no command for it to be carried out. They may have wanted to celebrate the feast in the fullest way possible. The assembly on the additional eighth day was also according to Divine pattern (Lev. 23:36).

WORD STUDIES

AMEN (vs. 6: pronounced in Hebrew the same as in English): the basic idea is of something firm, like a foundation or support or pillar of a building. A thing which is built on a firm foundation is "durable" and "lasting." A person of this kind would be "faithful"; his conduct and his words would be "true."

In Neh. 10:1 this same word forms the base of the word translated **DOCUMENT**: something confirmed and sure.

UNDERSTAND (vss. 2, 8: Bin): separate, distinguish. It indicates "discerning" or "understanding" as they are dependent on the power of separating or distinguishing or discriminating. Intelligence and wisdom are dependent on this.

The preposition translated "between" is derived from this word.

SUMMARY

After the completion of the wall, the people (both men and women) gathered at a public square within the city and asked Ezra

8. Philip S. Bernstein, *What The Jews Believe*, p. 35ff.

to read God's Law to them. This was done in the Fall of the year, on the first day of their seventh month, the month which contained more religious holy days than any other. Ezra and others read and explained the Law beginning at dawn and continuing till noon. The rest of the day was occupied with feasting, sharing, and fellowship, in a spirit of joy.

The next day some of the leaders assembled with Ezra for more specific instruction, and in the process of their studies discovered a command concerning the Feast of Booths, scheduled for the middle of the month, which they had been neglecting. They gathered branches and built temporary brush shelters.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who read the Law to the people?
2. What special preparations were made for the occasion?
3. What feast in particular was mentioned?
4. What was unusual about the manner in which they kept the feast?

Chapter Nine

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. What do you suppose brought the people to the humility and confession described in this chapter?
2. Who is the more prominent in this chapter, Ezra or Nehemiah? How do you explain this?
3. What were the major points in the Levites' prayer?
4. Why do you suppose so much time was taken up tracing the history of Israel?

OUTLINE

- B. The Levites lead in a psalm of confession.
1. Introduction: The occasion on which the prayer was offered is described (vss. 1-5a).
 2. God is praised for his power in creation (vss. 5b-6).
 3. His goodness to Abraham (vss. 7-8).
 4. His hand in the Exodus (vss. 9-15).
 5. Israel's rebellion in the Wilderness (vss. 16-21).
 6. God's compassion takes them into Canaan (vss. 22-25).
 7. Disobedience, punishment, and repentance characterize the period of judges and kings (vss. 26-31).
 8. Prayer for present mercy (vss. 32-38).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- B. The Levites lead in a psalm of confession.
1. Introduction: The occasion on which the prayer was offered is described.

TEXT, 9:1-5a

- 1 Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the sons of Israel assembled with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dirt upon them.
- 2 And the descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities

of their fathers.

- 3 While they stood in their place, they read from the book of the law of the LORD their God for a fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshiped the LORD their God.
- 4 Now on the Levites' platform stood Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani, and Chenani, and cried with a loud voice to the LORD their God.
- 5a Then the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah, and Pethahiah, said, "Arise, bless the LORD your God forever and ever!

COMMENT

A quick look through this chapter will reveal the startling fact that neither Ezra nor Nehemiah is mentioned in it. This is another evidence that the real stars of this performance, the heroes on this occasion, were the people. They had initiated it in 8:1 by their request to hear the reading of God's Law. Throughout the events of the seventh month they have been the center of attention. Now, without mention of a great name who ordered their response they came together once more.

Verse 1 reinforces this impression in another way. Their assembly was on a day which fits no requirement of the Law at all; that is, they met because they wanted to, not because of any command or obligation. They had already had nine or ten days of Scripture reading and worship, and they still would not go home. The twenty-fourth day does allow for one day's rest since the close of the previous chapter. Fasting, being clothed in sackcloth, and with dirt upon them would be progressively more intense signs of grief and repentance.

In *verse 2* the separation from foreigners was a ritual symbol of their purification. It portrayed in action what their shunning marriage to foreigners was designed to accomplish. Their standing and confessing may be a summary of the rest of the chapter.

In *verse 3* the day is divided into fourths and the reading continues for one fourth of the day, with confession filling another;

that also is probably a summary of the next verses. We have here a slight problem is arithmetic: how long is a quarter of a day? If we think of the day as opposed to the night, it would be three hours; but if we think of a calendar day, it is six. Since only two quarters are accounted for, we assume that they were sleeping the other half. Also, in 8:3 the action had begun at daybreak and continued to noon, with a new set of activities apparently taking up the rest of the day. We would assume, then, that reading filled six hours, and confession and worship occupied substantially the rest of the daylight hours.

Verse 4 returns to the scene in 8:2, with the platform above the people occupied by Levites; we assume that all the names in this list are Levites, as they are in the next verse. A prayer follows, but is not preserved for us; evidently it was a spontaneous one.

Verse 5a gives a second list, with some duplications. Perhaps those in *verse 4* presided in the morning, and those in *verse 5* in the afternoon or second session. The people were then called on to stand in preparation for the prayer that follows. The Levites who were presiding may have read it in unison, or one may have voiced it as the representative of the group.

2. God is praised for His power in creation.

TEXT, 9:5b-6

5b O may Thy glorious name be blessed
 And exalted above all blessing and praise!

6 "Thou alone art the LORD.
 Thou has made the heavens,
 The heaven of heavens with all their host,
 The earth and all that is on it,
 The seas and all that is in them.
 Thou dost give life to all of them
 And the heavenly host bows down before Thee.

COMMENT

Here begins the longest prayer recorded in the Bible: longer than either Jesus' prayer in John 17 or Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple in I Ki. 8. Its author is not named, but Ezra is most commonly thought to have composed it. The *Anchor Bible*¹ has an extensive chart of verbal and thought parallels in the O.T. to this prayer verse by verse. The author was obviously immersed in the Biblical tradition; the things he mentions are exactly the historical events recorded in the O.T. We may conclude that the Book which he had was essentially the same as the one which we have, up to that point.

The prayer begins (*verse 5b*) with praise to God. There is a difference between thanksgiving to God for what he has done and praise to Him for who He is: for His majesty and power and glory, and His mighty acts. This along with *verse 6*, is praise. The reference to God's name is to His character and person: "name" in the O.T. means "personality," or "person": see the Word Studies that follow.

In *verse 6*, the first reference to the heavenly host is to the stars, all in their orderly ranks; the second reference is to His angels, all the heavenly beings.

3. God is exalted for His goodness to Abraham.

TEXT, 9:7-8

- 7 "Thou art the LORD God,
 Who chose Abram
 And brought him out from Ur of the Chaldees,
 And gave him the name Abraham.
- 8 "And Thou didst find his heart faithful before Thee,
 And didst make a covenant with him
 To give him the land of the Canaanite,

1. *Anchor Bible, op. cit.*, p. 167ff.

Of the Hittite and the Amorite,
 Of the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite—
 To give it to his descendants.
 And Thou hast fulfilled Thy promise,
 For Thou art righteous.

COMMENT

History was of great significance to Israel's religion. The people believed, on good authority, that they could see evidence of God's taking action in their affairs in actual observed events. Faith, in Scripture terms, is always rooted in history. Judaism and Christianity alone are regarded as historical religions, whose truth can be measured by verification of the events which gave them their character. Therefore this psalm moves into a recital of that history.

Without a Divinely inspired interpretation and record of our nation's history, we may still be profited by recalling and recounting His favors to us.

Verse 7: The history of the people of Israel starts with Abraham. There might also be an implied parallel between God's bringing Abraham out of the land of the Chaldeans and His recent delivery of Israel, Abraham's descendants, from the same land.

Verse 8 records God's generosity and faithfulness to Abraham and to his descendants. Of course He would keep His promise, because He is righteous: this is the keynote of the prayer.²

4. God's hand is seen in the Exodus.

TEXT, 9:9-15

9 "Thou didst see the affliction of our fathers in Egypt,
 And didst hear their cry by the Red Sea.

2. Adenay, *Expositor's Bible*, *op. cit.*, p. 300.

- 10 "Then Thou didst perform signs and wonders against Pharaoh,
Against all his servants and all the people of his land;
For Thou didst know that they acted arrogantly toward them,
And didst make a name for Thyself as it is this day.
- 11 "And Thou didst divide the sea before them,
So they passed through the midst of the sea on dry ground;
And their pursuers Thou didst hurl into the depths,
Like a stone into raging waters.
- 12 "And with a pillar of cloud Thou didst lead them by day,
And with a pillar of fire by night
To light for them the way
In which they were to go.
- 13 "Then Thou didst come down on Mount Sinai,
And didst speak with them from heaven;
Thou didst give to them just ordinances and true laws,
Good statutes and commandments.
- 14 "So Thou didst make known to them Thy holy sabbath,
And didst lay down for them commandments, statutes, and
law,
Through Thy servant Moses.
- 15 "Thou didst provide bread from heaven for them for their
hunger,
Thou didst bring forth water from a rock for them for their
thirst,
And Thou didst tell them to enter in order to possess
The land which Thou didst swear to give them.

COMMENT

As the Cross and Resurrection are the focal points of the N.T., so the Exodus, the giving of the Law, and the entrance into Canaan constitute the central event of the O.T. Whenever Israel praised God for His acts in history, in the Psalms or elsewhere, this would have to be mentioned. So it is the largest topic of this prayer.

The deliverance from Egypt occupies *verses 9-12*.

Verse 9 recalls the words of Ex. 3:7, with other acts following.

In *verse 10*, Pharaoh's arrogance is paralleled by Ex. 15:7. God's making a name for Himself illustrates an idea in the Word Studies under NAME, at the end of this chapter.

In *verse 11*, even the imagery of the stone is taken from Moses' victory song, Ex. 15:5, 10.

Verses 13, 14 rehearse the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai.

The statement in *verse 14* that God revealed His Holy Sabbath at that time is informative. It reinforces Dt. 5:15, which says that the purpose of the Sabbath was to commemorate their release from slavery in Egypt; their enjoying rest was an appropriate symbol. There is no mention of Sabbath keeping in the O.T. before that event. It is true that God Himself rested on the seventh creative day, and He blessed and sanctified it; but there is no suggestion that He required its observance by man until Moses' time, as *verse 14* says.

The bearing that this has on Seventh Dayism is clear. The Sabbath was not an eternal, unchanging law, but a national celebration of Independence. The Lord's Day celebrates another event, in another manner.

Verse 15 bespeaks the provision which God made for His people in that circumstance: the manna, the water from the rock, and the instruction for possession of the land. We think of our bread from heaven (Jn. 6:48-51), and of our rock, which is Christ (I Cor. 10:4).

5. God blesses Israel even during her rebellion in the Wilderness.

TEXT, 9:16-21

- 16 "But they, our fathers, acted arrogantly;
They became stubborn and would not listen to Thy command-
ments.
- 17 "And they refused to listen,
And did not remember Thy wondrous deeds which

- Thou hadst performed among them;
So they became stubborn and appointed a leader to return
to their slavery in Egypt.
But Thou art a God of forgiveness,
Gracious and compassionate,
Slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness;
And Thou didst not forsake them.
- 18 "Even when they made for themselves
A calf of molten metal
And said, 'This is your God
Who brought you up from Egypt;'
And committed great blasphemies,
- 19 Thou, in Thy great compassion,
Didst not forsake them in the wilderness;
The pillar of cloud did not leave them by day,
To guide them on their way,
Nor the pillar of fire by night, to light for them the way in
which they were to go.
- 20 "And Thou didst give Thy good Spirit to instruct them,
Thy manna Thou didst not withhold from their mouth,
And Thou didst give them water for their thirst.
- 21 "Indeed, forty years Thou didst provide for them in the
wilderness and they were not in want,
Their clothes did not wear out, nor did their feet swell.

COMMENT

Twice in these verses the pattern of Israel's rebellion and God's graciousness are repeated.

In *verses 16, 17* their stubbornness and short memory caused them to appoint a leader to replace Moses, God's man, in order to lead them back to Egypt. Num. 14:4 records their threat to do this; the information given here, that they had actually appointed someone is a supplement to it. Their arrogance made them guilty of the same sin as the Egyptians. Yet God's graciousness and forgiveness prevented His forsaking them.

Then again in *verses 18-21* they rebelled but God was compassionate.

Verse 18 portrays the epitome of the rebelliousness. Not only did they make a forbidden idol and worship it, but they credited it instead of God for their deliverance from Egypt! That is incomprehensible.

Verses 19-21 list God's favors to them despite their sins; His presence vouched for by the pillar and the cloud, guiding and lighting their way; His Spirit of instruction; the manna and the water; protection from wear for their clothing and their feet.

6. God's compassion takes them to Canaan.

TEXT, 9:22-25

- 22 "Thou didst also give them kingdoms and peoples,
And Thou didst allot them to them as a boundary.
And they took possession of the land of Sihon the king of
Heshbon,
And the land of Og the king of Bashan.
- 23 "And Thou didst make their sons numerous as the stars of
heaven,
And Thou didst bring them into the land
Which Thou hadst told their fathers to enter and possess.
- 24 "So their sons entered and possessed the land.
And Thou didst subdue before them the inhabitants of the
land, the Canaanites,
And Thou didst give them into their hand, with their kings,
and the peoples of the land,
To do with them as they desired.
- 25 "And they captured fortified cities and a fertile land.
They took possession of houses full of every good thing,
Hewn cisterns, vineyards, olive groves,
Fruit trees in abundance.
So they ate, were filled, and grew fat,
And reveled in Thy great goodness.

COMMENT

Israel's entrance into the Promised Land came in two stages.

Verse 22 describes the conquest of the East Bank. Sihon and the Amorites inhabited the land by the Dead Sea; Heshbon was one of their cities. Og and the people of Bashan were closer to the Sea of Galilee. Psalm 135:11 is another example of how this event was impressed on their minds in relation to their entry into the land.

In *verse 24* they go on to the West Bank.

Verses 23, 25 fit both situations. Their growing fat, in *verse 25*, speaks of their prosperity; in a culture where hunger was the rule, fat was beautiful (Prov. 13:4). The word "revel" in Hebrew has the name, Eden, in it; it speaks of delight and pleasantness. Under God, their Eden was being restored.

We realize that the two words, "fat" and "reveled," are taken by many as evidence of apostasy; but the phrase, "in Thy great goodness," suggests a more positive interpretation. Even good things can be used in excess; here we see them as goods; in other contexts the first term especially can be associated with excess. The transition to evil comes more naturally with the "But" of the next verse.

7. Disobedience, punishment, and repentance characterize the period of judges and kings.

TEXT, 9:26-31

- 26 "But they became disobedient and rebelled against Thee,
 And cast Thy law behind their backs
 And killed Thy prophets who had admonished them
 So that they might return to Thee,
 And they committed great blasphemies.
- 27 "Therefore Thou didst deliver them into the hand of their
 oppressors who oppressed them,
 But when they cried to Thee in the time of their distress,
 Thou didst hear from heaven, and according to Thy great
 compassion

- Thou didst give them deliverers who delivered them from the hand of their oppressors.
- 28 “But as soon as they had rest, they did evil again before Thee; Therefore Thou didst abandon them to the hand of their enemies, so that they ruled over them. When they cried again to Thee, Thou didst hear from heaven, And many times Thou didst rescue them according to Thy compassion,
- 29 And admonished them in order to turn them back to Thy law. Yet they acted arrogantly and did not listen to Thy commandments but sinned against Thy ordinances, By which if a man observes them he shall live. And they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck, and would not listen.
- 30 “However, Thou didst bear with them for many years, And admonished them by Thy Spirit through Thy prophets, Yet they would not give ear. Therefore Thou didst give them into the hand of the peoples of the lands.
- 31 “Nevertheless, in Thy great compassion Thou didst not make an end of them or forsake them, For Thou art a gracious and compassionate God.

COMMENT

Verses 26-29 relate particularly to the rule by judges, though the pattern is the same when the kings ruled. The cycle of disobedience, suffering oppression, and God’s hearing and delivering occurs frequently in the book of Judges. The killing of the prophets (*vs. 26*) may raise eyebrows, but there were prophets in that period (Jgs. 6:8; in I Sam. 3:20, Samuel is called a prophet; I Sam. 9:9 indicates they had existed before under the title of “seers”). If they existed, it is a natural assumption that some of them would have been killed.

The “many times” of *verse 28* is an obvious reference to events during Judges. Even without the repetition indicated by that

phrase, there are three cycles of evil (vs. 26, "But they became disobedient"; vs. 28, "they did evil again"; vs. 29, "yet they acted arrogantly") each followed immediately by God's gracious deliverance, if we look ahead to *verse 30*.

The reference to the ordinances in *verse 29* is revealing; "By which if a man observes them he shall live." This does not refer directly to life hereafter, but to survival in this world. The keeping of the laws really did add to their longevity as compared to their contemporaries.

Verses 30, 31 relate more fully to the Kingdom Period: God's long forbearance, His urgings through the prophets, their deafness, the inevitable Captivity, and God's compassionate preservation and deliverance of His people are all here.

8. Prayer for present mercy.

TEXT, 9:32-38

- 32 "Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who dost keep covenant and lovingkindness, Do not let all the hardship seem insignificant before Thee, Which has come upon us, our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and on all Thy people, From the days of the kings of Assyria to this day.
- 33 "However, Thou art just in all that hast come upon us; For Thou hast dealt faithfully, but we have acted wickedly.
- 34 "For our kings, our leaders, our priests, and our fathers have not kept Thy law
Or paid attention to Thy commandments and Thy admonitions with which Thou has admonished them.
- 35 "But they, in their own kingdom,
With Thy great goodness which Thou didst give them,
With the broad and rich land which Thou didst set before them,
Did not serve Thee or turn from their evil deeds.
- 36 "Behold, we are slaves today,

And as to the land which Thou didst give to our fathers to eat
of its fruit and its bounty,

Behold, we are slaves on it.

37 "And its abundant produce is for the kings

Whom Thou hast set over us because of our sins;

They also rule over our bodies

And over our cattle as they please,

So we are in great distress.

38 "Now because of all this

We are making an agreement in writing;

And on the sealed document are the names of our leaders,
our Levites and our priests."

COMMENT

The "Now" of *verse 32* brought them up to the present. Three attributes of God are given: majesty (great, mighty, awesome); faithfulness (who dost keep covenant); mercy (and loving kindness).³ The reference to the kings of Assyria (there were at least six) reverently omits accusing God for this, though He had said (Isa. 10:5) that He was using them as the rod of His anger against His people. *Verses 33-35* use this information in justifying God for His hand in these acts of punishment and correction.

Verses 36, 37 describe their condition as of that day. Note the contrast between the "they" of *verse 35* and the "we" of *verse 36*.

Verse 36 pungently reminds us that they were not entirely free. The Persians were still their overlords, though they had been permitted to return to their homeland.

Verse 37 speaks of the nature of that burden. A certain part of their crops went to the Persian rulers; a certain number of their offspring were taken into Persian taskwork and military service; and everyone in fact was physically subject to the rule of these foreigners. They felt the burden of God's judgment.

Verse 38 gives the outcome of their prayer: they have determined

3. Adenay, *op. cit.*, p. 304.

to place their names on a document pledging their loyalty to God, as will be further described in the next chapter. A conclusion which spells out and calls for immediate action is always effective.

WORD STUDIES

NAME (vs. 5, Shem): basically it means a sign, monument, or memorial of a person, thing, or event. This word is translated "memorial" in Isa. 55:13. But the emphasis is on the person or event of which it is only the sign. To do something in someone's name is to act by his authority (Ex. 5:23). To know someone by name suggests acquaintance with him personally (Ex. 33:12). To make oneself a name indicates fame and renown (II Sam. 7:9); conversely, to have no name is to be a nobody (Job 30:8); a good name signified a good reputation or character (Prov. 22:1); the destruction of one's name meant that his person and the memory of him would be no more (Dt. 9:14).

God's name, then, is His person, His authority, the knowledge of Him, His fame or glory, His character, the memory of all that He has done.

WORSHIP (vs. 3); **BOW DOWN** (vs. 6): these are the same word. It contains three ideas; (1) sink down, bow down, fall prostrate, do honor or reverence to someone whether to an equal or to a superior; (2) hence, to worship or adore; (3) therefore, to do homage or yield allegiance to someone.

Worship is incomplete without commitment.

SUMMARY

After a day's break the people assembled once more with the marks of humility and purity. The Law was again read, and the Levites led them in a prayer of confession.

The prayer began with praise to the incomparable God of creation who had chosen Abraham and had covenanted to give him and his descendants the land on which the people were standing.

They reviewed God's hand in the Exodus events: miraculous deliverance from Egypt, giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai, directions to enter Canaan. When the Israelites were stubborn and disobedient, God forgave. When they made a golden calf to be their god, He was compassionate and continued to guide and provide for them. Eventually God enabled them to defeat Sihon and Og and take their territory on the east of the Jordan: then to go into the land of the Canaanites. They took over cities already built and farmlands already under cultivation. Then followed alternating periods of rebellion, oppression, repentance, and God's gracious deliverance, through the time of judges, kings, and even captivity. Now they recognized the justness of what God had done; they saw the bonds which still tied them to Persia; and their leaders signed their names on behalf of all the people to a document to be described following.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who led the people in their prayer?
2. What is the character which Israel consistently demonstrated?
3. What character traits did God show?
4. What was the immediate result of the prayer?

Chapter Ten

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. What was included in the oath which the people took?
2. How were they to observe every seventh year?
3. What provisions were made for the support of the Levites?
4. Why was so much emphasis placed on getting firewood?

OUTLINE

- C. The people make vows of faithfulness.
1. A list is given of the signatures on the document (vss. 1-27).
 2. The content of the document is a vow of purity from the heathen (vss. 28-31).
 3. The people pledge additionally to support the Temple (vss. 32, 33).
 4. They also arrange support for the Levites, who in turn would support the priests (vss. 34-39).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- C. The people make vows of faithfulness.
1. A list is given of the signatures on the document.

TEXT, 10:1-27

- 1 Now on the sealed document were the names of: Nehemiah the governor, the son of Hacaliah, and Zedekiah,
- 2 Seraiah, Azariah, Jeremiah,
- 3 Pashhur, Amariah, Malchijah,
- 4 Hattush, Shebaniah, Malluch,
- 5 Harim, Meremoth, Obadiah,
- 6 Daniel, Ginnethon, Baruch,
- 7 Meshullam, Abijah, Mijamin,
- 8 Maaziah, Bilgai, Shemaiah. These were the priests.
- 9 And the Levites: Jeshua the son of Azaniah, Binnui of the sons of Henadad, Kadmiel;

- 10 also their brothers Shebaniah, Hodiah, Kelita, Pelaiiah,
Hanan,
11 Mica, Rehob, Hashabiah,
12 Zaccur, Sherebiah, Shebaniah,
13 Hodiah, Bani, Beninu.
14 The leaders of the people: Parosh, Pahath-moab, Elam,
Zattu, Bani,
15 Bunni, Azgad, Bebai,
16 Adonijah, Bigvai, Adin,
17 Ater, Hezekiah, Azzur,
18 Hodiah, Hashum, Bezai,
19 Hariph, Anathoth, Nebai,
20 Magpiash, Meshullam, Hezir,
21 Meshezabel, Zadok, Jaddua,
22 Pelatiah, Hanan, Anaiah,
23 Hoshea, Hananiah, Hasshub,
24 Hallohesh, Pilha, Shobek,
25 Rehum, Hashabnah, Maaseiah,
26 Ahiah, Hanan, Anan,
27 Malluch, Harim, Baanah.

COMMENT

Verse 1 begins the document. Two methods of sealing official papers are known from this period: (1) the imprint of the thumbnail,¹ or (2) the impression of the person's private seal on a ball of moist clay, which is then attached by a string to the document.² The signatures in the case before us were voluntary. The first and most prominent name on the list was that of Nehemiah. His title, governor, used here and in 8:9, is in the official Persian form; one translation of it is "His Severity." The title used in 5:14 and 12:26 differs from this, being Hebrew in form. Nehemiah apparently used the Persian title only for more official or solemn occasions.

1. *Cambridge Bible, op. cit.*, p. 267.

2. *Ellicott, op. cit.*, p. 500.

Zedekiah may be another spelling of Zadok (shortened by dropping the name of Jehovah at the end: cf. Nehemiah and Nahum), who may have been Nehemiah's secretary (scribe, 13:13). Thus we would have the heads of state making the document official.

Verses 2-8 are the names of the priests who signed, being next in status to Nehemiah, Persia's representative. If Ezra is in the list at all, the most likely place is under Seraiah: that is, the names appear to be names of families instead of individuals; several are repeated in this way in 12:12-15, and Ezra was a descendant of Seraiah (Ezra 7:1).

By giving only their family names they may be saying that the priest's office and ancestry is more important than his individual identity: compare this with the present usage of the title "Archbishop of Canterbury."

Levites are named in *verses 9-13*; six of the seventeen names we remember from those who manned the speaker's platform in 9:4, 5; three others may have been there if we allow for variations in spelling. These also may have been names of families, though this is not certain. Part of the problem is that more than one generation used the same names.

Verses 14-27, the remainder of the list, contain the names of the leaders of the people; we have gotten used to this classification of priests, Levites, and leaders of the people by now. Sixteen of these names are also in Ezra 2; it is supposed, then, that some are names of ancient families and others of individuals of newer families.

2. The content of the document is a vow of purity from the heathen.

TEXT, 10:28-31

- 28 Now the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the law of God, their wives, their sons and their daughters, all

those who had knowledge and understanding.

- 29 are joining with their kinsmen, their nobles, and are taking on themselves a curse and an oath to walk in God's law, which was given through Moses, God's servant, and to keep and to observe all the commandments of GOD our LORD, and His ordinances and His statutes:
- 30 and that we will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons.
- 31 As for the peoples of the land who bring wares or any grain on the sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the sabbath or a holy day; and we will forego the crops the seventh year and the exaction of every debt.

COMMENT

Verse 28 takes note of the categories of persons who did not sign, but (see *vs. 29*) were represented by those who did. The "all those who had separated themselves" we would understand to be a comprehensive term for the individual groups previously mentioned. Note that men and women, young and old (reasonably young: having knowledge and understanding; it takes a little longer to acquire understanding than it does knowledge), were included. This was exceptional; note its parallel in 8:2.

Verse 29 shows their solidarity with the kinsmen and nobles whose signatures presumably are above. The curse and oath express the solemnity of the occasion, and their awareness of its possible consequences. Next we have the vow's contents. Point number one is their obligation to God's Word: that must always be kept foremost. We have noticed before (8:1) their certainty that this was God's law which came through Moses.

There are actually three kinds of material in the full agreement. (1) Reference was made to particular laws handed down from Moses, called to their attention because these were the ones they were neglecting. They were not innovators; they were seeking to live by the ancient traditions. (2) Detail was added to spell out the methods by which these laws would be put into operation: a priest

was to be present when the Levites received tithes for example. (3) They were accepting new obligations (gathering firewood for example) in order to share with one another more equitably, probably because the proportion of their population who were priests or Levites was higher than ever before, and they did not want to neglect the support of these people. This was a personal agreement, with personal names attached, and this was their personal pledge. If it were not for this, they could simply have vowed to keep the Law in general.

Verse 30 deals again with the nagging problem of intermarriage which always threatened to wipe out the distinctive character of their religion and even their national identity. It will be mentioned yet again.

Verse 31 enforces the strictness of their observance of the Sabbath day and holy days; they would not buy or sell with foreigners; of course it goes without saying that there would be no commercial dealings with each other on those days. The Sabbatical year would be observed with equal strictness; two of its features were that crops were not to be planted (the land was to be given a rest; there are certain ecological considerations which a man owes to the soil, as well as concerns for the poor: Lev. 25:3f; Ex. 23:10f), and no one was to be pressured for payment on his debts.

3. The people pledged additionally to support the Temple.

TEXT, 10:32, 33

- 32 We also placed ourselves under obligation to contribute yearly one third of a shekel for the service of the house of our God:
33 for the showbread, for the continual grain offering, for the continual burnt offering, the sabbaths, the new moon, for the appointed times, for the holy things and for the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and all the work of the house of our God.

COMMENT

The one-third shekel in *verse 32* appears superficially to be at variance with the requirement of Ex. 30:13, specifying a half-shekel. The amount is also known to us from Matt. 17:27. The simplest explanation is that different standards of weight had been introduced by the Persians so that what had been a half-shekel before was now only a third of a shekel.³ This was to be used for the public services of the Temple.

Verse 33 probably is in addition to this, and they pledged to take care of these expenses also. It is not likely that the fraction of a shekel yearly from each male over twenty would be sufficient for all these supplies, including repairs to the building.

4. The people also arranged support for the Levites, who in turn would support the priests.

TEXT, 10:34-39

- 34 Likewise we cast lots for the supply of wood among the priests, the Levites, and the people in order that they might bring it to the house of our God, according to our fathers' households, at fixed times annually, to burn on the altar of the LORD our God as it is written in the law;
- 35 and in order that they might bring the first fruits of our ground and the first fruits of all the fruit of every tree to the house of the LORD annually,
- 36 and bring to the house of our God the first-born of our sons and of our cattle, and the first-born of our herds and our flocks as it is written in the law, for the priests who are ministering in the house of our God.
- 37 We will also bring the first of our dough, our contributions, the fruit of every tree, the new wine and the oil to the priests at the chambers of the house of our God, and the tithe of our

3. *Interpreter's Bible, op. cit.*, p. 764.

ground to the Levites, for the Levites are they who receive the tithes in all the rural towns.

- 38 And the priest, the son of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive tithes, and the Levites shall bring up the tenth of the tithes to the house of our God, to the chambers of the storehouse.
- 39 For the sons of Israel and the sons of Levi shall bring the contribution of the grain, the new wine and the oil, to the chambers; there are the utensils of the sanctuary, the priests who are ministering, the gatekeepers, and the singers. Thus we will not neglect the house of our God.

COMMENT

Verse 34 makes provision for a supply of wood. A fire was to be kept constantly burning on the altar (Lev. 6:12f). There is no previous mention of where this wood came from; what has been everybody's business may have become nobody's business; so now they made a personal pledge outside the framework of the Law, and arrived at a fair means for replenishing the supply periodically through the year. Wood was always in short supply in Israel; houses of stone were much less expensive than those made of wood; so this was no small item. All the clans (fathers' households) would draw straws or use some other random method merely to determine the part of the year in which they would fulfill this obligation.

In *verse 35* they accepted a similar obligation to supply food. A part of each field crop, and one year's crop from each new tree, had been specified by the Law as the Lord's portions (Ex. 23:16; Lev. 19:24; 23:14). They recognized this as a necessity for the support of the Levites.

Verse 36 reflects their knowledge of the law that all firstborn belonged to the priests; for sons, a redemption price of five shekels was substituted (Num. 18:15f).

Verse 37 indicates that certain rooms of the Temple were used for the storage of these crops. A distinction is made between the

first fruits, which went to the priests, and the tithes, the tenth portion of all their yearly increase, which were designated for the Levites. It was the responsibility of the Levites to teach religion throughout the land and not in Jerusalem only.

Verse 38 adds a new detail to facilitate these collections. A priest would be on hand so that the Levites could quickly take a tenth of the tithe which they received and pass it along to the priests (Num. 18:26). Thus those who received tithes would in turn give tithes.

In *verse 39* the people pledged to relieve the priests of the responsibility of collecting or transporting the contributions; they would bring them to the storage chambers of the Temple where all the utensils used in the service of worship (see Ezra 1:9, 10) were kept. Priests, gate keepers, and singers would be available to add in handling the produce.

The pledge is closed with the people's promise not to neglect any of these things, which would be tantamount to neglecting the house of God.

WORD STUDIES

DOCUMENT: see AMEN, in the Word Studies for chapter 8. **SABBATH** (vs. 31): the basic idea is to cease, interrupt, stop; thus the manna ceased (the verb form of this word): Josh. 5:12. If work stops, there is rest (Ex. 23:12).

The word applied to the seventh day (Ex. 20:11); to the seventh years, when no crops were to be sown (Lev. 25:2); to the first and last day of the festivals that lasted for a week, regardless of the day of the week (Lev. 23:39); to the Day of Atonement (Lev. 23:32) or Feast of Trumpets (Lev. 23:24); or in the plural as a synonym for weeks (Lev. 23:15) or for seven-year periods (Lev. 25:8).

SUMMARY

A document was drawn up and sealed with the names of Nehemiah, the heads of priestly families, Levites, and leaders

of the people, in behalf of all the adult religious community, male and female. This pledged them to walk in God's Law, specifically to keep all His commandments and not to intermarry with foreigners nor to violate the Sabbath or holy days by trading with them on those days. They would also keep the Sabbatical year.

They pledged also to support the Temple with money and materials, to provide wood for the continual fire on the altar, to bring the firstfruits of their crops and herds to the priests, to offer their tithes to the Levites who in turn would give a tenth to the priests, and to see that the needs of the house of their God were not neglected.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What part did Nehemiah take in these proceedings?
2. How much was each man to give for the service of the Temple each year?
3. How did they decide who was to supply wood for each portion of the year?
4. Were the Levites, who received tithes, also to tithe?

Chapter Eleven

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Why do you suppose new residents were wanted in Jerusalem?
2. What was the method used to get them?

OUTLINE

- III. Persons Bound by Vows are Listed, and Reforms on Nehemiah's Second Visit are Described: chapters 11-13.
- A. The genealogies of residents of Jerusalem and names of other cities are listed.
1. An effort is made to increase Jerusalem's population (vss. 1-2).
 2. People of Israel (vss. 3-9).
 3. Priestly leaders (vss. 10-14).
 4. Levites (vss. 15-19).
 5. Other groups (vss. 20-24).
 6. Towns occupied in Judah and Benjamin (vss. 25-36).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- III. Persons Bound by Vows are Listed, and Reforms on Nehemiah's Second Visit are Described: chapters 11-13
- A. The genealogies of residents of Jerusalem and names of other cities are listed.
1. An effort is made to increase Jerusalem's population.

TEXT, 11:1-2

- 1 Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem, but the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while nine-tenths remained in the other cities.
- 2 And the people blessed all the men who volunteered to live in Jerusalem.

COMMENT

The story is resumed from chapter seven after the interruption of the great revival. Nehemiah had gotten the genealogical list to

help trace the people's present whereabouts; now an effort was about to be made to coax some of them to Jerusalem. With the city's walls repaired there was more protection for them. A strong Jerusalem would be a refuge in time of danger for all the surrounding townspeople and would help build a stable economy for the entire area. But people were needed to man the fortifications.

From *verse 1* we judge that government officials were the largest part of its residents; the location of government buildings and agencies there would be responsible for that. Evidently it had been an almost empty city before the walls had been constructed. None really wanted to move there; it was the post in greatest danger; so the expedient of casting lots was resorted to. Families or clans would be the units involved; to select individuals would fragment families.

The volunteers of *verse 2* then present a puzzle. Were they people who chose to move there, and thus reduced the number who must be chosen by lot?¹ Or were they the ones who allowed their names to be included in the drawing,² or were good sports about moving there when they lost? The lot is cast in *verse 1*; the volunteers are applauded in *verse 2*; we would have expected to hear mention of those chosen by lot, if they were a different group. At any rate, something of the desperate conditions of the city may be guessed from the applause they received for moving there.

2. People of Israel.

TEXT, 11:3-9

- 3 Now these are the heads of the provinces who lived in Jerusalem, but in the cities of Judah each lived on his own property in their cities—the Israelites, the priests, the Levites, the temple servants and the descendants of Solomon's servants.
- 4 And some of the sons of Judah and some of the sons of Benjamin lived in Jerusalem. From the sons of Judah: Athaiah

1. *Interpreter's Bible, op. cit.*, p. 771.

2. Adenay, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

- the son of Uziah, the son of Zechariah, the son of Amariah, the son of Shephatiah, the son of Mahalalel, of the sons of Perez;
- 5 and Maaseiah the son of Baruch, the son of Col-hozeh, the son of Hazaiah, the son of Adaiah, the son of Joiarib, the son of Zechariah, the son of the Shilonite.
- 6 All the sons of Perez who lived in Jerusalem were 468 able men.
- 7 Now these are the sons of Benjamin: Sallu the son of Meshullam, the son of Joed, the son of Pedaiah, the son of Kolaiah, the son of Maaseiah, the son of Ithiel, the son of Jeshaiiah;
- 8 and after him Gabbai and Gallai, 928.
- 9 And Joel the son of Zichri was their overseer, and Judah the son of Hassenuah was second in command of the city.

COMMENT

In *verse 3*, the heads of the provinces are not the same as the leaders of the people in *verse one*, but are the persons who moved to Jerusalem (*vss. 4-19*) or lived in the cities of Judah and Benjamin (*vss. 20-36*). Next we have the classifications of the names which will follow, except that no names of descendants of Solomon's servants will appear. It may be that they are synonymous with the gatekeepers in *verse 19*. All these groups are named in *Ezra 2*, in the same order, where also the gatekeepers are associated with the sons of Solomon's servants, and with the temple servants (*Ezra 2:42, 55, 58*).

The term "Israelites" (or "Israel") corresponds with "people of Israel" in *Ezra 2:2*, where also it is placed first after the rulers.

In *verse 4* they are subdivided into "sons of Judah" and "sons of Benjamin." Leaders from Judah are listed in *verses 4-6*, and those from Benjamin in *verses 7-9*.

3. Priestly leaders.

TEXT, 11:10-14

- 10 From the priests: Jedaiah the son of Joiarib, Jachin,
 11 Seraiah the son of Hilkiah, the son of Meshullam, the son of

- Zadok, the son of Meraioth, the son of Ahitub, the leader of the house of God,
- 12 and their kinsmen who performed the work of the temple, 822; and Adaiah the son of Jeroham, the son of Pelaliah, the son of Amzi, the son of Zechariah, the son of Pashhur, the son of Malchijah,
- 13 and his kinsmen, heads of fathers' households, 242; and Amashsai the son of Azarel, the son of Ahzai, the son of Meshillemoth, the son of Immer,
- 14 and their brothers, valiant warriors, 128. And their overseer was Zabdiel, the son of Hagedolim.

COMMENT

Verse 10 is almost identical with I Chr. 9:10.

Verse 11 we recognize from the genealogy of Ezra (Ezra 7:1, 2). This list is very condensed; if you are interested in the way genealogies are used in the Scriptures, you might compare these two in Nehemiah and Ezra with I Chr. 6:8-14 and 9:11; no two are alike, and no one is complete.

Note the similar length of the genealogies of the other two priestly lines in *verses 12, 13*. For the importance of these lengthy lists, see comments on Ezra 2:59-62.

In *verse 14* the mention of valiant warriors is a surprise. Priests were excluded from military service. Since the entire passage, *verses 10-14*, is paralleled by I Chr. 9:10-13, we can supplement this description from that, where they are called "very able men for the work of the service of the house of God." Of course, the Lord's work is a warfare too, but this phrase need not be translated this way: in Ruth 2:1 the same words are translated, "a man of great wealth." We could even say, "manly man of holiness" — see Word Studies on WEALTHY, Neh. 4.

4. Levites.

TEXT, 11:15-19

- 15 Now from the Levites: Shemaiah the son of Hasshub, the son of Azrikam, the son of Hashabiah, the son of Bunni;

- 16 and Shabbethai and Jozabad, from the leaders of the Levites, who were in charge of the outside work of the house of God;
- 17 and Mattaniah the son of Mica, the son of Zabdi, the son of Asaph, who was the leader in beginning the thanksgiving at prayer, and Bakbukiah, the second among his brethren; and Abda the son of Shammua, the son of Galal, the son of Jeduthun.
- 18 All the Levites in the holy city were 284.
- 19 Also the gatekeepers, Akkub, Talmon, and their brethren, who kept watch at the gates, were 172.

COMMENT

These verses likewise are paralleled in I Chr. 9:14-16. Only two phrases will be picked out for comment.

In *verse 16*, the outside work was probably the various kinds of responsibilities which the Levites had as distinguished from the service of the house of God (see *verse 22*): teaching, acting as officers or as judges (I Chr. 23:4) for example.

In *verse 19*, the gatekeepers (presumably of the Temple) are evidently synonymous with the descendants of Solomon's servants, as noted in our comments on *verse three*, thus completing the categories named there.

5. Other groups.

TEXT, 11:20-24

- 20 And the rest of Israel, of the priests, and of the Levites, were in all the cities of Judah, each on his own inheritance.
- 21 But the temple servants were living in Ophel, and Ziha and Gishpa were in charge of the temple servants.
- 22 Now the overseer of the Levites in Jerusalem was Uzzi the son of Bani, the son of Hashabiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Mica, from the sons of Asaph, who were the singers

for the service of the house of God.

- 23 For there was a commandment from the king concerning them and a firm regulation for the song leaders day by day.
- 24 And Pethahiah the son of Meshezabel, of the sons of Zerah the son of Judah, was the king's representative in all matters concerning the people.

COMMENT

Verse 20 describes the situation in the rest of Judah, which will be developed beginning with *verse 25*. But first, other incidental matters are dealt with.

In *verse 21* the location of the residences of the Temple servants (cf. *Ezra 2:43*; *Neh. 3:26*) is described as being outside the city walls. Ophel was at other times within the city boundaries (*II Chr. 33:14*); it is normal that the size of a city would fluctuate, and we would expect that at this time the shortest possible distance would be walled.

Verse 22 speaks of Uzzi as being in charge of Levite affairs in the city. Singers are also listed in *Ezra 2:41*.

Verse 23 explains this a little further by saying the king (Artaxerxes probably, though some see a reference here to regulations affecting the Levites made by King David) had issued a commandment regarding them. The firm regulation may have been a daily allowance, putting them under royal patronage.³

In *verse 24*, at the other end of the flow of finances was Pethahiah, possibly stationed in the Persian court as the people of Israel's representative there.

6. Towns occupied in Judah and Benjamin.

TEXT, 11:25-36

- 25 Now as for the villages with their fields, some of the sons of Judah lived in Kiriath-arba and its towns, in Dibon and its

3. Adenay, *op. cit.*, p. 325.

- towns, and in Jekabzeel and its villages,
 26 and in Jeshua, in Moladah and Beth-pelet,
 27 and in Hazar-shual, in Beersheba and its towns,
 28 and in Ziklag, in Meconah and in its towns,
 29 and in En-rimmon, in Zorah and in Jarmuth,
 30 Zanoah, Adullam, and their villages, Lachish and its fields,
 Azekah and its towns. So they encamped from Beersheba
 as far as the valley of Hinnom.
 31 The sons of Benjamin also lived from Geba onward, at Mich-
 mash and Aija, at Bethel and its towns,
 32 at Anathoth, Nob, Ananiah,
 33 Hazor, Ramah, Gittaim,
 34 Hadid, Zeboim, Neballat,
 35 Lod and Ono, the valley of craftsmen.
 36 And from the Levites, some divisions in Judah belonged to
 Benjamin.

COMMENT

Verses 25-30 list the populated towns of Judah, south of Jerusalem. Kiriath-arba is the ancient name for Hebron. Many of these towns are also named in Joshua 15, when Israel was entering the land. The distance from Beersheba to the valley of Hinnom at the edge of Jerusalem, from one extreme to the other, is 50 miles: a little farther than they had occupied previously, in Ezra.

Verses 31-35 list the settlements in Benjamin, north of Jerusalem (cf. Joshua 18:21-28).

Verse 36 speaks of the necessity of transferring Levites occasionally to serve both areas.

WORD STUDY

LOT (vs. 1, Goral; sound like "gravel"?): a small stone. Sometimes a number of stones, including one or more of an odd color, were shaken in a container and thrown onto the ground, thus

deciding matters by chance; or they were shaken together and thrown into a vase, and each person drew one out, seeking for the odd-colored one. Eventually they were made into cubes and the faces numbered to form dice.

SUMMARY

In order to increase the population and strengthen the situation of Jerusalem (where no one seemed to want to live), lots were cast and one tenth of the people were chosen as residents; the others remained in the villages. Names are given of families of the people of Israel, priests, Levites, and gatekeepers of the Temple. Temple servants lived just outside the wall. The Persian king furnished aid for the Levites, and the people had a representative at the Persian court.

A list of settlements, both in Judah and Benjamin, follows; Levites were stationed in both areas.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What proportion of the people were asked to move to Jerusalem?
2. Who were already living there?

Chapter Twelve

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Are all these lists of names from the same time?
2. Why do you suppose the dedication service did not follow the completion of the walls, in 6:15?
3. Do you see any reason for the choral procession around the entire length of the walls?
4. What would be the value of a dedication service, anyway?

OUTLINE

There are two topics in this chapter: priestly and Levitical lines (vss. 1-26), and the dedication of the wall (vss. 27-47).

- B. The genealogies of priests and Levites are given, and the wall is dedicated.
 1. Priests and Levites who came up with Zerubbabel (vss. 1-9).
 2. Names of high priests, from the Return from Captivity to the end of Nehemiah's time (vss. 10, 11).
 3. Priests' families at the time of Joiakim (vss. 12-21).
 4. Levites, in the time of Joiakim (vss. 22-26).
 5. Levites assembled for dedication of the wall (vss. 27-30).
 6. Processional and dedication ceremonies (vss. 31-43).
 7. Concern about support of the Levites (vss. 44-47).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

Having given an honor roll of those who accepted the discomforts of living in Jerusalem in order to assure a strong and healthy state, the book next gives an honor roll of the religious leaders who contributed equally to the survival and well-being of the state. The text itself will indicate the varying periods in which this data was assembled.

The fact that in many cases the names are of families and not individuals does not lessen the honor; the oriental would find it even more gratifying to bring honor to the family name than to his own.

B. The genealogies of priests and Levites are given,
and the wall is dedicated.

1. A list is given of the priests and the Levites who
came up with Zerubbabel and Jeshua.

TEXT, 12:1-9

- 1 Now these are the priests and the Levites who came up with Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua: Seraiah, Jeremiah, Ezra,
- 2 Amariah, Malluch, Hattush,
- 3 Shecaniah, Rehum, Meremoth,
- 4 Iddo, Ginnethoi, Abijah,
- 5 Mijamin, Maadiah, Bilgah,
- 6 Shemaiah and Joiarib, Jedaiah,
- 7 Sallu, Amok, Hilkiyah, and Jedaiah. These were the heads of the priests and their kinsmen in the days of Jeshua.
- 8 And the Levites were Jeshua, Binnui, Kadmiel, Sherebiah, Judah, and Mattaniah who was in charge of the songs of thanksgiving, he and his brothers.
- 9 Also Bakbukiah and Unni, their brothers, stood opposite them in their service divisions.

COMMENT

Neh. 7:39-42 has already told us there were over 4,000 priests who returned to Jerusalem at the one time. Here in vss. 1-7 a longer list of heads of families is given (the clans are evidently broken down into smaller units), but it is still from Jeshua's and Zerubbabel's time. Eight, perhaps eleven, of the twenty-two names are also affixed to the document in chapter 10.

Verses 8, 9 add the names of Levites from Zerubbabel's day. Of the eight, four names are on the document in chapter 10. Of course, in neither this nor the case above can we assume that the others were opposed: see Neh. 10:28f. The reference in *verse 8* to being in charge of song, and in *verse 9* to standing opposite them, appears to refer to antiphonal arrangement of choirs: see 11:17. The occasion being referred to could be that in Ezra 3:10.

2. The high priests descended from Jeshua are traced, possibly to the end of Nehemiah's life.

TEXT, 12:10, 11

- 10 And Jeshua became the father of Joiakim, and Joiakim became the father of Eliashib, and Eliashib became the father of Joiada,
 11 and Joiada became the father of Jonathan, and Jonathan became the father of Jaddua.

COMMENT

The odd thing about this list is that it traces the office down to Jaddua; a man by that name was high priest at the time of Alexander the Great, a hundred years after Nehemiah returned the second time to Jerusalem. Even Dr. Ironside, a thorough conservative, believes this to be an addition by a later hand, though still inspired.¹ It is not an impossibility however that Nehemiah may have lived long enough to see the birth of Jaddua, who could have been a very old man in Alexander's day.

There is also an Eliashib in this list, which recalls the Eliashib whose son Ezra mentions (Ezra 10:6). There may be no connection, but this creates the possibility that Ezra's friend may have been a son of the high priest, though not his successor.

3. The priests' families are listed at the time of Joiakim.

TEXT, 12:12-21

- 12 Now in the days of Joiakim the priests, the heads of fathers' households were: of Seraiah, Meraiah; of Jeremiah, Hananiah;
 13 of Ezra, Meshullam; of Amariah, Jehohanan;

1. Ironside, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

- 14 of Malluchi, Jonathan; of Shebaniah, Joseph;
- 15 of Harim, Adna; of Meraioth, Helkai;
- 16 of Iddo, Zechariah; of Ginnethon, Meshullam;
- 17 of Abijah, Zichri; of Miniamin, of Moadiah, Piltai;
- 18 of Bilgah, Shammua; of Shemaiah, Jehonathan;
- 19 of Joiarib, Mattenai; of Jedaiah, Uzzi;
- 20 of Sallai, Kallai; of Amok, Eber;
- 21 of Hilkiah, Hashabiah; of Jedaiah, Nethanel.

COMMENT

Only two comments come to mind here.

Joiakim, in *verse 12*, succeeded Jeshua (*verse 10*); therefore this entire list is from the next generation after the list in verses 1-7.

This means that the Ezra in *verse 13* (and obviously the Ezra in *verse one*) is not the Ezra of the previous book, and the associate of Nehemiah; the date is a little too early.

4. Levites are listed from the time of Joiakim.

TEXT, 12:22-26

- 22 As for the Levites, the heads of fathers' households were registered in the days of Eliashib, Joiada, and Johanan, and Jaddua; so were the priests in the reign of Darius the Persian.
- 23 The sons of Levi, the heads of fathers' households, were registered in the Book of the Chronicles up to the days of Johanan the son of Eliashib.
- 24 And the heads of the Levites were Hashabiah, Sherebiah, and Jeshua the son of Kadmiel, with their brothers opposite them, to praise and give thanks, as prescribed by David the man of God, division corresponding to division.
- 25 Mattaniah, and Bakbukiah, Obadiah, Meshullam, Talmon, and Akkub were gatekeepers keeping watch at the store-houses of the gates.

- 26 These served in the days of Joiakim the son of Jeshua, the son of Jozadak, and in the days of Nehemiah the governor and of Ezra the priest and scribe.

COMMENT

According to *verse 22*, records were kept of the Levites from the time of the second high priest after the Return from Captivity until into the fourth century B.C. (cf. vss. 10, 11); Jaddua may have lived to the time of Alexander the Great. Similar records for the priests covered a like time span, according to many who identify Darius the Persian as Darius III, Codomannus, 336-331 B.C. Because of the late date, Dr. Ironside also calls this a later insertion: cf. comments on vss. 10, 11. The later hand is only verifying that the records were still being kept in his day.

Verse 23 says these records were in the Book of the Chronicles: not the Bible book, but apparently a register kept in the Temple. Johanan may be another spelling for Jonathan, who was a (grand-) son of Eliashib.

Verse 24 again describes antiphonal arrangement of choirs.

In *verse 25*, the gatekeepers would be on duty at the Temple storehouses, not the gates of the city.

Verse 26 dates the above list of Levites to the time of Joiakim, a generation later than the previous list of Levites (vss. 8, 9), and contemporaneous with Nehemiah and Ezra.

5. The Levites were assembled for the dedication of the wall.

TEXT, 12:27-30

- 27 Now at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought out the Levites from all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem so that they might celebrate the dedication with gladness, with hymns of thanksgiving and with songs to the accompaniment of cymbals, harps, and lyres.

- 28 So the sons of the singers were assembled from the district around Jerusalem, and from the villages of the Netophathites,
 29 from Beth-gilgal, and from their fields in Geba and Azmaveth, for the singers had built themselves villages around Jerusalem.
 30 And the priests and the Levites purified themselves; they also purified the people, the gates, and the wall.

COMMENT

The rest of the chapter, clearly from Nehemiah's hand (vs. 31), describes the service of dedication for the wall, completed in Neh. 6:15. How much time has elapsed in between is hard to say. The delay may have been caused by the concentration on the reading of the Law in the intervening chapters. Or it may have been necessitated by the logistics of preparing a sufficiently grand and impressive program. Or they may have wished to wait till the city was sufficiently occupied (chapter 11) and the walls were adequately manned. It is people who are being dedicated more than things, for flesh and blood is as necessary to walls as are stones, and the act of dedication was more spiritual and psychological than physical. The greatest value of the wall also was psychological, as it furnished success and encouragement to a dispirited people. In Adenay's words, "This act, although it was immediately directed to the walls, was, as a matter of fact, the reconsecration of the city . . ."²

Verse 27 is a reminder that many of the Levites lived in surrounding towns, where they either occupied themselves with teaching the Law or with making a living in the light of the reality of inadequate support.

Verses 28, 29 equate the singers with the Levites: they were a subclass of them in Ezra 2:41.

In *verse 30*, before dedication there is a need for purification from defilement. Even the Tabernacle, and now the Temple, had

2. Adenay, *op. cit.*, p. 329.

their laver for cleansing the priests and the offering before sacrifices were made. As an illustration of the point previously made, note that the people are cleansed along with the wall.

6. The processional and dedication ceremonies are described.

TEXT, 12:31-43

- 31 Then I had the leaders of Judah come up on top of the wall, and I appointed two great choirs, the first proceeding to the right on top of the wall toward the Refuse Gate.
- 32 Hoshaiah and half of the leaders of Judah followed them,
33 with Azariah, Ezra, Meshullam,
34 Judah, Benjamin, Shemaiah, Jeremiah,
35 and some of the sons of the priests with trumpets; and Zechariah the son of Jonathan, the son of Shemaiah, the son of Mattaniah, the son of Micaiah, the son of Zaccur, the son of Asaph,
36 and his kinsmen, Shemaiah, Azarel, Milalai, Gilalai, Maai, Nethanel, Judah and Hanani, with the musical instruments of David the man of God. And Ezra the scribe went before them.
- 37 And at the Fountain Gate they went directly up the steps of the city of David by the stairway of the wall above the house of David to the Water Gate on the east.
- 38 The second choir proceeded to the left, while I followed them with half of the people on the wall, above the Tower of Furnaces, to the broad wall,
39 and above the Gate of Ephraim, by the Old Gate, by the Fish Gate, the Tower of Hananel, and the Tower of the Hundred, as far as the Sheep Gate, and they stopped at the Gate of the Guard.
- 40 Then the two choirs took their stand in the house of God. So did I and half of the officials with me;
41 and the priests, Eliakim, Maaseiah, Miniamin, Micaiah,

- Elioenai, Zechariah, and Hananiah, with the trumpets;
 42 and Maaseiah, Shemaiah, Eleazar, Uzzi, Jehohanan. Malchijah, Elam, and Ezer. And the singers sang, with Jezrahiah their leader,
 43 and on that day they offered great sacrifices and rejoiced because God had given them great joy, even the women and children rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard from afar.

COMMENT

Verse 31 begins the descriptive of a processional of dignitaries and choirs in two columns almost the entire length of the wall, around the city.

Verses 32-36 give the personnel included in one column.

In *verse 36*, the kind of instruments associated with David are used, with the explanation that he was the man of God; so we see their effort to conform even in small details to the tried and proven paths to evoke God's pleasure. At the front of that procession, right behind the choir, was Ezra.

In *verse 37* their route is traced from a point south of the city to another on the east.

Meanwhile, *verses 38, 39*, a second column began at the same southern point and followed along the west wall and apparently circled more than half of the city. Following the choir and leading the rest of this procession was Nehemiah.

In *verse 40*, both columns arrived at the Temple where the choirs and some of the dignitaries stationed themselves for the ceremonies to follow.

Verses 41, 42 list the priestly participants and the choir leader, and mention the singers and the instrumental accompaniment.

In *verse 43* there is one more word for joy in the Hebrew text than in English: five times there is rejoicing or joy! Amid it all was the offering of innumerable sacrifices, and thrilled by it all were men, women, and this time without question, children.

The impression made by the pageantry, the dignitaries (Ezra

and Nehemiah both may have been recalled from Babylon and Persia for the occasion), the music, and the smell and sight of sacrifices, must have been awe-inspiring.

7. Concern is expressed over the support of the Levites.

TEXT, 12:44-47

- 44 On that day men were also appointed over the chambers for the stores, the contributions, the first fruits, and the tithes, to gather into them from the fields of the cities the portions required by the law for the priests and Levites; for Judah rejoiced over the priests and Levites who served.
- 45 For they performed the worship of their God and the service of purification, together with the singers and the gatekeepers in accordance with the command of David and of his son Solomon.
- 46 For in the days of David and Asaph, in ancient times, there were leaders of the singers, songs of praise and hymns of thanksgiving to God.
- 47 And so all Israel in the days of Zerubbabel and Nehemiah gave the portions due the singers and the gatekeepers as each day required, and set apart the consecrated portion for the Levites, and the Levites set apart the consecrated portion for the sons of Aaron.

COMMENT

There was a very practical outcome to all of this, as there should be to great spiritual feasts. Perhaps the ceremonies themselves had pinpointed the inadequate support which the priests and Levites had been receiving though this is not mentioned. Perhaps their soul-stirring contribution of their talents had moved the great audience to gratitude; *verse 44* implies as much, for it speaks of the people's joy at their service. At any rate, arrangements

were made to obtain a great offering for them. How that reminds us of dedication services today!

Verses 45, 46 speak further of the action of these servants of God, reminding us of the hand which David and Solomon had taken in organizing and directing these orders (I Chr. 25:1; II Chr. 8:14).

In *verse 47* the names of Zerubbabel and Nehemiah are linked together, perhaps to stress the continuity as the two fulfilled the same office and conducted the Lord's work well.

WORD STUDIES

PURIFY (vs. 27): the basic idea of the Hebrew word is brightness or splendor; i.e. it causes something to shine or be bright. It signifies to be or become clean or pure: to cleanse or purify. It can be done for three reasons. (1) Of physical purity: Ezek. 39:12 describes the cleansing of the land from corpses. Num. 8:6, 7 speaks of washing and completely shaving the Levites to prepare them for God's service. (2) Of ceremonial purity: Ezek. 43:26 speaks of cleansing the altar for the new Temple of which Ezekiel had a vision. A leper who had been healed would be purified in a ceremony administered by a priest: Lev. 14:11. (3) Of moral purity: Mal. 3:3 uses the figure of purifying metal from dross as a parallel of a person's moral cleansing. Jer. 33:8 speaks of cleansing through God's forgiveness.

DEDICATION (vs. 30: Hanukkah): Sometimes a study of word derivations leads one down some strange and unexpected paths. There are three words formed from the same base, all of which have one common meaning: to choke. Apparently from this come the ideas of being narrow or of closing. A *collar* is placed around the *neck* of an animal and it is *strangled* down so that it can be *initiated* into man's service and *trained* for usefulness: thus it becomes *dedicated*, or *consecrated* to certain purposes. Each of the italicized words is a translation of one of the forms of this word. Our English word, "neck," is derived from this same base (note the N and K, also in Hanukkah). So a wall was "collared" for man's service.

SUMMARY

This chapter records the names of families of priests and Levites who returned from captivity with Zerubbabel the governor and Jeshua the high priest; then the names of successive high priests covering about two centuries; then a list of Levite families, about a generation after the return.

Then follows a description of the service of dedication for the rebuilt wall surrounding Jerusalem: the assembling of Levites from many communities; the purification of the priests, people, gates, and wall; the two columns of Levite choirs, dignitaries, priests, trumpeters, and more singers; with Ezra and Nehemiah serving as parade marshals for the two columns; the covering at the Temple for numerous sacrifices and a service rendered by the priests and Levites. Everything was done according to patterns established long ago by David and Solomon. The people continued to give the prescribed portions to the Levites on the specified days, and the Levites gave their portion to the priests when Nehemiah was governor, as they had when Zerubbabel had been their governor.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who were the leaders of the two processions that circled the city?
2. Where did the parade end?
3. What sacrifices were made?
4. How did the people show gratitude to the Levites for this impressive service?

Chapter Thirteen

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. Where have we gotten acquainted with Tobiah before?
2. How many prayers of Nehemiah can you count in this chapter?
3. How did Nehemiah handle the problem of mixed marriages? Is this how Ezra would have handled it?
4. What was Sanballat's last method of attack on Israel, in the book of Nehemiah?

OUTLINE

- C. Foreigners are expelled and religious reforms are instituted to purify the nation.
 1. Foreigners are expelled (vss. 1-3).
 2. Tobiah is driven out (vss. 4-9).
 3. Support for the Levites is renewed (vss. 10-14).
 4. Labor and merchandising is forbidden on the Sabbath (vss. 15-22).
 5. Nehemiah deals with the problem of mixed marriages (vss. 23-29).
 6. Nehemiah summarizes his reforms (vss. 30, 31).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- C. Foreigners are expelled and religious reforms are instituted to purify the nation.
 1. Foreigners are expelled.

TEXT, 13:1-3

- 1 On that day they read aloud from the book of Moses in the hearing of the people; and there was found written in it that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God,
- 2 because they did not meet the sons of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them. However, our God turned the curse into a blessing.
- 3 So it came about, that when they heard the law, they excluded all foreigners from Israel.

COMMENT^a

The events in *verses 1-3*, like those in the previous chapter, apparently happened on the occasion of Nehemiah's second visit (13:6f), when the wall was dedicated.¹ The occasion on which the Law of Moses was being read is not identified, but this was a regular part of Israel's community life following the exile. The particular passage which they read was Dt. 23:3-6. The exclusion in *verse 3* refers to foreigners, and not to those of foreign descent.² That is, those who retained their citizenship in and loyalty to other nations (not just Moab and Ammon), which would include worship of their gods, were not permitted to share in Israel's Temple ceremonies.

2. Tobiah is driven out.

TEXT, 13:4-9

- 4 Now prior to this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, being related to Tobiah,
 5 had prepared a large room for him, where formerly they put the grain offerings, the frankincense, the utensils, and the tithes of grain, wine and oil prescribed for the Levites, the singers and the gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests.
 6 But during all this time I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had gone to the king. After some time, however, I asked leave from the king,
 7 and I came to Jerusalem and learned about the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, by preparing a room for him in the courts of the house of God.
 8 And it was very displeasing to me, so I threw all of Tobiah's household goods out of the room.

1. John E. Eggleton, *Discovering The Old Testament*, p. 237.

2. *Anchor Bible*, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

9 Then I gave an order and they cleansed the rooms; and I returned there the utensils of the house of God with the grain offerings and the frankincense.

COMMENT

In *verse 4*, the “prior to this” would refer to the time when Nehemiah was in Persia, following his first visit to Jerusalem. The extent to which intermarriage had gone is evident in that it had affected even the household of Eliashib the priest. The chambers of the Temple (I Ki. 6:5-8) were in three stories along the full length of both sides.

In *verse 5* the purpose of the chambers is given: they were for the supplies essential to the priests and Levites (including singers and gatekeepers), and for utensils (Neh. 7:70; Ezra 1:9-11; 8:26, 27) necessary for the Temple ceremonies. Now the priests prepared them arbitrarily for the personal use of Tobiah, who had given Israel trouble in the past (Neh. 2:19; 4:3, 7; 6:12). According to *verse 9* it was not unneeded extra space.

Verse 6 sets the limit of twelve years on Nehemiah’s first term as governor. How long a term intervened before he returned to Jerusalem is not known, but it is thought to have been relatively short. We have seen the Persian kings’ use of the title, “king of Babylon,” before: Ezra 5:13.

Verse 7 shows that it was on Nehemiah’s return from Persia that he heard of this impropriety involving Tobiah.

In *verse 8* we see his anger. Nehemiah was justified in the action he took; the Temple had been dedicated exclusively for the use of priests and Levites in their service for God: certainly not for foreigners, even heads of state. Nehemiah was responsible for all affairs within his realm, even over the priests, and he must defend the interests of the weak and abused or they would not be defended. We cannot say with certainty that Tobiah lived in the rooms; he may have used them only for storage; but the household goods would suggest at least preparation for occupancy.

Now, in *verse 9*, the rooms were cleansed from contamination (see PURIFY, Word Studies, chapter 12), and returned to their proper use.

3. Support for the Levites is renewed.

TEXT, 13:10-14

- 10 I also discovered that the portions of the Levites had not been given them, so that the Levites and the singers who performed the service had gone away, each to his own field.
- 11 So I reprimanded the officials and said, "Why is the house of God forsaken?" Then I gathered them together and restored them to their posts.
- 12 All Judah then brought the tithes of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses.
- 13 And in charge of the storehouses I appointed Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and Pedaiah of the Levites, and in addition to them was Hanan the son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah; for they were considered reliable, and it was their task to distribute to their kinsmen.
- 14 Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out my loyal deeds which I have performed for the house of my God and its services.

COMMENT

In *verse 10*, Nehemiah's discovery of the Levites' predicament may have stemmed from the events of the previous paragraph, from seeing the shortage of supplies in the storage rooms. The service of the Levites and singers may have involved more than that at the dedication of the wall. Now they had been driven by financial necessity to agricultural pursuits, to the detriment of the Temple services. It was a waste to fail to employ such talents in praising and serving God. This was evidently a chronic problem throughout Israel's history.

Verses 11-13 show Nehemiah's effectiveness in dealing with the problem: first a reprimand, pointing subtly to their obligation before God; then a searching out and restoration of the abused; then the contributions from the community of Judah followed; and then an organization of reliable, faithful people was set up

to get all the contributions into the right hands.

Verse 14 is another of Nehemiah's trademark prayers.

4. Labor and merchandising is forbidden on the Sabbath.

TEXT, 13:15-22

- 15 In those days I saw in Judah some who were treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sacks of grain and loading them on donkeys, as well as wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of loads, and they brought them into Jerusalem on the sabbath day. So I admonished them on the day they sold food.
- 16 Also men of Tyre were living there who imported fish and all kinds of merchandise, and sold them to the sons of Judah on the sabbath, even in Jerusalem.
- 17 Then I reprimanded the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this evil thing you are doing, by profaning the sabbath day?"
- 18 "Did not your fathers do the same so that our God brought on us, and on this city, all this trouble? Yet you are adding to the wrath on Israel by profaning the sabbath."
- 19 And it came about that just as it grew dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and that they should not open them until after the sabbath. Then I stationed some of my servants at the gates that no load should enter on the sabbath day.
- 20 Once or twice the traders and merchants of every kind of merchandise spent the night outside Jerusalem.
- 21 Then I warned them and said to them, "Why do you spend the night in front of the wall? If you do so again, I will use force against you." From that time on they did not come on the sabbath.
- 22 And I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come as gatekeepers to sanctify the sabbath day. For this also remember me, O my God, and have compassion on me according to the greatness of Thy lovingkindness.

COMMENT

Note that what is described here is in direct violation of the vow which the people had signed in Neh. 10:31. Also, when the day of rest is violated, it is the poor and the laborer who suffer the most (Amos 8:4-6).

In *verse 15*, emphasis is put on Judah's Sabbath violations: treading out grapes, loading and transporting sacks of produce, bringing them into the holy city, and selling them: the full route, from producer to consumer. The products were not all in season at the same time, so Nehemiah may have observed over a period of time until his patience was broken. His one corrective measure was "jaw-boning."

Verse 16 emphasizes similar activities of Tyrian merchants. Tyre was renowned in the ancient world for its commerce (Ezek. 27:3ff), and its position on the seacoast made it a source of fish. This illustrates another problem arising from intermarriage and other forms of involvement with foreigners. By their standards they were doing nothing wrong, though the Jews were buying from them. Israel's law, on the other hand, required that it be a day of rest for the stranger or foreigner, and even for the animals (Ex. 20:10).

In *verse 17*, Nehemiah first approached his own countrymen to correct this evil; the word translated "reprimand" usually indicates quarreling and contention, but does not rule out physical violence.

Verse 18 recalls the connection between Israel's violation of the Sabbath and their suffering captivity and humiliation (Lev. 26:35; II Chr. 36:21). It was possible that God's wrath might be increased or repeated because of their actions.

Next, in *verse 19*, Nehemiah took more direct action. At sundown, when the Sabbath began, he ordered that not only the huge gates that barred the entrance of carts, but the doors in the gates that prevented entrance of individuals, be closed and left closed for at least twenty-four hours. The social and business activity of the community took place at the gates. If the foreigners would do business in Israel, they must live by Israel's laws.

Then some of Nehemiah's own bodyguards, loyal personally to him, were stationed at the gates to prevent entry.

Verse 20 indicates that he did not retract these policies under pressure. Though commerce meant prosperity and profits and taxes, still he risked offending the tradesmen.

In *verse 21* he threatened the use of force. Until then the tradesmen were not convinced.

In *verse 22* Nehemiah made this not only a religious issue but an act of service and worship to God. The Levites, who alone were allowed to labor on the Sabbath in the performance of sacred duties, were recruited as keepers of the gates. Then we have Nehemiah's second prayer in this chapter.

5. Nehemiah deals with the problem of mixed marriages.

TEXT, 13:23-29

- 23 In those days I also saw that the Jews had married women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab.
- 24 As for their children, half spoke in the language of Ashdod, and none of them was able to speak the language of Judah, but the language of his own people.
- 25 So I contended with them and cursed them and struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor take of their daughters for your sons or for yourselves.
- 26 "Did not Solomon king of Israel sin regarding these things? Yet among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel; nevertheless the foreign women caused even him to sin.
- 27 "Do we then hear about you that you have committed all this great evil by acting unfaithfully against our God by marrying foreign women?"
- 28 Even one of the sons of Joiada, the son Eliashib the high priest,

was a son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite, so I drove him away from me.

29 Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.

COMMENT

In *verse 23*, Ashdod was a city in the old Philistine area, in the present day Gaza strip. With the change of one letter Ammon becomes Amman, and we have its approximate present-day location. The people of Moab lived at the southeastern end of the Dead Sea.

The language of Ashdod, *verse 24*, is now known to have been quite similar to Hebrew, as Aramaic was (and so were the Moabite and Ammonite languages), but still a separate language³ (as Dutch and German, or French and Spanish, or Spanish and Portuguese). The children were closer to their mothers through most of the day, so they spoke their language more than Hebrew.

In *verse 25*, “contended” is the same as “reprimanded” in *verse 17*. “Curse” may be a little too strong. The *Anchor Bible* gives its literal translation as “to be light,” and gives the possible translation, “treat with contempt.” This would seem to be more in keeping with Nehemiah’s character. But he also struck some of them and pulled out their hair. We recall that when Ezra was faced with the same kind of a situation, the hair that was pulled was his own! Perhaps there is an illustration here of the nature of the offices of the two men: the one, God’s priest and man’s intercessor; the other, God’s chosen vessel still, but man’s ruler. We gather that there are times for both kinds of action. What he achieved by this method was an oath that they would no longer participate in or allow mixed marriages. There is no mention of divorce, as there was in Ezra (10:11).

Verses 26, 27 give the argument which Nehemiah used. If the great King Solomon, powerful among the nations, loved by God

3. *Op. cit.*, p. 217.

(that is the meaning of his personal name, Jediah, II Sam. 12:24f), and able to rule over all Israel, could not take foreign wives without being led to forsake God and sin, how did they think they could do this without sinning, weak as they were?

A little curiosity, going back to *verse 26*, is the KJV reference to "outlandish" women, reminding us that the derivation and original English meaning of the word had reference to women from outside the land of Solomon.

The information in *verse 28* has not been given us previously; it is given here for the first time.

Now Nehemiah's prayer, in *verse 29*, is not for himself directly but against those of the Levitical line, priests and Levites alike, who had violated the covenant (Num. 25:12) which God had made originally with their forefathers because they had stood more firmly against intermarriage and defilement with foreigners than any of the other tribes.

6. Nehemiah summarizes his reforms.

TEXT, 13:30, 31

- 30 Thus I purified them from everything foreign and appointed duties for the priests and the Levites, each in his task,
31 and I arranged for the supply of wood at appointed times and for the first fruits. Remember me, O my God, for good.

COMMENT

These two verses are Nehemiah's summary of his work: note his attention to detail, which is one of the characteristics of the man. How else could he end it but with a prayer? He asks not to be remembered by man, but by God. This is a fitting close for the record of a great man.

WORD STUDIES

EVER (vs. 1: Olam): for ever, everlasting. Basically it means "hidden" (as in the "secret" sins of Psa. 90:8): where the beginning or end is obscure or uncertain or indefinite. It is applied to (1) the past, or antiquity, time long past or even only a lifetime, the days of old, Mic. 7:14; or of a long time, Isa. 42:14; (2) the future, i.e., of the end of one's life, Dt. 15:17; (3) end of an age or race or dynasty, limited by the length of their obedience, I Sam. 2:30. (4) The laws are for ever (Passover, Ex. 12:14), yet they are superseded now. (5) The earth and universe are forever (Psa. 104:5), though we know they will pass away. (6) Only when the term is used of God does it have the idea of absolute eternity (Psa. 90:2).

The people of the O.T. did not have an everlasting promise; they found no need to coin a word for an idea which they didn't have, or barely had, in their mind. Only Jesus could complete that picture for them (II Tim. 1:10).

LOVED (vs. 26: Aheb): to breathe after, long for, desire; the meaning is akin to Agapé in the N.T. Israel loved Joseph, Gen. 37:3f; Jacob loved Rachel, Gen. 29:18; Hosea was told to love his wife in spite of her unworthiness, Hos. 3:1; God loved His people, Dt. 23:5; and we must love God, Dt. 6:5.

SUMMARY

The public reading of the Law revealed that God had forbidden the entrance of Moabites or Ammonites into their religious assemblies, so the people barred all foreigners.

Nehemiah discovered on his return from Persia that space had been given to Tobiah, governor of Ammon, in some of the Temple rooms. He threw Tobiah's belongings out and restored the rooms to the Levites for their intended uses for storage of supplies.

He also observed that people were not supporting the Levites with their tithes, and he corrected that, appointing reliable people

to make distributions of these goods to the Levites.

Sabbath observance had become neglected, so he complained to the public officials and offending tradespeople from Tyre doing business at the gate on the Sabbath, eventually barring the gates and threatening to use force to prevent their entrance on the Sabbath.

He observed that children were losing the ability to speak Hebrew because many of them were the products of marriages with foreigners and he got the people to agree to stop that practice.

The high priest had a grandson who had married the daughter of Sanballat the Samaritan; Nehemiah drove him away.

He summarized his achievements in purifying the people of foreign influences, restoring priests and Levites to their duties, seeing that wood was provided for their offerings, and restoring the offering of first fruits to them.

In all these things he prayed for God's approval on his work.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What objection did Moses have against Ammonites and Moabites?
2. Who were especially involved in the desecration of the Sabbath?
3. What did Nehemiah do to prevent continued desecration of the Sabbath?
4. With what nations in particular were the Jews intermarrying?

REFLECTIONS ON NEHEMIAH

Before we bid farewell to Nehemiah, let's take a look back at the man.

One of his most noticeable characteristics is his use of the short and frequent prayers, "instant prayers," perhaps. Prayer is not as large a feature of the O.T. as of the N.T., but here is a person who had become a master of the art. His one lengthy prayer (1:5-11) is a model of intercession.

He saw the value of the community, the fellowship, the close contact with others for mutual protection. Much of his effort went to bringing people together within the walls of Jerusalem.

He recognized the value of the services of the people, and made frequent appeals to them for co-operation and commitments. He was able to organize them to accomplish in a few days what they hadn't been able to do in a century.

He was practical enough to foresee dangers and to prepare to meet them, thus perhaps averting them. He saw the value in getting people to pledge together to reform their ways of living. He shared in the great and thrilling moment of the wall's dedication which must have lifted the spirits of the people for some period of time.

We may learn much from this one of God's heroes, and we can praise God for supplying leaders of this calibre for those times when His people are faced with great burdens.

PROJECT

Remember the way we reviewed the book of Ezra? Let's try the same thing with Nehemiah. There are thirteen chapters; chapter seven divides the book in half; it is a repeat from Ezra 2 of the names of the first captives of Israel to return from Babylon.

Now, the first half of the book can be divided in half again. In the first three chapters, (1) Nehemiah hears of Jerusalem's helplessness; (2) he gets permission from King Ahasuerus of Persia and comes to Jerusalem; (3) the rebuilding of the wall, section by section, is described. Chapters 4-6 enlarge on problems involved in the wall's reconstruction. (4) Their enemies try ridicule and rumor to block construction; (5) internal difficulties (indebtedness, mortgage foreclosures, enslavement) arise and are overcome; (6) the enemies resort to tactics of diversion (rumors, lies, a plot to discredit or destroy Nehemiah), but the wall is completed in 52 days. Then they needed residents, which is the reason for (7) republishing the list of first returnees as prospects for new settlers in the city, as already noted.

Chapters 8-13 also may be divided in half. First there is the great revival: (8) affecting the intellect, the Law is read one day, then through the Feast of Booths; (9) affecting the emotions, there is a psalm or prayer of confession; (10) affecting the will or actions, the people sign vows of faithfulness. Then in the last three chapters, (11) the residents of Jerusalem and the names of surrounding settlements are listed; (12) genealogies of priests and Levites are given, and the wall is at last dedicated, which is the climax of the book; (13) foreigners are expelled and religious reforms are instituted to purify the nation.

Now get out thirteen cards or slips of paper and write a title of a chapter on each, leaving off the number; then mix them up (the following list is already mixed), and practice arranging them in order.

The genealogies of priests and Levites are given, and the wall is dedicated.

The enemies try ridicule and rumor to block construction. Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem.

Foreigners are expelled and religious reforms are instituted to purify the nation.

Nehemiah hears of Jerusalem's helplessness.

The rebuilding of the wall, section by section is described.

The people make vows of faithfulness.

Nehemiah finds the list of the first exiles to return.

The Law is read and the Feast of Booths is kept.

The enemies resort to tactics of diversion, but the wall is completed.

The Levites lead in a psalm of confession.

Internal difficulties arise and are overcome.

The genealogies of residents of Jerusalem, and names of other cities, are listed.

Word Study Index

	<i>Page</i>		<i>Page</i>
Ahava	100	Mina	33
Altar	44	Name	211
Amen	196	Oath	120
Babylon	100	Offering	110
Bondage	109	Ordinance	131
Booth	44	Passover	81
Burnt offering	80	Peace	68
Casiphia	100	Peg	109
Commandment	131	Persia	15
Covenant	120	Purify	239
Custom	58	Redeem	168
Cyrus	16	Remember	178
Darius	80	Reproach	140
Dedication	239	Sabbath	220
Discourage	57	Salt	58
Document: cf. Amen ...	196	Scribe	90
Enemy	57	Statute	131
Ever	250	Strengthen	178
Ezra	15	Support	150
Forest	140	Susa	131
Geshem	178	Tabernacle	44
Hanani, Hananiah	186	Take oath	120
Hebrew	69	Teach	90
Holy	100	Temple servants	33
Israel	68	Toll	58
Jacob	69	Tribute	57
Jerusalem	68	Trumpet	159
Jeshua, Joshua	33	Understand	196
Jew	68	Unleavened	81
Law	44	Wall	109, 150
Levite	44	Wealthy	159
Lot	228	Worship	211
Loved	250	Zerubbabel	33

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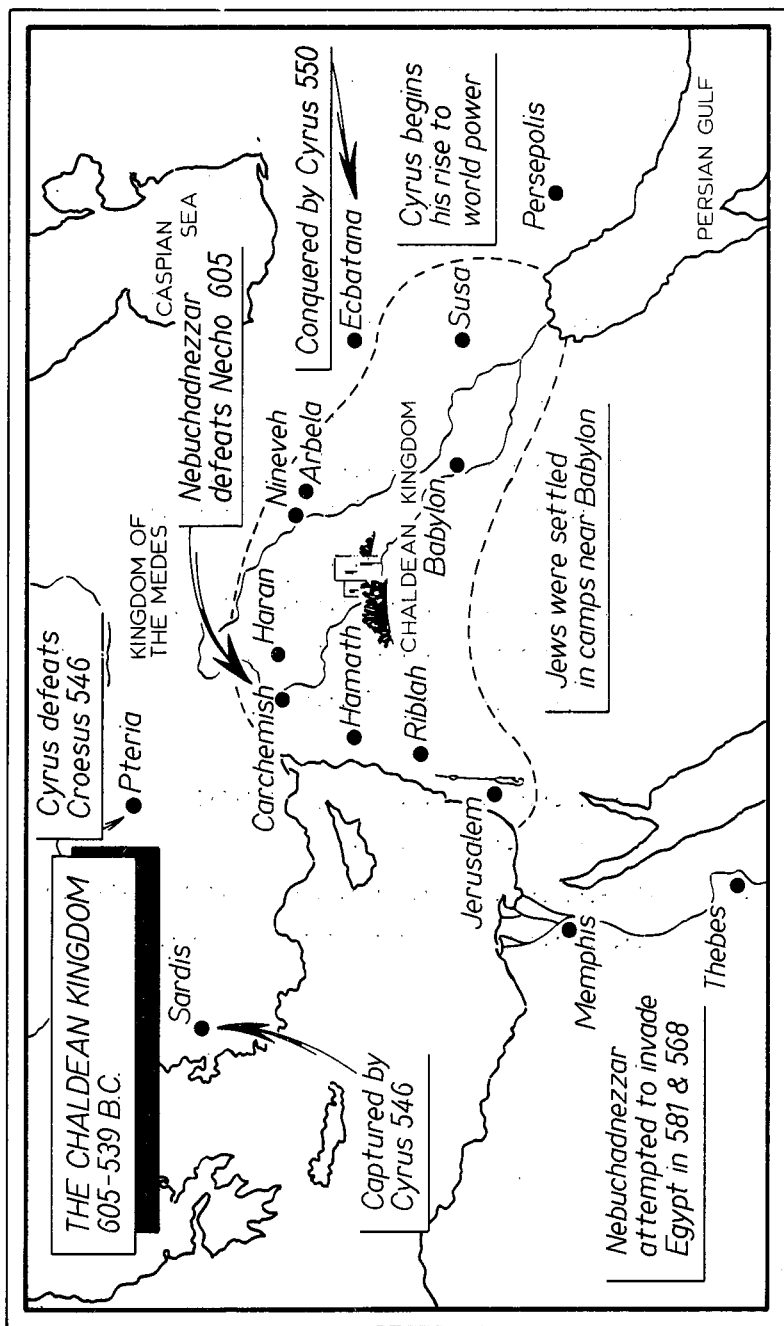
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ESTHER



THIS VOLUME IS DEDICATED TO

Don and Elsie DeWelt

*who not only encouraged me to write
but have had the courage to publish what*

I have written . . .

*and whose lives display the same daring
and determination to save*

God's people as Esther's . . .

with special thanks to my secretary,

Mrs. Penny Skaggs

*whose help with my administrative and instructional tasks
was invaluable in completing this work.*



Esther

INTRODUCTION

Author: Quite simply, we do not know who the author was. The name *Esther* is probably from *Ishtar*, a Persian or Akkadian word meaning, *star* (Venus). Jewish rabbinical tradition (Bava Beta— a part of the Talmud) says: “. . . the man of the Great Synagogue wrote . . . the roll of Esther.” Others (including Josephus and Ibn Ezra) attribute the authorship of the book to Mordecai, Esther’s uncle. We just do not know with any certainty who wrote this book. The author was probably a Persian Jew. Familiarity with Persian life and customs forces that conclusion. The author of this book made use of some of Mordecai’s writings (9:20), the official records of the kings of Media and Persia (2:23; 10:2), and probably the eyewitness accounts preserved through oral tradition.

Date: The book was evidently written after the death of Ahasuerus (Xerxes). We set this date because 10:2 implies that the official state history of the reign of Ahasuerus had already been written when the book of Esther was composed. Ahasuerus died by assassination in 465 B.C. Scholars have pointed to the absence of any traces of Greek influence either in language or thought as evidence that the book of Esther may *not* be dated any *later* than 330 B.C. While on the other hand, the intimate and exact knowledge of Persian culture of the fifth century B.C. indicates the most likely date to be somewhere between 460-450 B.C.

Canonicity: The unique nature of the book of Esther has caused problems concerning its canonicity. The problems will be dealt with later. Esther has been accepted as an authoritative part of the revelation of God from a very early date. Its canonicity may be traced as follows:

- a. The Council of Jamnia, held by Jewish scholars and rabbis in 90 A.D., was to discuss the canon of the Old Testament. The very fact that the canonicity of a few books (one of which was Esther) was challenged proves these books had *earlier* been considered canonical.
- b. Josephus (cir. 90 A.D.) indicates that the same books we

have in our present Old Testament (including Esther) are the same ones considered canonical by Jewish leaders of his day.

- c. Melito of Sardis (170 A.D.) went to Palestine himself and confirmed the canonicity of the O.T. as we have it today.
- d. Origen, Christian scholar of about 250 A.D. confirms the canon of the O.T. as it is today.
- e. The Jewish Talmud of about 400 A.D. confirms the canonicity of Esther.
- f. The scientific scholarship of 20 centuries (manuscript discoveries, archaeological discoveries) has amassed an accumulation of evidence to convince any honest student that Esther is truly a part of God's revelation to man.

One of the most significant arguments for the canonicity of the book of Esther is that there is no reasonable explanation for the historic fact of the Feast of Purim as observed by succeeding generations of Jews except that such remarkable events as recorded in this book actually took place there and then.

Persian Culture: Where did the Persians come from? In the hills of what is today known as Iran lived a rugged, dynamic man called Cyrus. Isaiah predicted his rise to fame over 100 years before he was born! (See *Isaiah, Vol. III*, by Butler, pg. 108-112; College Press.) He began his rise to world conquest among the shepherds of this land of majestic mountains and ferocious deserts. Under the leadership of Cyrus, this army of former shepherds overthrew the Median government and by 550 B.C. Cyrus had united the Medes and Persians into an unbeatable fighting force. By 547 B.C. Cyrus had defeated Croesus, king of Lydia (Asia Minor, known today as Turkey). Then he conquered Babylon (539 B.C.) and continued expanding his territorial rule until he was slain in battle near the southern shore of the Caspian Sea.

Persian government was unique to a Mesopotamian world that had formerly been divided into many different warring clans and tribes. It was the first time people of many different races and

INTRODUCTION

cultures were controlled under one ruler and government. Cyrus and his immediate successors were very wise in administering their rule. All citizens (regardless of race) were given equal rights and the same demands of citizenship were made of all citizens. As long as there was no political rebellion, most people were allowed to worship according to their ethnic religions and maintain their cultural distinctions. In some instances they were even permitted to keep their own rulers (subordinate to the emperor of Persia, of course).

There were three capital cities in Persia. This made it possible for the emperors to travel throughout their empire and keep "in touch" with their subjects. The cities were: *Susa* or *Shushan*, in the delightfully temperate and fertile valley of the Choaspes River (river Ulai, Dan. 8:2) and many Jews lived here later in the days of Esther and Nehemiah—Persian emperors "wintered" here; *Persepolis*, down in the deserts east of the Persian Gulf about 200 miles, whose ruins are visible today, was the royal seat of the Achaemenid kings of Persia. It was a city of grandeur and strong defenses, but burned and looted by Alexander the Great in 331 B.C., and; *Ecbatana*, the capital of Media, located in the cool mountainous region just south of the Caspian Sea, the summer residence of the emperors of Persia.

Persian emperors administered their rule through "The Law of the Medes and The Persians." Once a law was passed, it could never be changed. Not even a king could change it (cf. Dan. 6:12ff.). This was actually beneficial to the citizens in two ways: (a) It meant that the laws necessary to maintaining the structures of society were above the individual's whims, even those of capricious emperors! Not even the emperor was as powerful as the law. (b) Those who had the responsibility of making laws and enforcing them were very careful to make sure the law was a good and just law before it was passed. If even those who make the laws could not change them to suit their own fancies, it tended to make for laws that were more just for everyone.

The empire was divided into twenty-one provinces called *satrapies*. Each province was ruled by a *satrap* who might be a local ruler or a Persian noble. The emperor appointed his own

elite inspectors to check up on the *satraps* and these inspectors were called "the eyes and ears of the emperor," (cf. Dan. 6:1-5), and if the emperor received an unfavorable report about one of his satraps, he usually executed the culprit.

In order to create a good economic base for the empire, Persian rulers instituted a standardized currency, built an empire-wide road system and policed it with soldiers so that it was said a woman could travel across the country in safety. They set up a type of "pony express" whereby the emperor could be in touch with information from any part of his empire within almost one week. Every 14 miles along the main roads was an express station where messengers would change horses so they could travel the 1600 miles between Sardis (in Asia Minor or Lydia) and Susa in one week.

The Persians were not exactly monotheists, but neither were they polytheists. They thought it was foolish to worship many gods, but they did not mind other peoples being polythesists. Their god was Ahura Mazda, "the Wise Lord." Zoroaster, a philosopher who lived about 600 B.C., taught that Mazda created the earth and that Mazda's holy spirit wars against an evil spirit, Ahriman. Human beings are involved in a warfare between these good and evil spirits. There was an element of Messianism in Zoroastrianism for it taught that after the earthly life of a future Savior, God would finally triumph over evil, and all souls on the side of good would pass over the "bridge of decision" and enjoy eternal bliss while all on the side of evil would be tortured forever. Zoroaster stressed truth and mercy. Some think that Isaiah 45:7 (contextually predicting the reign of Cyrus about 180 years later) is a prophetic rebuttal of Zoroastrianism. The teachings of Zoroaster were written in twenty-one volumes and are known as *Zend Avesta*.

Persian Imperialism: When Cyrus defeated Croesus (king of Lydia), all the cities Greece had colonized in Ionia (Asia Minor) came under Persian rule. In 500 B.C. these cities rebelled against Persian rule, but Darius I suppressed the rebellion even though the Ionians had help from the mainland Greeks. Interference from the Greek mainlanders angered Darius so he decided to invade the mainland and bring all Greece under Persian control.

INTRODUCTION

In 490 B.C. the Persian army sailed across the Aegean Sea and landed on the plains of Marathon, just north of Athens. The Athenians, greatly outnumbered sent a runner to Sparta for help. The runner made the 150 miles over hilly, rocky territory in two days, but the Spartans were having a festival and refused to send help until after the celebration. The Athenians attacked, scattered the Persian forces, killing 6400 Persians while losing only about 200 men. It was a great victory for the Greeks. The Battle of Marathon was significant for if Persia had conquered Greece and destroyed her culture (her ideas on democratic and republican forms of government, her art and philosophies) the history of western civilization might be far different than it is today.

Darius' son, Xerxes (Ahasuerus) was determined to complete what his father could not. Xerxes took the throne in 486 B.C. In 483 B.C. Xerxes (Ahasuerus) gave his great banquet (Esther 1:3) probably to display his pompsity and power in preparation for the invasion of Greece. This was the banquet where he was humiliated by his wife Vashti. Three years later, 480 B.C., Xerxes had a pontoon bridge stretched across the Dardanelles Strait using 674 small boats as pontoons. When a storm temporarily destroyed part of the bridge, Xerxes took his rage out by trying to "scourge" the sea and by executing the engineers who built the bridge. Finally Xerxes and his massive force walked across the bridge and invaded Greece. For three days a small force of Spartans held up the massive Persian army at Thermopylae (a narrow mountain pass). The Persians found a way around this pass through a Greek deserter, destroyed the Spartan army and marched down to Athens. There they burned the city to the ground. The Athenians, however, escaped to their fleet of small boats and tricked the Persian navy (350 large, cumbersome ships) into the small Bay of Salamis where 200 of the Persian ships were destroyed. Xerxes made a hasty retreat to Persia, leaving a large army still in Greece. This force was totally defeated at the battle of Plataea in 479 B.C. The battle of Plataea became the watershed of Persian imperialism. Persia remained a powerful empire for another 150 years, but she began to deteriorate culturally and

morally from the days of Xerxes until Alexander the Great finally conquered her in 330 B.C.

Xerxes: Xerxes (Ahasuerus) (486-465 B.C.) was the son of Darius by Atossa, a daughter of Cyrus. For twelve years he served under his father as viceroy of Babylon before succeeding to the throne at the death of Darius. The Persian form of the name Xerxes is Khshayarsha, which, in Hebrew is rendered Ahasuerus (cf. Ezra 4:6 and the Book of Esther). Xerxes lived 14 years after the loss of Greece, but little is known about him in that time. He was murdered by a usurper, Artabanus, who is said to have reigned seven months before being killed by Artaxerxes, the third son and legitimate heir to Xerxes. Xerxes was about 55 years old when he was assassinated. He was reportedly very rich and indulgent and habitually acted like an impudent, petulant brat. The episode with the pontoon bridge, the Vashti incident, and the hasty accession to the spiteful hate of Haman all agree well with this description. He was given to ostentation and loved display and appears to have been susceptible to the flattery and intrigue of fawning courtiers. Xerxes is probably the "fourth" Persian ruler mentioned in Daniel 11:2. For thorough treatment of Persian historical background see *Daniel*, by Paul T. Butler, College Press, chapters six, eight and eleven.

Some Historical Difficulties in Esther:

1. Herodotus, Greek historian of the 5th century B.C., says that a woman named Amestris, daughter of a Persian named Otanes, was Xerxes' queen in the seventh year of his reign. The book of Esther says Esther was. Amestris and Esther cannot be the same person since Amestris was cruel, even to the point of sadistic brutality. Amestris was a Persian. There are those who might think there is a historical contradiction between the biblical record and Herodotus. However, Herodotus does *not* say Esther was *not* a queen at some time during the reign of Xerxes; neither does the Bible say Amestris was *not* a queen at some time during the reign of Xerxes. Therefore, there is no contradiction. It is altogether possible that Xerxes, having given his banquet in the third year of his reign (483 B.C.) (Esther 1:3) and deposed Vashti,

INTRODUCTION

then made Amestris queen. After this, Xerxes entered into his first campaign against Greece (480 B.C.) and was defeated. He returned, deposed Amestris and elevated Esther to queenship in the seventh year (479-478 B.C.) (Esther 2:16) of his reign. Omission by Herodotus of Esther and Vashti does not mean he *contradicts* the Bible. Omission in the book of Esther of Amestris does not mean that the Bible contradicts Herodotus. It might be of interest to remember that on the basis of an omission of the name of Belshazzar by Herodotus, many critics of the Bible denied the historicity of Daniel's book—that is, until archaeological discoveries verified the existence of King Belshazzar and the historicity of Daniel's account concerning him!

2. The statement in Esther 2:5-6 has been offered by some as evidence of the historical inaccuracy of the book of Esther. Critics insisted this passage was an historical *faux pas* because it implies that Mordecai was taken captive from Palestine in the deportation of Jehoiachin in 597 B.C. Mordecai was, of course, a contemporary of Xerxes. That would have made Xerxes and Nebuchadnezzar contemporaries—an historical impossibility! However, the proper antecedent of the relative pronoun *'esher* ("who") in verse six is not Mordecai but Kish, his great grandfather. Actually, the time between the deportation of Jehoiachin in 597 B.C. and the time of Mordecai (483 B.C.) is just the right amount of time for the three generations between Kish and Mordecai!

3. A third objection to the accuracy of the text of Esther is in connection with the statement (9:16) that the Jews killed 75,000 enemies throughout the empire in one day. First, it was by command of the emperor that the Jews "in every city" carry out this execution. Second, there were 500 executed in Susa, the capital, in one day (9:6). It would only require that 500 be executed in 150 cities each to total 75,000. When the vastness of the Persian empire is considered (Asia Minor and parts of Greece on the west, to India on the east; Armenia on the north, to Palestine and Egypt on the south) it is not in the least incredible that it actually happened. Josephus mentions that a small detachment of the Roman army killed more than 15,000 Jews in one day who were

fleeing from Gadara during the Jewish revolt (64-70 A.D.). The Septuagint gives the number slain in Esther 9:16 as 15,000, but the Hebrew text probably gives the accurate number. We will deal with the ethics of the situation in our comments on the text.

4. Fourth, the book's historicity was impugned because no trace of the name Mordecai was to be found in secular history. Critical opinions have been changed since archaeological inscriptions were found mentioning a certain Marduk-ai-a (Mordecai??) as an official in Susa during the reign of Xerxes (See *A Survey of O. T. Introduction*, Gleason Archer, Moody Press, pg. 405.).

5. The science of archaeology has provided undeniable evidence of the historical accuracy of the book of Esther. An inscription of Artaxerxes II (404-359 B.C.) states that the palace of Xerxes (Esther's husband 486-465 B.C.) was destroyed by fire in the reign of Artaxerxes I (464-424 B.C.). The ruins were located in Susa and very definite portions of the palace were identified: e.g., the "king's gate" (4:2); the "inner court" (5:1); the "outer court" (6:4); the "palace garden" (7:7); and even one of the dice or lots (called "Pur" in Persian) were found (3:7)! Now if this palace was destroyed in the reign of Artaxerxes I (464-424 B.C.), it was destroyed within 30 years of the time of Esther's living in the palace (486-424 B.C.). Yet the critics who attack the historicity of the book would have us believe that an unknown author 200 years after this palace was destroyed could describe its ground plans in intimate and perfect detail! The reader may find more information of Esther's palace in the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, art. 1009a.

6. The most important criticism of the book of Esther, however, is not aimed toward its historicity, but toward its theology. The total absence of the name of God is the chief difficulty for many critics. The Talmud gives Deut. 31:18 as a reason why God's name is not mentioned. Because of the sin of idolatry, God had cast them into captivity and "veiled His face" from the Jews. The promise of this judgment is intensified in the Prophets. Edward J. Young (*An Introduction to the Old Testament*, pub. Eerdmans, pg. 378) theorizes, "These Jews in Persia . . . showed no desire to return to Palestine . . . Their theocratic spirit . . .

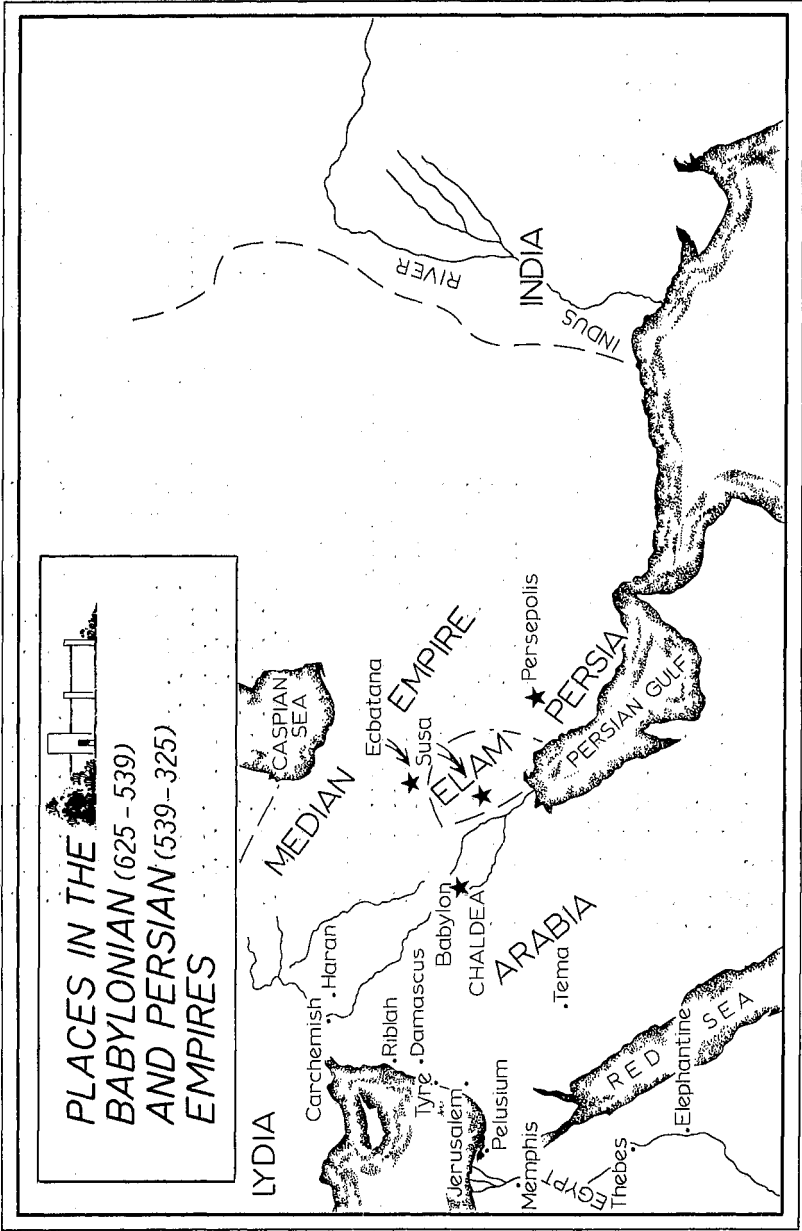
was weak . . . despite that fact, God had not rejected them . . . He would still watch over them. . . . But, since these Jews were no longer in the theocratic line, so to speak, the *Name* of the covenant God (Yahweh) is not associated with them . . . since they are in this distant, far country, and not in the land of promise, His name is not mentioned. . . . By causing us to behold the workings of providence, the book does, after all, turn our eyes to God who determines the destinies of men and nations." Perhaps more significant is the indication from the book of Esther itself that it is, after all, primarily an extract from the official documents of the Persian Court and this would account for both its minute secular details and the omission of the name of God (e.g. 2:23; 3:14; 6:2; 8:9-14; 9:14, 20; 9:29-32; 10:1-3). Matthew Henry said, "If the name of God is not here, His finger is." No other book in the Bible teaches the providence of God as forcibly as the book of Esther. The providence of God preserving the Jews through Esther is no more astonishing than that predicted (Dan. 2:20-23) and recorded in the life of Daniel. God's providence is over all things. Nothing "just happens," even in a pagan empire. One commentator says, "It is almost universally agreed that this omission (of the name of God) must have been intentional. He offers the theory that since Esther was to be read at the annual Feast of Purim and it was such a time of merry-making, the author feared that the Divine Name might be profaned, or that the book might be profanely treated by Gentiles because of its story of the triumph of the Jews over their enemies.

Outline: The Providence of God Preserving His People

- I. Pageant of Xerxes, 1:1-22
- II. Promotion of Esther, 2:1-23
- III. Perverseness of Haman, 3:1-15
- IV. Pluck of Esther, 4:1-17
- V. Plan of Esther, 5:1-8
- VI. Petulance of Haman, 5:9-14
- VII. Pride of Haman, 6:1-14
- VIII. Plea of Esther, 7:1-10

- IX. Proclamation of Xerxes, 8:1-17
- X. Preservation of the Jews, 9:1-19
- XI. Purim Instituted, 9:20-32
- XII. Postscript, 10:1-3

Value: The Book of Esther, in the Hebrew Bible, is the last of the five *Megilloth*. The *Megilloth* (literally, the word means, *rolls* or *scrolls*) is a group of writings (Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther) which are used in the Jewish liturgical year. Song of Solomon is read at Passover (first month); Ruth is read at Pentecost (third month); Lamentations is read in the fifth month (Ab); Ecclesiastes is read at the Feast of Tabernacles (seventh month); and Esther is read at the Feast of Purim (twelfth month). At one time it was normal for every Jewish household to possess a scroll or book of Esther for such liturgical purposes. Among the Jews Esther is the best known of all the books of the Bible. The impetus for a patriotic Jewish nationalism provided by the book would make it very popular among Jewish people. The book is of the calibre of literary excellence. It is recognized to be a valuable source of information filling many gaps in the accounts of classical historians. It is thus an invaluable research source for biblical historians. It has all the merits of great literature: distinct characterization; graphic, vivid descriptions; clear and concise language; action; plot; resolution; drama. A vast body of Jewish apocryphal literature has grown up around the book of Esther which is of no value whatever because of its unhistorical nature. Its greatest value is the lesson that God is able to providentially preserve those who trust Him in the face of overwhelming opposition.



I. Pageant of Xerxes, 1:1-22

A. Display

TEXT: 1:1-8

- 1 Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus, (this is Ahasuerus who reigned from India even unto Ethiopia, over a hundred and seven and twenty provinces,)
- 2 that in those days, when the king Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom, which was in Shushan the palace,
- 3 in the third year of his reign, he made a feast unto all his princes and his servants; the power of Persia and Media, the nobles and princes of the provinces, being before him;
- 4 when he showed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honor of his excellent majesty many days, even a hundred and fourscore days.
- 5 And when these days were fulfilled, the king made a feast unto all the people that were present in Shushan the palace, both great and small, seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's palace.
- 6 There were hangings of white cloth, of green, and of blue, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and pillars of marble: the couches were of gold and silver, upon a pavement of red, and white, and yellow, and black marble.
- 7 And they gave them drink in vessels of gold, (the vessels being diverse one from another), and royal wine in abundance, according to the bounty of the king.
- 8 And the drinking was according to the law; none could compel: for so the king had appointed to all the officers of his house, that they should do according to every man's pleasure.

Today's English Version, 1:1-8

From his royal throne in Persia's capital city of Susa, King Xerxes ruled 127 provinces, all the way from India to Sudan.

In the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his officials and administrators. The armies of Persia and Media were present,

as well as the governors and noblemen of the provinces. For six whole months he made a show of the riches of the imperial court with all its splendor and majesty.

After that, the king gave a banquet for all the men in the capital city of Susa, rich and poor alike. It lasted a whole week and was held in the gardens of the royal palace. The courtyard there was decorated with blue and white cotton curtains, tied by cords of fine purple linen to silver rings on marble columns. Couches made of gold and silver had been placed in the courtyard, which was paved with white marble, red feldspar, shining mother-of-pearl, and blue turquoise. Drinks were served in gold cups, no two of them alike, and the king was generous with the royal wine. There were no limits on the drinks; the king had given orders to the palace servants that everyone could have as much as he wanted.

COMMENTS

v. 1-2 *Potentate*: 'Achashewerosh is the Hebrew equivalent of the Persian *Khshayarsha* (which is *Xerxes* in Greek). Ahasuerus is generally recognized by historians as Xerxes I (486-465). It is not the same Ahasuerus as named in Ezra 4 and Daniel 9 (who was probably Cambyses, the immediate successor of Cyrus the Great). The author of Esther distinguishes this Ahasuerus by describing his reign from "India to Ethiopa." The Hebrew word for "India" is *hoddu* an old Persian word meaning *Hindu* or Sanskrit meaning, *great river*; hence, Indus River. The empire of Xerxes extended from the Indus River on the east to Ethiopia (*Cush*, in Hebrew) in the south, and to Lydia (Asia Minor) on the east (see map on page 271). At one time, the Persian empire even extended east into the Greek mainland. Some have been skeptical about the statement that Xerxes ruled over 127 "provinces," because Herodotus wrote that the empire was divided into 20 satrapies. The Hebrew word translated *provinces* is *medinah* and it is not certain at all that *medinah* represents the same as the word *satrapy*. *Medinah* may very well represent a subdivision of the Persian *satrapy*. According to Herodotus there were about 60

nations under the Persian rule so it is altogether possible that the 20 satrapies or 60 nations were subdivided into smaller "provinces" (127 of them). Xerxes assumed the throne in 486 B.C. Shushan (Susa) was the city from which he was ruling in the third year of his reign. The Hebrew word *birah* is translated *palace* but is, more accurately, *fortress*. This was the whole palatial section of the city of Susa which was much more strongly fortified than the city surrounding it. The *birah* included the courts, gardens, out-buildings and the royal palace itself. Furthermore, the same word *birah* is used in 2:5 to indicate that Mordecai lived within the fortress and in 9:12 showing that as many as 500 other common citizens lived within the fortress of Susa. The main city had a circumference of six to seven miles, and the *birah* (fortress) was enclosed with a massive wall about two and one half miles square. As late as 1100-1200 A.D. there were 7000 Jews living in Susa. By 1500 A.D. the city became uninhabited and fell into ruins.

v. 3-5 *People*: In the third year of his reign (483 B.C.), Xerxes was making plans, according to Herodotus, to invade the Greek mainland. He planned to attack within two years. This "feast" was, in Hebrew, a *mishetteh*. *Mishetteh* is from a root word meaning, *to drink wine*; hence it is a banquet whose main feature is a drinking bout (cf. 1:7-8). The Hebrew word *sarav* would be better translated *officials* or *rulers* than *princes*. It is from the root *sar* meaning to rule, while the word *nagid* (used of the Messiah in Dan. 9:24-27) has more the connotation of royalty. The word *paretemim* is translated *nobles* and is probably derived from a Babylonian word meaning *first* or *chief*. The word *chel* is translated in the ASV, *power*; it means literally, *army* (cf. Isa. 36:2; 2 Kings 18:17). We are not told exactly how many guests there were. But the number would certainly run into the hundreds. And it is probable that the guest list changed regularly because he would not want to invite the whole army and all its chiefs at once and leave the empire defenseless. Besides, the feast lasted six months so the guests could come in relays.

Verse 4 specifically states the purpose of this feast was that Xerxes might "show" the riches of his kingdom and his own

majesty for half a year. If Xerxes lived today, psychiatrists would say he had "an identity problem." The emperor's main reason for this great feast seems to have been to create an image for himself. He wished to impress his government officials with his greatness. According to Herodotus it was at this feast Xerxes announced: "As Cyrus, Cambyses, and Darius, have enlarged the empire, I wish to do the same. I propose to bridge the Hellespont, march through Europe, and fire Athens for burning Sardis and opposing Datis and Artaphernes. By reducing Attica and Greece, the sky will be the only boundary of Persia." The emperor's "image building" had also the pragmatic motive of "psyching" his fighting force up for the coming invasion of Greece. Not only were the government officials and the army and its chiefs feasted, the emperor made a week-long feast for all the other citizens then residing in the fortress of Susa, both rich and poor, great and small. These drinking bouts seem to have been for men only. The women apparently had a feast of their own (1:9).

v. 6 *Palace*: The description of the palace is in no way an exaggeration. Tapestries and awnings of expensive, imported linens in pure white, deep green and royal blue were fastened with soft white linen cords to solid silver rings and tall pillars of marble. Some of these columns of marble were 67 feet high. In 1884-86 a Frenchman named Dieulafoy excavated the ruins of this great palace. One writer has said, "There is no event described in the Old Testament whose structural surroundings can be so vividly and accurately restored from actual excavations as 'Shushan the palace.'" Couches (used to recline upon when eating, probably much like the later Roman *triclinium*) were either overlaid heavily with gold and silver or made of pure gold and silver. The floors of the palace were made of beautifully patterned and variable-colored marbles red, white, mother-of-pearl yellow, and black.

v. 7-8 *Party*: The feasting passion of the Persians was insatiable. Some of these feasts had as many as 15,000 guests at one time, and cost nearly \$100,000 for each banquet session. As noted before (1:3) *mishetteh* means a *drinking bout*. Wine flowed freely, according to the "bounty" of the king. The Hebrew word translated "bounty" is *yod* and is literally, *hand*. In other words,

the good, choice wine of the imperial wine-cellars was distributed according to the king's boundless means. Ordinarily, everyone present drank only upon command or invitation according to the "law" of ritual and the whim of the emperor or toastmaster. At these feasts, however, that law had been suspended and everyone was allowed to drink as they pleased. The Persians were noted for their drinking. Xenophon (434-355 B.C.), Greek historian and soldier, knew this and wrote, "They drink so much that they cannot stand upright on their feet, and must be carried out." This was the setting and these were the circumstances surrounding critical decisions made by the emperor Xerxes. The results or consequences of his decisions were used by the Lord God Jehovah to save the Jews of the dispersion from extinction and thus provide a witness to the revealed Word of God through the centuries awaiting the Messiah's coming. No matter how depraved or stupid the behavior of man, all will ultimately redound to the goal and glory of God.

B. Defiance

TEXT: 1:9-12

- 9 Also Vashti the queen made a feast for the women in the royal house which belonged to king Ahasuerus.
- 10 On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, and Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, the seven chamberlains that ministered in the presence of Ahasuerus the king,
- 11 to bring Vashti the queen before the king with the crown royal, to show the peoples and the princes her beauty; for she was fair to look on.
- 12 But the queen Vashti refused to come at the king's commandment by the chamberlains: therefore was the king very wroth, and his anger burned in him.

Today's English Version, 1:9-12

Meanwhile, inside the royal palace Queen Vashti was giving a banquet for the women.

On the seventh day of his banquet the king was drinking and feeling happy, so he called in the seven eunuchs who were his personal servants, Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carkas. He ordered them to bring in Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown. The queen was a beautiful woman, and the king wanted to show off her beauty to the officials and all his guests. But when the servants told Queen Vashti of the king's command, she refused to come. This made the king furious.

COMMENTS

v. 9-11 *Demand*: Three different lexicons give three different meanings to the name *Vashti*; one lexicon says it means, *beauty* (a word of Persian origin); another says *Vashti* means, *best*; while still another says the meaning is *while drinking* (from the Hebrew root *shatha*). It is more likely to be of Persian origin. Some have suggested that *Vashti* was not the actual name of the queen but a word of endearment such as, "sweetheart" or "darling." There is no evidence that Persian custom demanded women feast separately from men. Esther invited Haman and the emperor to a feast (5:3ff). *Vashti* made her feast in the *beth-hammalekuth*, or, house of the king (palace). On the last day of the drinking bout, when the heart of the king was *detov* (lit. *at good*) or *merry* with wine, he ordered seven of his most trusted servants to bring the beautiful queen into the huge hall where all the inebriated men were carousing. The Jewish Talmud and other Jewish commentators think the command to be that *Vashti* should be brought in with *only* the royal crown, that is, naked. The custom of women appearing publicly only when veiled was doubtless as serious then in Persia as it is now in Iran. It would have been threatening enough to her modesty to appear fully dressed but without her

veil before hundreds of drunken men. She would have been ridiculed ever after as a common trollop. Of course, the king's demand might have actually required her to appear completely naked. That is more in character with the behavior of an intemperate man like Xerxes after drinking too much wine. The word translated *fair* is the Hebrew word *toy* which means literally, *good, pleasing, delightful* or *very excellent*.

v. 12 *Denial*: Vashti refused. That was all there was to it. She presumptuously and deliberately disobeyed the emperor's demand and sent the servants back empty-handed. Why did Vashti refuse? We must speculate. Perhaps her moral standards were high enough that she refused to do what was wrong. It would not be impossible that Vashti had adopted the higher moral standards of the Hebrew people around her. Some would question Vashti's morals because the *feast* she made for the women (1:9) was also a *mishetteh* (drinking bout). Most likely, Vashti's refusal was motivated by her desire to retain her social and political status. Any queen who would allow herself to be exploited and degraded like a common prostitute could never command respect for her person or position again. Vashti, too, may have become inebriated and with the false courage that comes with drunkenness, dared to defy the emperor's command. Whatever Vashti's reason, the emperor was enraged. A literal rendering would be, "And was angry the king, very (exceedingly), and his anger blazed within him." The word translated *very* is 'ud and means, *steaming, powerful, excessively, fiery*. Xerxes, who just moments ago was feeling good all over and merry in his heart, is now steaming and burning with red-hot anger. "What fools we are to put into our mouths that which would take away our brains!" (Shakespeare). How devastating drunkenness is to cause a monarch to lose all sense of propriety toward one who occupies the position of queen of the realm!

C. Decree

TEXT: 1:13-22

13 Then the king said to the wise men, who knew the times, (for so was the king's manner toward all that knew law and judgment;

- 14 and the next unto him were Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king's face, and sat first in the kingdom,)
- 15 What shall we do unto the queen Vashti according to law, because she hath not done the bidding of the king Ahasuerus by the chamberlains?
- 16 And Memucan answered before the king and the princes, Vashti the queen hath not done wrong to the king only, but also to all the princes, and to all the peoples that are in all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus.
- 17 For this deed of the queen will come abroad unto all women, to make their husbands contemptible in their eyes, when it shall be reported, The king Ahasuerus commanded Vashti the queen to be brought in before him, but she came not.
- 18 And this day will the princesses of Persia and Media who have heard of the deed of the queen say the like unto all the king's princes. So will there arise much contempt and wrath.
- 19 If it please the king, let there go forth a royal commandment from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes, that it be not altered, that Vashti come no more before the king Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal estate unto another that is better than she.
- 20 And when the king's decree which he shall make shall be published throughout all his kingdom, (for it is great,) all the wives will give to their husbands honor, both to great and small.
- 21 And the saying pleased the king and the princes; and the king did according to the word of Memucan:
- 22 for he sent letters into all the king's provinces, into every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language, that every man should bear rule in his own house, and should speak according to the language of his people.

Today's English Version, 1:13-22

Now it was the king's custom to ask for expert opinion on questions of law and order, so he called for his advisers, who

would know what should be done. Those he most often turned to for advice were Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan—seven officials of Persia and Media who held the highest offices in the kingdom. He said to these men, “I, King Xerxes, sent my servants to Queen Vashti with a command, and she refused to obey it! What does the law say that we should do with her?”

Then Memucan declared to the king and his officials; “Queen Vashti has insulted not only the king but also his officials—in fact, every man in the empire! Every woman in the empire will start looking down on her husband as soon as she hears what the queen has done. They’ll say, ‘King Xerxes commanded Queen Vashti to come to him, and she refused.’ When the wives of the royal officials of Persia and Media hear about the queen’s behavior, they will be telling their husbands about it before the day is out. Wives everywhere will have no respect for their husbands, and husbands will be angry with their wives. If it please Your Majesty, issue a royal proclamation that Vashti may never again appear before the king. Have it written into the laws of Persia and Media, so that it can never be changed. Then give her place as queen to some better woman. When your proclamation is made known all over this huge empire, every woman will treat her husband with proper respect, whether he’s rich or poor.”

The king and his officials liked this idea, and the king did what Memucan suggested. To each of the royal provinces he sent a message in the language and the system of writing of that province, saying that every husband should be the master of his home and speak with final authority.

COMMENTS

v. 13-15 *Panic*: When Vashti disobeyed the emperor’s order, panic ensued. The image he had built for himself by this grandiose feast was destroyed in one stroke. It was such an unprecedented response, the emperor did not know how he should act. He knew the queen’s actions would be known sooner or later throughout

the empire. Along with the gossip must go a story of the emperor handling the situation. But how shall it be handled? He hastily convened a meeting with his "wise" men. These are well-known men who are "next unto him" and probably would be likened to our President's "cabinet members." They were not astrologers or magi as the Talmud thinks. They are men learned in the laws and customs of Persian government—familiar with all precedents set in the past and presently having the power of law. The Hebrew word used here for *law* is *dath* and not the usual *torah* (Mosaic law). *Dath* is a word used in the O.T. only during the Persian period and is used of the emperor's laws 3:8; Haman used the word to refer to the "laws of the Jews" 3:8; it is used for the rules of drinking at a feast 1:8; for purifying of women 2:12. The Hebrew word translated *the times* is *ha'itim* and most often means *past times*. Some commentators have theorized that "the times" refers to the winds of a social upheaval (an ancient "equal rights movement") then beginning to blow in Persia. Since the word *ha'itim* almost always means *times of the past* it is doubtful that such a movement was then in progress. Most assuredly, if Vashti's impertinence is not squelched, a feminist movement would soon be started! That was the definite conclusion of the emperor's advisory council. There were seven families of the first rank (Ezra 7:14) in Persia, from which the king was supposed to take his wives. The chiefs of each of these seven families had access to the king at all times, except when he was in the company of one of his wives.

v. 16-20 *Prompting*: Why did Xerxes wish to punish Vashti "according to law"? Apparently there was no law at that time to cover such behavior. The emperor eventually made one, but it was after the fact. Perhaps Xerxes did not have the courage or the ability to handle Vashti's insolence as a husband should. Perhaps the deflation of his ego prompted him to seek a severe punishment to recover his damaged image. Memucan recognized that the politically expedient thing to do was suggest some punishment which would make it appear Vashti's behavior was a serious matter of public policy and concerned the welfare of the whole empire. It would not do, of course, to allow the citizens to think

Vashti's punishment was merely the gratification of the emperor's personal rage.

Memucan, a true male-chauvinist, believed that a woman's respect and surrender is insured through male despotism. Some men believe the only way to assert masculinity is to exploit and tyrannize the opposite sex. The only real and lasting way a man may command the respect and devotion of a woman is to love her with all his heart and actions. Memucan may have known deep in his heart the truth of that last statement, but practically, feared such an answer would not satisfy the emperor's impetuous rage. There is no reason to suppose that Vashti's behavior would cause such catastrophic rebellion as depicted by Memucan. The probable cause of Vashti's rebellion in the first place was the domineering attempt of Xerxes to profane her womanhood before a whole host of male-chauvinists. Memucan's advice to reinforce male domination and exploitation by royal decree would hardly remedy the situation created by Vashti's refusal to obey her husband. It is true that women of that culture were, in some instances, treated as chattel by men. Vashti's defiance caused more of a stir in the hearts of men of the empire than in the women. The contempt and wrath Memucan feared was that of the men of the empire.

There may have been political intrigue involved in Memucan's advice. It appears he expected the emperor to dispose of Vashti's royalty to another "better than she." Did Memucan have someone specifically in mind? If he expected the emperor to choose the next queen from one of the families of the first-ranked seven, perhaps Memucan had a maiden from his own family in mind. Whatever the case, Memucan's advice is very specific that the emperor make it a public decree ("written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes") so that it could not be changed. Vashti's deposition and banishment must be irrevocable. If the way were left open for her to regain Xerxes' favor and restoration to the throne, she would surely execute her vengeance on Memucan.

v. 21-22 Precedent: We tend to agree with the Jewish rabbis in the Midrash that Xerxes "was utterly devoid of sense in so

decreeing," and, "Nay more, he made himself a laughing-stock." There was no need for such a decree. The women of Persia would not be able to overthrow the government or revolutionize the cultural status-quo because of Vashti's disobedience. This royal law protected the myth of male superiority about as much as the attempt to legislate female equality by an "equal rights amendment" in the United States! It is apparent from certain incidents in the book of Esther that wives were held in considerable esteem by their husbands (cf. 5:10; 5:13; 7:1-2, etc.). Xerxes certainly could neither insure his own male superiority nor that of the men of his empire by passing a law. He already had at his disposal enough force to depose or slay a queen who disobeyed him if he wished. But Vashti had already proved that in spite of all his power and laws he could not force her to prostitute her womanhood if she did not wish to do so! But Memucan's advice pleased the intemperate king and his princes.

The precedent-setting decree was sent out to the whole empire. Since there were people of different languages (and probably different dialects), the decree was written in as many different languages as were necessary. The practice of the Persians to address proclamations in different languages is illustrated by the bilingual and trilingual inscriptions from Cyrus to Artaxerxes, and especially by that one of Darius preserved on the Behistun Rock (see map, page 271). The decree of Xerxes was, "Let every man bear rule in his own house," and, "speak according to the language of his people." The latter part of that decree seems superfluous. Jewish commentators take the phrase to mean that if a husband and wife were of different race and language, the husband was not to allow the wife's language to prevail in the home. He was to compel his wife to learn and speak his language.

What happened to Vashti? There is no record. So far as we know, Vashti was never given an opportunity to speak in her own defense. Nor do we find anyone else speaking out on her behalf. Her fate was decided according to the whim of an egotistical and intemperate tyrant. Jewish tradition believes she was executed. The history of deposed kings and queens of the East would substantiate that tradition. Disgraced potentates were usually put to the sword.

Led into rashness by his own intemperance and given foolish counsel by his advisors, Xerxes is trapped. His hand is forced, he banishes the one closest to him and now he is alone with himself. He is in desperate need of a wise consort.

We may learn the following lessons from this chapter:

1. Pride and arrogance feeds on the exploitation of others.
2. Intemperance, especially in alcohol, causes people to disregard decency and sacrifice personal integrity.
3. No woman, not even a pagan one, likes to be treated as a mere object or “thing” to satisfy male gratification.
4. The proper functioning of members of a household cannot be sustained through civil legislation—it must be established through love.
5. Almighty God uses the consequences of men’s evil deeds to carry out His plan of redemption for the world.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was Ahasureus’ Greek name?
2. How large was his Persian empire?
3. What kind of feast was being held by the Persian emperor?
4. What was his purpose in holding the feast?
5. How would you characterize Ahasuerus?
6. Why do you think Vashti refused the emperor’s demand?
7. Why did the emperor panic when Vashti refused him?
8. Memucan’s advice was born of what shrewdness?
9. Do you believe the emperor’s decree was as necessary as Memucan advised?
10. What lessons are to be learned here?

II. Promotion of Esther, 2:1-23

A. Search for a Queen

TEXT: 2:1-4

- 1 After these things, when the wrath of king Ahasuerus was pacified, he remembered Vashti, and what she had done, and what was decreed against her.
- 2 Then said the king's servants that ministered unto him, Let there be fair young virgins sought for the king:
- 3 and let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom, that they may gather together all the fair young virgins unto Shushan the palace, to the house of the women; unto the custody of Hegai the king's chamberlain, keeper of the women; and let their things for purification be given them;
- 4 and let the maiden that pleaseth the king be queen instead of Vashti. And the thing pleased the king; and he did so.

Today's English Version, 2:1-4

Later, even after the king's anger had cooled down, he kept thinking about what Vashti had done and about his proclamation against her. So some of the king's advisers who were close to him suggested, "Why don't you make a search to find some beautiful young virgins? You can appoint officials in every province of the empire and have them bring all these beautiful young girls to your harem here in Susa, the capital city. Put them in the care of Hegai, the eunuch who is in charge of your women, and let them be given a beauty treatment. Then take the girl you like best and make her queen in Vashti's place."

The king thought this was good advice, so he followed it.

COMMENTS

v. 1 *Remorse*: Late in 480 B.C., Xerxes (Ahasuerus) returned from a disastrous military expedition to the Greek mainland (see Introduction, pg. 265). It had been three long years since he had,

in a drunken rage, humiliated his beautiful queen, Vashti (she was probably executed finally). The word *pacified* is *keosek* in Hebrew and means "a sinking down." Finally, after three years, his wrath settled down enough for him to remember with remorse, his beautiful Vashti, and what he had done to her. The Hebrew word *zakar* is the verb translated *remembered*. He remembered "what she had done, and what was decreed against her." He had gone to Greece filled with male egotism, for a while venting his arrogance upon the Greeks, but then, suffering a humiliating defeat, he returned to Persia slightly less arrogant perhaps, than when he left. Whether Xerxes remembered Vashti before this or not, the Hebrew language does not indicate. The Hebrew verb system has no tense, at least in the sense in which past, present, and future are understood in English. Hebrew verbs have two "kinds" of action; complete and incomplete. It does have seven verb stems each expressing a particular voice or degree of action. The word *zakar* is the Qal stem of the verb and means completed action in the active voice; "he remembered." Perhaps it was not until Xerxes had suffered an ego-deflation and returned to the familiar surroundings of the palace that the impact of the Vashti incident was able to sink into his heart. In the *Haggadah* (meaning, "relate") portion of the *Midrash* (meaning, "explanation") which is more homiletical than historical, it is conjectured that before Esther was made queen, Xerxes would compare women who entered with a statue of Vashti that stood near his bed. After his marriage the statue was replaced by one of Esther (Midrash Abba Guryon, Parashah 2). As legendary as that may be, the biblical text seems to infer that Xerxes realized that Vashti had acted with wisdom when she refused to allow her royal highness to be profaned, and that his reaction was, at best, hasty, and worse than that, despicable!

v. 2-4 *Recommendations*: The Hebrew noun *ne'aroth* is feminine plural of *na'ar*. It is translated *servants*; these *servants* were probably young maidens. Those now advising the emperor were not the seven princes of chapter one. These young maidens might well be visualizing the atmosphere in the palace should the emperor continue to brood on about his beautiful Vashti's fate

and his own guilt. Quickly, with the shrewdness of feminine intuition, they suggest something that is certain to divert the attention of the male of the species — a beauty contest to choose a new royal consort. Note that nothing is said about the social or political qualifications of the prospective queen. According to protocol, the emperor was supposed to take his wives from the seven chief families of the realm (see comments 1:13-15). These young female servants knew how to change the mood of the emperor. Their suggestion was that the search for a new queen be concentrated on the physical features of womanhood. She must be fair to look upon and she must be a virgin. The word for virgin is *bethulah* and connotes “young” virgin. For a discussion of the difference between the words *bethulah* and *’almah*, both of which mean *virgin*, see *Isaiah, Vol. I*, by Butler, pub. College Press, pg. 152-153.

These women servants of the emperor suggested that elaborate procedures be instituted to find the “fairest of the fair,” the one young maiden in the whole Persian empire that would most please him. No possible candidate should be overlooked. All the maidens who might please the emperor were to be transported to the capital city, Susa, and housed in the “house of the women.” The “house of the women” was the emperor’s *harem*. Ancient kings and emperors had many wives and concubines. King Solomon had a house like this to accommodate his many wives and concubines (cf. I Kings 7:8). In the Persian palaces the “house of the women” was quite large and spacious because the emperors were known to have housed as many as 300 or 400 concubines as well as their “wives.” Hegai was probably one of the emperor’s most trusted *eunuchs*. The Hebrew word is *saris* and is translated in the RSV as *eunuch*. He was probably some repulsive old man, on whom the court ladies were very dependent, and whose favor they constantly courted. Some of the Hebrew kings evidently had such eunuchs (II Kings 9:32; Jer. 41:16). The Hebrew word *tameruqeyhen* is translated *things for purification* in the ASV but *their ointments* in the RSV. It is from the root word *maraq* which means *to make clean, bright by rubbing, to polish*. It is *not* the Hebrew word used to legislate religious or

ceremonial purification, therefore it probably had to do with some form of beauty treatment such as diet, training in royal behavior, anointment of the body with perfume, and facial make-up. It may also have been a sort of quarantine that would allow time for any latent disease or blemish to show up before the emperor made his selection.

The emperor considered this good (*tov*) advice. He was pleased at the prospect of looking over all the beautiful women of Persia and choosing one for a queen. It would be a welcome diversion from the tedious affairs of state.

B. Solicitude of Mordecai

TEXT: 2:5-11

- 5 There was a certain Jew in Shushan the palace, whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite,
- 6 who had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captives that had been carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away.
- 7 And he brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter: for she had neither father nor mother, and the maiden was fair and beautiful; and when her father and mother were dead, Mordecai took her for his own daughter.
- 8 So it came to pass, when the king's commandment and his decree was heard, and when many maidens were gathered together unto Shushan the palace to the custody of Hegai, that Esther was taken into the king's house, to the custody of Hegai, keeper of the women.
- 9 And the maiden pleased him, and she obtained kindness of him; and he speedily gave her her things for purification, with her portions, and the seven maidens who were meet to be given her out of the king's house: and he removed her and her maidens to the best place of the house of the women.

- 10 Esther had not made known her people nor her kindred; for Mordecai had charged her that she should not make it known.
11 And Mordecai walked every day before the court of the women's house, to know how Esther did, and what would become of her.

Today's English Version, 2:5-11

There in Susa lived a Jew named Mordecai son of Jair; he was from the tribe of Benjamin and was a descendant of Kish and Shimei. When King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took King Jehoiachin of Judah into exile from Jerusalem, along with a group of captives, Mordecai was among them. He had a cousin, Esther, whose Hebrew name was Hadassah; she was a beautiful girl, and had a good figure. At the death of her parents, Mordecai had adopted her and brought her up as his own daughter.

When the king had issued his new proclamation and many girls were being brought to Susa, Esther was among them. She too was put in the royal palace in the care of Hegai, who had charge of the harem. Hegai liked Esther, and she won his favor. He lost no time in beginning her beauty treatment of massage and special diet. He gave her the best place in the harem and assigned seven girls specially chosen from the royal palace to serve her.

Now on the advice of Mordecai, Esther had kept it secret that she was Jewish. Every day Mordecai would walk back and forth in front of the courtyard of the harem, in order to find out how she was getting along and what was going to happen to her.

COMMENTS

v. 5-7 *Orphanhood*: Enter Mordecai! This book might well have been called, *The Book of Mordecai*. All the way through the book Mordecai is as much a star as Esther and the book ends with an account of the fame and dignity of Mordecai. The Feast or Purim is called "the day of Mordecai" in II Maccabees 15:36. He

is a favorite character in the Rabbinical literature. The name Mordecai is derived from Marduk, chief deity of Babylon and Persia. Marduk means "be bold and audacious in acts of rebellion; run strenuously, attack." Some suggest that Nimrod is a Hebrew transmutation of Marduk which in turn has some relationship to the constellation Orion. "He who was to the Babylonians a deified hero, was to the Hebrews a rebel Titan, bound in chains among the stars that all might behold his punishment." The fact that the name Mordecai is derived from Marduk substantiates assumption that this famous man was born in captivity. It would seem physically impossible for Mordecai to have been born before the captivity and still be a contemporary of Xerxes. If Mordecai had been carried into captivity (even as an infant) with Jeconiah (Jehoiachin) in 596 B.C., he would be 122 years of age when he became prime minister in the 12th year of Xerxes' reign (474 B.C.); and Mordecai was in office for a long time after 474 B.C. (cf. 10:2ff). In the long standing argument about the proper antecedent of the relative pronoun *who* (2:6) we have taken the position that it refers to Kish—great grandfather of Mordecai. The time between the exile of Jeconiah (Jehoiachin) and the time of Mordecai is just the right amount of time for the three generations between Kish and Mordecai. We have already indicated that *birah* ("palace") means more specifically, *fortress* (cf. 1:1-2). Mordecai did not at this time live within the royal palace itself, but inside the walled fortress known as Susa.

Mordecai was an especially compassionate man toward his own kinsmen. When his uncle and aunt died, they left a beautiful young daughter completely orphaned. Mordecai was a man who went beyond the letter of the law (Ex. 22:22) which forbade exploitation of the widow and the fatherless; he kept the spirit of the law as proclaimed by the prophets (Isa. 1:17) and defended the fatherless. Mordecai had no way of knowing when he first took Esther into his home as his own daughter that someday his association with Esther would promote him to high office and fame. But Jehovah who rewards the righteous knew! Yes, even Mordecai had come to Persia for such a time as this!

The orphaned girl had been named *Hadassah* by her parents

which means *myrtle* in Hebrew. The myrtle is a large evergreen shrub with fragrant flowers and spicy-sweet scented leaves. All parts of the plant are somewhat perfumed. The word *hadassah* in Hebrew came to mean *sweetness*. It has been used as a symbol of beauty and sweetness (Isa. 41:19; 55:13; Zech. 1:7-10). It was one of the trees used in the Feast of Tabernacles (Neh. 8:15). In ancient times it was sacred to Astarte. The name Esther is probably derived from the Persian *stara*, i.e. *star*, or from the goddess Ishtar (also known as Ashtoreth and Astarte). Esther was well named! The Hebrew words *yephath*—*to'ar vetovath mare eh* describe Esther's unusual beauty. *Yephath* means *beautiful*; *to'ar* means the beauty of her *form*; *vetovath* means *pleasant, desirable*; and *mare'eh* has as its root in Hebrew that from which we get the word *vision, spectacle, appearance, form*. Esther must have been strikingly beautiful. Her facial features, her feminine figure, and her personality all combined to make her as beautiful, comely, shapely and desirable as the "beloved" young bride in Song of Solomon (cf. S.S. 1:8; 1:15-17; 2:14; 4:1-8, etc.). Mordecai, her cousin, took her into his home and into his heart and she became his adopted daughter.

v. 8-11 *Opportunity*: There must have been hundreds of young women gathered to the emperor's palace. The word *ravvoth* means *large number, great number, myriads*. They were all given to the custody (Heb. "into the hand of") Hegai, the emperor's eunuch (cf. 2:3) who was in charge of the emperor's harem. It seems clear from these verses that this was no ordinary beauty contest. These contestants had not entered by their own choice. The fact that the many were "gathered" and Esther was "taken" indicates they were compelled to be made part of the emperor's harem. In the Jewish Targums there is a story that Mordecai tried to hide Esther from the emperor's servants when they came in search of beautiful maidens. Not only were these maidens forced to compete for the emperor's favor, the losers were probably not allowed to return to their homes but retained in his harem. Polygamy can be traced back to the pre-Noachian times. Lamech is the first recorded polygamist (Gen. 4:19, 23). Some think polygamy was the outcome of tribal wars. When men had separated into

clans and had taken up different places of abode, collisions soon occurred between them. In such wars the great majority of men would be massacred; the women and children, driven to the abode of the conquerors, there to become concubines and slaves. Of course the strongest man or the chief of the clan would assert his right to the choice of captives. Thus down through the centuries of time it became a status symbol. So we have even in Solomon's temple a harem of 700 wives and 300 concubines. Emperors and kings, with all of a nation's wealth at their command, could afford to support such harems. There were other facts involved in polygamy. First, there is the natural sex-drive in man, which, *not* under the control of the express will of God which commands one woman for one man, leads man to sexual promiscuity. The natural sex-drive *under control* is good, because it is created by God. Second, in an agricultural society which did not have the benefits of technological work-savers, a man would desire to produce as many offspring as possible to become a work-force and produce the highest standard of living possible. Women and children were usually considered "property" in such cultures. Of course, the principle "a man's life does not consist of the things which he possesses" was as true then as it is now. Polygamy and harems have always brought jealousy, intrigue, ruination, financial disaster, slavery and moral guilt. Solomon's polygamy bankrupted Israel and brought about a divided kingdom saturated with idolatry. It is doubtful that Esther would have chosen to become a member of Xerxes' harem. But she had no choice, except death to herself and probably to her family.

Esther pleased (*tov*) Hegai, supervisor of the emperor's harem. Just how she pleased him we are not told; most probably by her sweetness of disposition and determination to "make the most" of an unwanted circumstance without complaining or rebelling she was shown kindness (*chesed* in Hebrew). No doubt, her radiant beauty also prompted him to put her in a position to catch the emperor's eye sooner than the rest of the maidens. First, Hegai quickly gave Esther the ointments (*tameruqeyha* in Heb.) and cosmetics with which to adorn herself before being taken to the emperor's presence. Second, he gave her the customary portions

of food (*manotheyha* in Heb.; the word used of the special food in Dan. 1:5; see also Esther 9:19, 22). Third, Esther was given seven women attendants, probably the loveliest and most efficient of all the servant girls, suitable to the exceptional charm of Esther herself. Fourth, Hegai "removed" (*yeshanneha* in Heb., meaning, *altered, changed, transfered*) Esther and her maidens to the best place of the harem. Apparently she had been given quarters in a less desirable part of the harem when she was first brought to the palace.

Esther had not revealed her ethnic background. We assume she looked enough like a Persian that her Jewishness was not discernible. Since both Persians and Jews were of Semitic origin their physical features were enough alike to present no problem for Esther. Why did Esther not reveal that she was a Jew? And why did Mordecai advise her that she should not do so? Many answers have been given. One says, "Mordecai reasoned something like this: If Esther is chosen queen, it can only be because God desires to make her the instrument of His purpose. If she reveals that she is a Jewess, she will prejudice her choice . . ." Another suggests that she did *not* reveal she was from *royal* origin (descended from Kish and thus King Saul) hoping the emperor might think she was of humble origin and send her away. There is no evidence Esther was of royal lineage. Ibn Ezra says, "So that she might observe her religious obligations secretly. If she revealed her Jewish faith she would be forced to transgress" (cf. Dan. 1 and 6). Another Jewish tradition says Mordecai's modesty dictated that Esther's racial ties not be known; he modestly wanted to forego the advancement and publicity which would come to him if his relationship to Esther (when she became queen) were known. We would question whether Mordecai could have been that accurate with his premonitions. Could he know with certainty that Esther would become queen? The most natural reason, it would seem, for Esther to conceal her racial roots was the anti-Jewish feeling there (cf. 3:5-6; 5:13; 6:13; 8:11). The Jews suffered this anti-Jewish prejudice in Egypt under the Pharaohs, by their pagan neighbors while they were in the Promised Land, when they were taken captive to Babylon and Persia, from the

Samaritans after their return from captivity, from the Seleucids (Dan. 11), from the Romans, and from certain people of every nation with which they have been associated since. We think Mordecai's purpose was to protect his beautiful cousin from any violence should her ancestry be made known immediately. That Mordecai was very much concerned for her safety and well-being is evidenced by the fact that *every* single day he went to the court of the harem to inquire about her present circumstances and what the future might hold for her. It is apparent that Mordecai has some official duty or standing within the palace itself that would allow him easy and continuous access to the harem courts. Perhaps he was one of the porters who watched the many gates of the palace or had the responsibility of storing supplies within the palace.

Some question the ethics of Mordecai and Esther in keeping her racial ties silent. It needs to be understood that it is not unethical to withhold information, the revealing of which would serve no good purpose. The fact that they did not reveal she was a Jewess certainly did not cause others any suffering or loss. When Rahab did not betray the Hebrew spies there was nothing unethical in her action, (Josh. 2:1ff). Samuel withheld information from Saul at the direction of the Lord (I Sam. 16:1ff). Elisha withheld information from enemies (II Kings 6:19ff). The Lord Himself was party to military deception in the assault against Ai by Joshua (Josh. 8:3-29, esp. v. 18). Jesus advised concealment of truth from those who have no claim upon it (Mt. 7:6); Jesus himself would not so much as speak to Herod when questioned. Mordecai knew that the truth about Esther's ethnic background would only bring suffering (perhaps even death) to her and the Jewish people if such information should be divulged at an inopportune time.

C. Season of Preparation

TEXT: 2:12-14

12 Now when the turn of every maiden was come to go in to king Ahasuerus, after that it had been done to her according to

the law for the women twelve months, (for so were the days of their purifications accomplished, to wit, six months with oil of myrrh, and six months with sweet odors and with the things for the purifying of the women,)

- 13 then in this wise came the maiden unto the king: whatsoever she desired was given her to go with her out of the house of the women unto the king's house.
- 14 In the evening she went, and on the morrow she returned into the second house of the women, to the custody of Shaashgaz, the king's chamberlain, who kept the concubines: she came in unto the king no more, except the king delighted in her, and she were called by name.

Today's English Version, 2:12-14

The regular beauty treatment for the women lasted a year—massages with oil of myrrh for six months and with oil of balsam for six more. After that, each girl would be taken in turn to King Xerxes. When she went from the harem to the palace, she could wear whatever she wanted. She would go there in the evening, and the next morning she would be taken to another harem and put in the care of Shaashgaz, the eunuch in charge of the king's concubines. She would not go to the king again unless he liked her enough to ask for her by name.

COMMENTS

v. 12 *Purification*: We have already discussed the reasons for the purification process (cf. 2:3). Some presume another reason for such rites stems from the idea that Persian emperors considered themselves divine. They believed that such deity was resident in them that even pure maidens had to be purified ceremonially before approaching their emperor. We do not think it had anything to do with religion at all. It probably had to do with training in Persian customs. Daniel spent his quarantine in Babylon

becoming learned in all the wisdom and laws of Babylon. This may have been one of the purposes of the "purifications" for these maidens. The "law" for the women is the word *dath* already discussed (1:13-15).

Myrrh is from the Hebrew word *mor*. It is from a small tree growing in Arabia; the gum resin exudes in small tear-like drops which dry to a rich brown or reddish-yellow, brittle substance, with a faint though agreeable smell and a warm, bitter taste. The Hebrew word *mor* means "a bitter weeping, or drops of bitterness." Oil of myrrh was probably used as a cosmetic in this Persian "law" for purification. It may have even been used medicinally, for it was used that way at other times (it was offered to Jesus at His crucifixion as an anesthesia). It is quite likely that some of the "fair young maidens" there at that time had come from homes that were none too clean or sanitary. The time period for the purifications consisted first of six months application or oil of myrrh plus six months application of sweet odors. The Hebrew text has two interesting words here; the first is *basam* which refers to the balsam-tree or is translated *spice* in Song of Solomon 5:1; the second word comes from the Hebrew root *maraq* and means, cleansing or rubbing with *precious perfumes*. For one whole year there was a process of cosmetic, medicinal and dietary preparation of every young girl brought into the emperor's harem.

v. 13-14 *Presentation*: After a full year of preparation, each maiden was granted the opportunity to make her own presentation before the emperor as favorable as she was able. "Whatsoever she desired was given her" probably means she could wear any dress in the harem wardrobes, and adorn herself with any of the jewelry available there. The emperor wished each maiden to appear as alluring and as desirable as possible.

Each maiden, in the turn appointed her, presented herself before the emperor in the evening, stayed with the emperor that night, and returned on the next day to the "second house of the women." The Persian emperor's harem was apparently divided into three "houses": (1) a royal residence for the queen; (2) a house for the "women" (secondary wives or concubines); and (3) a

house for the virgins. On returning from her first visit to the emperor's chambers, a girl ordinarily returned to the "second house" because she was no longer a virgin. It must be assumed that the emperor's purpose in keeping these virgins over night in his chambers was sexual intercourse. The "second house" was under the supervision of Shaashgaz, another of the emperor's eunuchs. Once a maiden had been granted her night with the emperor, she was never permitted to be in his royal chambers again unless the emperor called for her by name. If a young virgin was not chosen as queen, she returned to the harem of concubines for the rest of her life. They were virtual prisoners. They would never be allowed to return to the world outside the palace and marry after consorting with the emperor for that would be degrading to the sovereignty and glory of the emperor.

D. Selection of Esther

TEXT: 2:15-18

- 15 Now when the turn of Esther, the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her for his daughter, was come to go in unto the king, she required nothing but what Hegai the king's chamberlain, the keeper of the women, appointed. And Esther obtained favor in the sight of all them that looked upon her.
- 16 So Esther was taken unto king Ahasuerus into his house royal in the tenth month, which is the month Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign.
- 17 And the king loved Esther above all the women, and she obtained favor and kindness in his sight more than all the virgins; so that he set the royal crown upon her head, and made her queen instead of Vashti.
- 18 Then the king made a great feast unto all his princes and his servants, even Esther's feast; and he made a release to the provinces, and gave gifts, according to the bounty of the king.

Today's English Version, 2:15-18

The time came for Esther to go to the king. Esther — the daughter of Abihail and the cousin of Mordecai, who had adopted her as his daughter; Esther — admired by everyone who saw her. When her turn came, she wore just what Hegai, the eunuch in charge of the harem, advised her to wear. So in Xerxes' seventh year as king, in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, Esther was brought to King Xerxes in the royal palace. The king liked her more than any of the other girls, and more than any of the others she won his favor and affection. He placed the royal crown on her head and made her queen in place of Vashti. Then the king gave a great banquet in Esther's honor and invited all his officials and administrators. He proclaimed a holiday for the whole empire and distributed gifts worthy of a king.

COMMENTS

v. 15-16 *Countenance*: We do not know how the "turns" of the maidens to appear before Xerxes were determined. Perhaps by casting lots, perhaps by the arbitrary decision of the eunuch in charge of that portion of the harem. Shimei (2:5) must have had at least two sons; Jair the father of Mordecai and Abihail, Mordecai's uncle and Esther's father. The Hebrew word *dod* is translated *uncle* and means literally, "father's brother." Thus we are to understand Esther's father to be Mordecai's paternal uncle. When Esther's turn came she did not seek any of the extras offered to the maidens (2:12-14) for their appearance before the emperor. Perhaps she refused extra adornment in an attempt to persuade the emperor to reject her from being queen. Or her modesty may have caused her to refuse the cosmetics and alluring clothes available. Whatever the reason, her natural beauty was so radiant and her personality so pleasant she was admired by all that looked at her. It is unusual that there was no jealousy and murmuring among the women against Esther. This verifies that her bearing and demeanor toward her contemporaries was such

as to obtain only graciousness, even from those competing for the crown!

When one considers the circumstances under which Esther was probably taken from her uncle's home to the emperor's harem and the cultural mores Esther had to sacrifice, it is nothing short of amazing that she could endure this experience without the exhibition of some animosity on her part. She certainly would seem to have justifiable cause for resentment toward these Persians. Yet she was held in favor by all who looked upon her. No little Jewish girl could be blasé about facing what Esther faced. She was about to sacrifice her virginity to a Persian monarch. There was the chance that she might become queen. But there was also the distinct possibility that she might become merely one of his concubines for the rest of her life. Not even the fact that she had been born in Persia and reared in Persian culture could soften the trauma of this experience. Her composure in the face of this moment is marvelous, to say the least.

She was presented to the emperor, in his palace, in the month Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. From Passover month (March-April) one counts ten months to Tebeth (December-January), because Passover month is the first month of the religious year. This is the only time in the Bible that the month Tebeth is mentioned. One scholar thinks the name *Tebet* (Heb. for Tebeth) may be related to the word *tava* which means in Hebrew "to dip or sink" and Tevet is thus the "month of sinking in" or the "muddy month" because of the abundant rainfall during that season. There were Jewish fasts observed on the 5th and 10th days of this month commemorating the fall and siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. It is not certain whether these fasts were being observed in Esther's day or not. Her presentation to Xerxes was dated also in the seventh year of his reign. This was shortly after (less than a year) his ignominious defeat at Salamis and Plataea in about 480 B.C. He returned home in 479 B.C. and selected Esther as his queen. If Xerxes was about 55 when he was assassinated (see Introduction, page 265) in 465 B.C., then he was about 40 years old when Esther appeared before him. We have no way of knowing Esther's age.

v. 17-18 *Coronation*: There are five or six Hebrew words that may be translated love, but the most common one is *'ahav*, and that is the word used of the Persian emperor's love for the Jewish maiden. He loved her more than all the other *women*. The Hebrew word translated women is the generic word for "mankind" *nashim*. It is difficult to tell from the word *nashim* whether the writer meant all the women in the emperor's harem or just those virgins who had appeared before him prior to Esther's appearance. The next phrase, ". . . more than all the virgins . . ." seems to limit *nashim* to those virgins appearing just before Esther. The word for *virgins* is the definitive word *bethuloth*.

Xerxes set the *kether*—*malekuth*, *crown*—*royal*, upon Esther's head and made her queen in the place of Vashti. *Kether* means "encircle, circlet, diadem," and was probably a heavily bejeweled turban. The word *nezer* is the word describing the only crown used in crowning Hebrew kings, so the *kether* describes the crown of a foreign monarch. To further honor his beautiful new queen, Xerxes decreed a new *mishetteh* ("feast") and named it Esther's Feast. *Mishetteh* is the word used to describe the "drinking-bout" in 1:9-11. The word the Hebrews used to describe their religious feasts was *chaggim*. The feast decreed by Xerxes was strictly a Persian festival and we do not find the Jews observing it. The Jews did later establish the Fast of Esther and observe it on the 13th of Adar (February-March) and followed it with the Feast of Purim on the 14th and 15th of Adar. But none of these holy days had any relationship to the Feast of Esther proclaimed by Xerxes. In addition to the inauguration of a Feast, Xerxes "made a release." The word *hanachah* has been explained by various commentators as; (a) release from paying taxes; (b) release from forced labor; (c) release of some prisoners; (d) release from military service. The root word in Hebrew is *nucha* and means simply, *rest*. It may mean what we think of today as simply, "a holiday," without any form of amnesty being involved. On this day when the emperor was enjoying the great pleasure of having acquired the most beautiful and personable woman in the empire for his queen, he felt especially generous and gave gifts. He gave

them "according to the bounty of the king," which means either in quantity or quality or both. It was a common practice for eastern potentates to give gifts at times like this. Herod Antipas offered Salome half of his kingdom when she danced for him. The Magi brought gifts to the "king of the Jews." Merodach-baladan sent a present to Hezekiah. It was a custom that served both egomania and politics. It gave kings an opportunity to build their own images as well as to cement national and international political relationships. It still goes on today. Potentates and politicians still curry the favor of constituents with "gifts." International relationships are still built, not on truth and honesty, but on "loans" and "gifts." Perhaps we are judging Xerxes' "holiday" too harshly. But in view of the customs then and continued practice today it would seem his motive was political or personal and not philanthropic.

E. Sedition Revealed

TEXT: 2:19-23

- 19 And when the virgins were gathered together the second time, then Mordecai was sitting in the king's gate.
- 20 Esther had not yet made known her kindred nor her people; as Mordecai had charged her: for Esther did the commandment of Mordecai, like as when she was brought up with him.
- 21 In those days, while Mordecai was sitting in the king's gate, two of the king's chamberlains, Bigthan and Teresh, of those that kept the threshold, were wroth, and sought to lay hands on the king Ahasuerus.
- 22 And the thing became known to Mordecai, who showed it unto Esther the queen; and Esther told the king thereof in Mordecai's name.
- 23 And when inquisition was made of the matter, and it was found to be so, they were both hanged on a tree: and it was written in the book of the chronicles before the king.

Today's English Version, 2:19-23

Meanwhile Mordecai had been appointed by the king to an administrative position. As for Esther, she had still not let it be known that she was Jewish. Mordecai had told her not to tell anyone, and she obeyed him in this, just as she had obeyed him when she was a little girl under his care.

During the time that Mordecai held office in the palace, Bigthana and Teresh, two of the palace eunuchs who guarded the entrance to the king's rooms, became hostile to King Xerxes and plotted to assassinate him. Mordecai learned about it and told Queen Esther, who then told the king what Mordecai had found out. There was an investigation, and it was discovered that the report was true, so both men were hanged on the gallows. The king ordered an account of this to be written down in the official records of the empire.

COMMENTS

v. 19-20 Plot: Why were the virgins gathered a "second time"? According to Jewish tradition, when Esther became queen she refused to disclose her lineage to Xerxes, although she did tell him she was of royal lineage. She rebuked him for following the evil advice of his nobles and having Vashti slain. Esther reminded Xerxes that Babylonian emperors (Nebuchadnezzar et al.) had been wise in following the advice of Hebrew prophets like Daniel. Esther sent Xerxes to Mordecai for counsel. Xerxes asked Mordecai's counsel on how to get Esther to reveal her ancestry. Mordecai suggested that the virgins be assembled again as if the emperor was planning to change queens again. This would move Esther to jealousy and she would then be glad to tell the emperor her lineage rather than be deposed. But, so the tradition goes, this scheme was in vain. Esther did not reveal her ancestry. Others have suggested that this second increment of virgins was gathered as late arrivals from the far reaches of the empire and missed the first series of individual over-night presentations to the emperor. Still others

think this is simply an historical aside noting the customary sexual promiscuity of Persian emperors. Although Xerxes loved Esther above all the women, he retained his polygamous desires for adding concubines to his harem. Whatever the case, the point of the account is the discovery of the plot against Xerxes' life.

Esther did not let her advancement to queen of the empire rob her of respect for the man who had rescued her from an orphan's fate. She kept the word of her uncle, Mordecai, just like when she was a little Hebrew orphan-girl. The word *ma'amar* is translated *commandment*. *Ma'amar* is a word borrowed from Chaldean language; the usual word for commandment in Hebrew is *mitzvah*. No doubt there were pressures on this young Hebrew woman to reveal her lineage, if for nothing else, for the sake of ethnic pride; connected to this might be the temptation to shame Xerxes publicly for having a Jewess as queen of Persia and retaliate for having been wrested from her home and culture and deflowered by a pagan emperor. Furthermore, it was customary in the ancient eastern empires that a person's kinsmen usually rose in political status right along with him. One would expect that when Esther became queen, Mordecai would have been appointed to some official position that would have secured his status before the emperor. Esther would then not need to be silent about her ancestry. The very fact that Esther remains silent indicates that Mordecai had no secure official position in the emperor's palace.

v. 21-23 *Punishment*: Hebrew tradition has it that Mordecai was appointed to "the king's gate." His task was to inform the emperor of any conspiracy against him. Bigthan and Teresh, who had previously kept the gate, became incensed, saying, "The king has removed two officials and replaced them by this single barbarian." They devised a plan to prove that the emperor should not have given their job to a Jew—they planned to kill the emperor. By this rather drastic scheme, they intended to prove that the Jew, Mordecai, was an unfit keeper of the gate. These two gate-keepers did not realize that Mordecai was a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin and knew 70 different languages. So when

they plotted together in their native tongue about killing the emperor, Mordecai understood, informed Esther, and Esther informed the emperor who had the two executed. So goes the rabbinic tradition. However, as stated earlier, our biblical text seems to imply that Mordecai had no official capacity. He was probably sitting in the "gate," as before (2:11), to learn news of Esther's fate. The "gate" was the usual large, fortified entrance to the palace enclosure. Gates to the royal residence have always been used in the East as courts of justice, public forums and places to learn daily news. To be placed in command or guardianship of these gates was a signal of high honor and showed that the occupant of the palace (the emperor) placed explicit trust in those so appointed. For some reason these two well-trusted officials were "wroth" with the emperor and were deciding to kill him. Bigthan may very well be the same person as the Bigtha of the group listed earlier (1:10). Both these men were eunuchs (*sariymey* in Hebrew). Conspiracies within the structure of Persian politics were common occurrences. Xerxes was ultimately assassinated by Artabanus, the captain of the guard, and Aspamitras, a chamberlain and eunuch. Just how this conspiracy became known to Mordecai we are not told. Whether Mordecai knew 70 different languages or not, it is almost certain he knew the language spoken by these Persian eunuchs. Mordecai had been born and reared in Persia. It was his home almost as much as theirs. Josephus says that a Jewish slave of the palace came to Mordecai with a report of the conspiracy. Whatever the source, Mordecai revealed it to Esther and Esther told the emperor. What was Mordecai's motive for trying to avert the assassination of the emperor? Perhaps it was his humane concern for the emperor's life. More likely, Mordecai had Esther's interest and the interest of the whole Jewish community as his first priority. If Xerxes should be assassinated, Esther would probably be deposed by the perpetrators of the coup — perhaps even murdered by them. If not by them, she would surely be deposed by the next emperor. Thus the Jewish people would be deprived of one of their own on the throne. If this seems harsh judgment of Mordecai's motives, one must remember that he dares risk Esther's life for the sake of the whole Jewish community later (4:10-17).

When the plot was revealed to the emperor and the matter thoroughly investigated and guilt established, Xerxes ordered the two conspirators executed. The Hebrew word *talah* is rendered "hang" but it probably does not mean to execute by hanging as Western cultures know it. The Jews executed usually by stoning the convicted culprit to death. There are only two clear instances of Jews dying by hanging and those were suicides (Ahitophel and Judas). Occasionally the Jews would "hang" a corpse on a "tree" (or stake) after execution or death (cf. II Sam. 4:12; Gen. 40:19; Dt. 21:22; Josh. 8:29; 10:26-27). The Philistines did this to Saul and Jonathan (II Sam. 21:12). The "tree" was a pole or stake that could be lowered to receive its victim and then raised and fixed into the ground so the public could view it. The Persians, according to Herodotus (III; 125 and IX; 78) and Plutarch, *impaled* the dead bodies of criminals and others executed on sharpened poles. This is apparently what is meant by the word *gallows* in 6:4; 7:10; 8:7; 9:13, 25. The word in Hebrew there is *ha'etz* and means literally, "the wood," or "the tree." Archaeological inscriptions have been found of the Mesopotamian civilizations which confirm that impaling victims on stakes was a method of execution.

All affairs of state were entered into the king's personal chronicles (somewhat like our Presidential Papers) and whenever the king wanted to be reminded of past events they would be read out to him. The information given by Mordecai about the assassination plot was very important information! Xerxes intended that this event be permanently recorded for future reference and use. Xerxes probably did not record it for Mordecai's benefit, but this event later played a crucial part in the survival of Mordecai, Esther and the whole Jewish community (6:1ff).

We may learn the following lessons from this chapter:

1. The male ego is insatiable and feeds on sexual promiscuity.
2. God blesses those who care for orphans.

3. It is not unethical to withhold information, the revealing of which would benefit no one.
4. Some people (Esther) are willing to make almost unbelievable personal sacrifices for what they think may benefit others.
5. Plotting violence on another's person usually returns in violence to the plotter.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think Xerxes remembered Vashti?
2. Why would his servants suggest that he select a new queen from young virgins not presently in his harem?
3. What constituted the "purification" process to which these virgins were subjected? Why?
4. What was Mordecai's relationship to Esther?
5. Why did Mordecai instruct Esther not to reveal her ethnic background?
6. Why do you think Xerxes had each maiden come to him individually and not allow them to return to the harem until the next morning?
7. According to the modern calendar when did Esther's turn for appearing before Xerxes come about?
8. About how old was Xerxes when Esther appeared before him as a young maiden?
9. Why didn't Esther prepare herself for her presentation before the emperor with all the accouterments of the harem?
10. Why do you think Mordecai reported the plot to assassinate the emperor?

III. Perverseness of Haman, Chapter 3

A. Scorn of Mordecai

TEXT: 3:1-6

- 1 After these things did king Ahasuerus promote Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him, and set his seat above all the princes that were with him.
- 2 And all the king's servants, that were in the king's gate, bowed down, and did reverence to Haman; for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai bowed not down, nor did him reverence.
- 3 Then the king's servants, that were in the king's gate said unto Mordecai, Why transgressest thou the king's commandment?
- 4 Now it came to pass, when they spake daily unto him, and he hearkened not unto them, that they told Haman, to see whether Mordecai's matters would stand: for he had told them that he was a Jew.
- 5 And when Haman saw that Mordecai bowed not down, nor did him reverence, then was Haman full of wrath.
- 6 But he thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone; for they had made known to him the people of Mordecai: wherefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasureus, even the people of Mordecai.

Today's English Version, 3:1-6

Some time later King Xerxes promoted a man named Haman to the position of prime minister. Haman was the son of Hammedatha, a descendant of Agag. The king ordered all the officials in his service to show their respect for Haman by kneeling and bowing to him. They all did so, except for Mordecai, who refused to do it. The other officials in the royal service asked him why he was disobeying the king's command; day after day they urged him

to give in, but he would not listen to them. "I am a Jew," he explained, "and I cannot bow to Haman." So they told Haman about this, wondering if he would tolerate Mordecai's conduct. Haman was furious when he realized that Mordecai was not going to kneel and bow to him, and when he learned that Mordecai was a Jew, he decided to do more than punish Mordecai alone. He made plans to kill every Jew in the whole Persian Empire.

COMMENTS

v. 1-4 *Insubordination of Mordecai*: Xerxes decided to promote a man named Haman. The name *Haman* in Hebrew means *violent one*, or, *riotous one*. Some think the name is strictly Persian and is an exact equivalent of the Greek "Eumenes," which means "well disposed." The Hebrew text has Haman's father, Hammedatha, as an Agagite. Some Jewish tradition would have Haman descended from the Amalekites (of king Saul's day) whose king was Agag. But the scriptures indicate that when Agag fell, he was the last of his house (I Sam. 15:33). The Assyrian King Sargon, father of Sennacherib, left an inscription (at Khorsabad) indicating that Agag was a territory adjacent to that of Media. The Septuagint (Old Testament in Greek language, written about 300 B.C.) calls Hammedatha, "the Bugaeon." The Bug River flows into the northern edge of the Black Sea. This could be the territory from which Haman's ancestors came. It is conjectured by some scholars that Hammedatha may be the same as the old Persian *Mahadata* which means "given by the moon." Others have thought the term *Agagite* was a title such as *Pharaoh*. In light of all the foregoing information it would seem more accurate to assume that Haman was truly Persian and definitely not related to any Canaanites such as the Amalekites. Haman certainly gave his sons Persian names (cf. Esth. 9:7-9).

Haman was promoted above all *hassarim* (Hebrew for *princes*). In the language of ancient Turkey he would be called a *grand vizier* (prime minister), a prince of princes. Haman actually became second *ruler* in the kingdom of Persia.

It has been suggested that Haman was of lowly origin and not from one of the "first" families of Persia. This may account for the emphasis placed on an apparent need of Haman to have everyone do obeisance toward him. In ancient times emperors and noblemen ruled as absolute despots and common men were so servile that a man appointed second ruler in an empire would receive the profoundest homage and reverence from all. The very fact that the "king" (emperor) had *commanded* all who were in the palace gates to do obeisance to Haman indicates that some might deliberately refuse to do so. Indeed, there was one who did not bow down and pay reverence to Haman — Mordecai.

Why did Mordecai disobey the orders of the emperor to do honor to Haman? We are not told, unless Mordecai's bold revelation that he was a Jew had something to do with his reason for disobedience. There is a Jewish tradition (Midrash) that Haman wore an image of an idol on his clothing, and Mordecai disobeyed considering such obeisance tantamount to idolatry. It is possible that promotion to second in the kingdom would bring with it the office of high-priest to the pagan religion of Persia. It has also been suggested that advancement to the second highest position in the empire may have caused Haman to claim divine honors for himself. We know that men in high positions of other empires did claim deity and demand worship from their subjects. Daniel's three Hebrew companions were thrown into Nebuhadnezzar's fiery furnace for refusing to worship the emperor's image.

All the other gate-keepers of the king's palace were obeying the king's commandment. The word for *commandment* is *mitzevath* in Hebrew and not the word *dath* (law) which we had in chapter one. Mordecai's contemporaries seem very anxious to protect Haman's honor. Their concern was very plainly prompted by jealousy. At first they probably said to themselves, "How does Mordecai get by without humbling himself before Haman, the low-born upstart, when we have to bow down and demonstrate servility every time Haman passes by this gate?" They thought Mordecai esteemed himself better than they. These gate-keepers kept badgering Mordecai for some explanation as to why he did

not show reverence to Haman until Mordecai told them he was a Jew. That was his excuse. Perhaps Mordecai added more than is recorded; perhaps he told them of his religious scruples. Whatever the case, the gate-keepers made it a point to inform Haman of Mordecai's disobedience to the royal edict. The text says they wanted to see whether Mordecai's "matters" would stand. The word translated "matters" is *davar* in Hebrew and means fundamentally, *speech, word. Davar* may also mean *business, occupation, reason* or *cause*. Apparently, these contemporaries were anxious to see if Mordecai's reason (Jewishness) was sufficient to keep Haman from taking his position of gate-keeper away from him.

v. 5-6 *Indignation of Haman*: Apparently Haman was not aware of Mordecai's irreverence until told by the other gate-keepers. When Haman saw it for himself he was infuriated. The Hebrew word *chemah* is translated *wrath* and means literally, *on fire, inflamed, burning* with anger. It is the same word used to describe Nebuchadnezzar's anger (Dan. 3:13, 19) when the Hebrews would not bow down and worship his image. The LXX (Septuagint) describes Haman's wrath with the Greek word *sphodra* which means *vehement, exceedingly*. Haman dismissed the idea of taking out his rage on just one Jew. He wanted every Jew in the empire of Persia to die because Mordecai refused to show him honor.

Mordecai's insult was based on his ethnic origin—he would not do obeisance *because* he was a Jew. Perhaps if Mordecai had offered some other excuse Haman might have demanded only the life of Mordecai. Jewish commentators see anti-Semitism as Haman's basic motive rather than wounded pride. It is very evident that Haman's first reaction was from wounded pride. And if one Jew refused to honor Haman's position, they all would, reasoned Haman, therefore they shall all be slain.

B. Subterfuge of Haman

TEXT: 3:7-11

7 In the first month, which is the month Nisan, in the twelfth year of king Ahasuerus, they cast Pur, that is, the lot, before

Haman from day to day, and from month to month, to the twelfth month, which is the month Adar.

- 8 And Haman said unto king Ahasuerus, There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from those of every people; neither keep they the king's laws: therefore it is not for the king's profit to suffer them.
- 9 If it please the king, let it be written that they be destroyed: and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those that have the charge of the king's business, to bring it into the king's treasuries.
- 10 And the king took his ring from his hand, and gave it unto Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the Jews' enemy.
- 11 And the king said unto Haman, The silver is given to thee, the people also, to do with them as it seemeth good to thee.

Today's English Version, 3:7-11

In the twelfth year of King Xerxes' rule in the first month, the month of Nisan, Haman ordered the lots to be cast ("purim" they were called) to find out the right day and month to carry out his plot. The thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, was decided on.

So Haman told the king, "There is a certain race of people scattered all over your empire and found in every province. They observe customs that are not like those of any other people. Moreover, they do not obey the laws of the empire, so it is not in your best interests to tolerate them. If it please Your Majesty, issue a decree that they are to be put to death. If you do, I guarantee that I will be able to put 375 tons of silver into the royal treasury for the administration of the empire."

The king took off his ring, which was used to stamp proclamations and make them official, and gave it to the enemy of the Jewish people, Haman son of Hammedatha, the descendant of Agag. The king told him, "The people and their money are yours; do as you like with them."

COMMENTS

v. 7-8 *Perjury*: In the first month which is called Nisan, Haman made his genocidal plans for the Jewish people. Nisan was the first month of the Jewish religious calendar. The word *Nisan* (meaning, "the month of flowers") was the word the Jews of the Babylonian exile substituted for the old Mosaic name of the first month, *Abib*. Nisan is comparable to March-April of the Gregorian calendar. The twelfth year of Xerxes is 474 B.C. The word *Pur* in Hebrew is probably a word borrowed from the Assyrian word *puru* which means *stone*. It came to mean a *lot* for casting to determine an issue. The casting of lots was a familiar practice of ancient Eastern civilizations, even of the Hebrews (cf. Prov. 16:33; Num. 26:55; Ezek. 48:29; Prov. 18:18; Jonah 1:7; Acts 1:26, etc.). Lots were drawn or thrown in various ways; sometimes by means of stone or ivory dice; sometimes by sets of intricately carved wooden sticks; by strips of parchment and other means. Haman's lots were probably some type of numbered or figured stones.

Haman cast lots to decide the day of the month and the month of the year. The lots fell upon the thirteenth day of the twelfth month (according to the Jewish calendar) Adar. *Adar* is the same as February-March (3:13). It appears that Haman tried the lot over and over until it finally signaled the above date. We are not to suppose that Haman took a whole year to cast the lots. In approximately 365 throws of the lots a decision would have to be reached. That would take no more than an hour or two. Casting the lots was, according to pagan superstition, leaving the decisive choice up to the gods of Fortune or Fate. This was to give divine sanction to the choice. Little did Haman know that the God of Mordecai and the Jews and of all men—the only real and true God—was taking a divine hand in the affairs of the Persian-Jewish confrontation. Having "religiously" decided which day he should kill the Jews, Haman proceeds with the next phase of his planned mass murder. He will go to the emperor with his lies about the Jewish people.

Haman's casual statement, "There is a certain people scattered

abroad . . ." does not immediately impress us with the enormity of what he is about to propose. He is about to call for the extermination of the whole world-wide Jewish community. "All the provinces of thy kingdom" would include the vast territory from India in the east, to Asia Minor in the west, Ethiopia in the south and the Caucasus Mountains (of southern Russia) in the north. It would include the Jews who had returned to Palestine a hundred years earlier. How many Jews would this include? We can only conjecture—perhaps two or three million. The first captivity of the Jewish nation took place in 721 B.C. (at the hands of the Assyrians); the second captivity took place in 606-586 B.C. (at the hands of the Babylonians.) Esther, Mordecai, and Haman are one hundred years and perhaps three generations later. This allows plenty of time for wide dispersion and extensive multiplication of the Jewish people. Josephus records that a million Jews were slain in the siege of Jerusalem alone in 66-70 A.D. There may have been even more than 3,000,000 Jews dispersed throughout the Persian empire in Esther's day. The Sibylline Oracles (250 B.C.) said, "Every land and every sea is full of thee." (see *ISBE*, art., "Dispersion," Vol. II, pg. 855-859 for detailed information on world-wide Judaism). The magnitude of the atrocity is almost incredible when it is realized that Haman is planning to eradicate a whole race of people—all because his pride has been wounded by one man! Haman's first assault upon the Jewish people is that they "are all over the place."

Next, he brings up their cultural peculiarities. "Their laws are diverse from those of every people." That is a true statement but it should be qualified. Of course, the Jews had religious doctrines and practices quite different from the heathen peoples among whom they lived. Because the Jews worshipped the One, True God, and had His Divine revelation in human language, their ethics were much higher and their human relationships much more benevolent than that of the heathen. Their laws of diet and dress were directly connected to their religion. Sometimes the religious scruples of the Jews were in conflict with the political ideologies of pagan nations because pagan emperors claimed divinity and required worship from all subjects. When Jews were

left free to worship according to the dictates of their *torah*, they were otherwise good and loyal citizens of any land in which they might dwell (e.g. Daniel, Nehemiah, Ezra, etc.). The Jewish Talmud represents Haman as saying, "They do not eat with us, nor drink with us, nor intermarry with us." Since the Persians allowed all conquered nations to retain their own religious and cultural practices so long as they did not constitute sedition, Haman's information poses no real threat to the security of Xerxes' empire. Haman's next accusation, "They do not keep the king's laws" is, *if true*, a serious threat to Xerxes and Persia. This was not true (except for cases mentioned earlier having to do with Jewish scruples against any form of idolatry). The Jews were law abiding citizens. Many Jews made great contributions in politics, science, the arts and finance in every country where they dwelt. Jeremiah the prophet instructed his countrymen who were about to be exiled into the Mesopotamian area, "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jer. 29:5-7). Rabbinic principle was established from Jeremiah's instructions, "The law of the country in which you live is binding." The Jews were faithful and loyal subjects of the Persian emperors from Cyrus the Great to Darius Codomannus.

v. 9-11 *Payoff*: Haman's rage is so consuming he is willing to pay a tremendous bribe to the emperor. Haman's offer is ten thousand talents of silver. This is a sum equivalent to approximately \$10,000,000 U.S. currency. Herodotus estimated the sum equal to the annual revenue in silver of the whole Persian empire. Haman's offer was probably tempting since Xerxes' recent military fiasco in Greece had drained the Persian royal treasury. When Xerxes gave his signet ring to Haman he was allowing Haman to do what he asked with full sanction and authority of the imperial crown. The immediate response of Xerxes to the request of Haman, without any royal questions or investigations into the ethics or practicality of such genocide, reinforces the

characterization of Xerxes as an immature, quick-tempered, vacillating despot.

Xerxes' reply, "The silver is given to thee . . .," makes it appear that he refused the offer of Haman's ten thousand talents. But Mordecai's report of the incident to Hathach, Esther's attendant, implies that Xerxes did, after all, accept the money (cf. 4:7). What is apparently meant by Xerxes' reply is that Haman is authorized to destroy the Jews and plunder their possessions. The "silver" of v. 11 is the silver of the Jews that shall belong to Haman. Haman's bribe of ten thousand talents may be nearly recouped in his royal mandate to pillage the property of the whole Jewish citizenry of Persia.

Massacre of an entire race shocks the modern western mind. However, the Persian emperor just before Xerxes, Darius Hystaspis, ordered the extermination of the Magi (a whole race of Medes who had rebelled under Cambyses). This great massacre was commemorated annually in Persia. About 100 years before that a massacre of the Scythians had occurred. Recent modern totalitarian tyrants have also attempted genocide on various races and cultures.

C. Sentence of Xerxes

TEXT: 3:12-15

- 12 Then were the king's scribes called in the first month, on the thirteenth day thereof; and there was written according to all that Haman commanded unto the king's satraps, and to the governors that were over every province, and to the princes of every people, to every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language; in the name of king Ahasuerus was it written and it was sealed with the king's ring.
- 13 And letters were sent by posts into all the king's provinces, to destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish, all Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, even upon

the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, and to take the spoil of them for a prey.

- 14 A copy of the writing, that the decree should be given out in every province, was published unto all the peoples, that they should be ready against that day.
- 15 The posts went forth in haste by the king's commandment, and the decree was given out in Shushan the palace. And the king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city of Shushan was perplexed.

Today's English Version, 3:12-15

So on the thirteenth day of the first month Haman called the king's secretaries and dictated a proclamation to be translated into every language and system of writing used in the empire and to be sent to all the rulers, governors, and officials. It was issued in the name of King Xerxes and stamped with his ring. Runners took this proclamation to every province of the empire. It contained the instructions that on a single day, the thirteenth day of Adar, all Jews— young and old, women and children— were to be killed. They were to be slaughtered without mercy and their belongings were to be taken. The contents of the proclamation were to be made public in every province, so that everyone would be prepared when that day came.

At the king's command the decree was made public in the capital city of Susa, and runners carried the news to the provinces. The king and Haman sat down and had a drink while the city of Susa was being thrown into confusion.

COMMENTS

v. 12 Penned: Scribes were specially trained men who were held in great esteem by most ancient civilizations. They not only wrote the decrees of kings but also recorded histories and were often called upon to interpret past precedents and offer advice to kings

in making immediate decisions inasmuch as their whole lives were devoted to recording and studying royal chronicles. Xerxes called for the royal scribes and on the thirteenth day of Nisan (first month, cf. 3:7) and ordered that all Haman had suggested should be written in all the languages currently used by conquered peoples throughout the whole Persian empire. To each copy of the decree that was to be sent to governors and princes of provinces, the emperor affixed an impression of his signet ring in wax (sealed). Thus it became an official policy of the Persian empire that all Jews were to be slain.

v. 13-15 *Posted*: The Hebrew word *haratzim* means literally, *the runners*. The documents were sent out into the provinces of the empire through the Persian postal system. This was one of the outstanding contributions of the Persian culture to the civilizations following theirs—a fast and proficient postal system. The Persian emperor could expect to be in touch with the farthest reaches of his vast empire within one week's time (see Introduction, page 264). Persian mail-carriers were mounted on fast horses and had relay stations every 14 miles, much like the Pony Express in 19th century America.

What utter chaos and consternation such a decree would have. There is an ancient decree of Mithridates king of Pontus in Asia Minor (died 63 B.C.) sometimes cited as a parallel to this shocking decree of Xerxes: "He sent secret order to all the satraps and the mayors of cities that they should within the space of thirty days fall upon the resident Romans and Italians, upon their wives and children and upon all the freemen of Italian origin, and kill them and take their goods as possessions. When the appointed day came, there was wailing and lamentation in the whole of Asia."

The Persian empire (including the Jews in all provinces) had from nine to eleven months warning of the massacre that was to come. Haman had decided action was to begin on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, Adar (Feb./Mar.). Modern Jews keep three days (13th, 14th and 15th of Adar) in connection with the feast of Purim; but they make the 13th a fast to commemorate the fast of Esther (4:16) and they keep the feast itself on the 14th and 15th. We shall discuss the feast of Purim in our comments on chapter nine.

Orders had been officially sent throughout the empire to massacre perhaps millions of people and the emperor and his prime minister sit down to feast and drink. How brutally callous! Well did the apostle Paul describe heathen civilizations in Romans, chapter one, who having refused to have God in their knowledge, become "foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless." The majority of the Persian populace (especially of the royal city, Susa) was perplexed. It was an ominous decree for any citizen to read. If Haman was capable of such ruthless rage against the Jews, he could vent the same rage on any other segment or people within the vast empire of Persia. Perhaps there were also many non-Jews feeling compassion and sympathy toward their Jewish neighbors.

We may learn the following lessons from this chapter:

1. Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely!
2. Racial or cultural distinctives are often used as rationalizations for the real motives (pride, greed etc.) behind hatred and persecution.
3. Some people will compromise even the most fundamental standards of humaneness for a bribe.
4. When people refuse to have the One True God in their knowledge and worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator (Rom. 1), they inevitably harden their own consciences so that they can order millions to be murdered and sit down and celebrate it.

CHAPTER THREE REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Where did Haman come from?
2. Why did Mordecai not bow down and pay Haman homage?
3. Were the Jews not observing the king's laws?
4. In what ways are the "laws" of the Jews different from all other people?

5. How much did Haman offer to put in the king's treasury?
6. When is the month Adar?
7. How could the king's edict ever be delivered and understood by so many different races and cultures within the vast Persian empire?
8. How many Jews were to be killed?
9. What effect did this edict have upon the citizens of Susa?

IV. Pluck of Esther, Chapter 4

A. Cry

TEXT: 4:1-3

- 1 Now when Mordecai knew all that was done, Mordecai rent his clothes, and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and bitter cry;
- 2 and he came even before the king's gate: for none might enter within the king's gate clothed with sackcloth.
- 3 And in every province, whithersoever the king's commandment and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping, and wailing; and many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

Today's English Version, 4:1-3

When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes in anguish. Then he dressed in sackcloth, covered his head with ashes, and walked through the city, wailing loudly and bitterly, until he came to the entrance of the palace. He did not go in because no one wearing sackcloth was allowed inside. Throughout all the provinces, wherever the king's proclamation was made known, there was loud mourning among the Jews. They fasted, wept, wailed, and most of them put on sackcloth and lay in ashes.

COMMENTS

v. 1-2 *Bitter*: The tearing or rending of clothing, putting on sackcloth and throwing of ashes on the head were all actual, though symbolic, rites practiced by Jews (and other Semitic peoples) expressing grief and contrition. The English word is derived from the Hebrew word *saq* which describes a coarse, dark cloth, usually made of goat's hair. It was worn by mourners (II Sam. 3:31; II Kings 19:1-2), often by prophets to symbolize the actions they sought from their audiences (Isa. 20:2; Rev. 11:3), and by exiles (I Kings 20:31). No one seems to know the precise

form of the *saq*. Some think it was much like a loin cloth; others think it was like a burlap sack with openings for the arms and neck. Sometimes the garment was worn next to the skin (Jonah 3:6; I Kings 21:27; II Kings 6:30; Job 16:15; Isa. 32:11) but usually it was worn over another garment. Ashes were sprinkled over a person or he sat among ashes as a sign of mourning (II Sam. 13:19; Job 2:8; Jer. 6:26). Mordecai, having donned the symbolic dress of deep grief, went out into the middle of the imperial capital and began venting his feelings in loud, doleful, wailing which was customary in ancient eastern cultures. The Hebrew word *marah* is translated bitter. It is the same word used by Naomi when she said, "Do not call me Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has afflicted me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?" (Ruth 1:20-21). This is what Mordecai was expressing. The rule that nothing mournful, of evil portent or distressing was to pass through the palace gates and into the presence of the emperor was another of the customs of the ancient east.

v. 3 *Baleful*: The same loud piercing funeral wailings and death cries were heard in every province where Jews lived throughout the vast Persian empire. People fasted and wept and lay in sackcloth and ashes. Literally, the Hebrew phrase is "sackcloth and ashes were spread out as a bed under many." The Hebrew word for *fast* is *tzum* and means *abstain*. Another Hebrew word for *fast* is *'innah* and means "afflict the soul." The word *tzum* is not used in the Old Testament before the book of Judges. Apparently, the original commandment (Lev. 16:29ff) was to "afflict" the soul which *later* came to be practiced by abstinence. It is altogether possible that the original commandment to "afflict the soul" (*fast*) did not necessarily demand abstinence. Jesus made drastic revisions to traditional practices of fasting (Mt. 6:16-18). Fasting or "afflicting the soul" has always had to do with the human need for mediation and intercession before God in times of stress and sorrow. The fasting of the Hebrew people in Persia at this time should certainly be considered as an act of supplication and intercession toward Jehovah for their rescue from the impending slaughter of Haman.

B. Crisis

TEXT: 4:4-9

- 4 And Esther's maidens and her chamberlains came and told it her; and the queen was exceedingly grieved: and she sent raiment to clothe Mordecai, and to take his sackcloth from off him; but he received it not.
- 5 Then called Esther for Hathach, one of the king's chamberlains, whom he had appointed to attend upon her, and charged him to go to Mordecai, to know what this was, and why it was.
- 6 So Hathach went forth to Mordecai unto the broad place of the city, which was before the king's gate.
- 7 And Mordecai told him of all that had happened unto him, and the exact sum of the money that Haman had promised to pay to the king's treasuries for the Jews, to destroy them.
- 8 Also he gave him the copy of the writing of the decree that was given out in Shushan to destroy them, to show it unto Esther, and to declare it unto her, and to charge her that she should go in unto the king, to make supplication unto him, and to make request before him, for her people.
- 9 And Hathach came and told Esther the words of Mordecai.

Today's English Version, 4:4-9

When Esther's servant girls and eunuchs told her what Mordecai was doing, she was deeply disturbed. She sent Mordecai some clothes to put on instead of the sackcloth, but he would not accept them. Then she called Hathach, one of the palace eunuchs appointed as her servant by the king, and told him to go to Mordecai and find out what was happening and why. Hathach went to Mordecai in the city square at the entrance of the palace. Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him and just how much money Haman had promised to put into the royal treasury if all the Jews were killed. He gave Hathach a copy of the proclamation that had been issued in Susa, ordering the destruction of the Jews,

Mordecai asked him to take it to Esther, explain the situation to her, and have her go and plead with the king and beg him to have mercy on her people. Hathach did this.

COMMENTS

v. 4-6 *Grief*: When the queen's servants told her of Mordecai's wailing and mourning and that he had dressed himself in the customary dress of bitterness of the soul, Esther was exceedingly grieved. The Hebrew word is *vatihechalechal* from the root word *chul* which means *writhe, twist and tremble in pain*. Esther was more than curious about Mordecai's public display of grief. He was her father and she has the power and the resources to send him immediate relief in a royal way now. Like any loving daughter, Esther hurts when her father hurts. She is determined to help. It may be also that she sent Mordecai clothing to replace his sackcloth so that he might enter through the palace gate and come to her chambers to communicate his plight. But Mordecai sent the servants back empty handed. He kept his sackcloth on and continued his wailing. Esther's agony for Mordecai was even more intensified and she then sent Hathach, a royal servant of high standing. The Hebrew pronouns (demonstrative and interrogative) are idiomatic, *mah—zeh, mah—zeh*; that is, Hathach was to report back to Esther the "why and wherefore" of Mordecai's public display of grief. Haman and Xerxes would not have confided their plot against the Jews to Esther, even though they did not yet know she was a Jewess. Eastern potentates were not accustomed to counsel with their wives about affairs of state.

v. 7-9 *Gory Details*: Now that he was sure Esther would hear the reason behind his mourning and allow it to continue for the needed impact upon the public, Mordecai told the whole story to Hathach so it could be relayed to the queen. Mordecai related how he had refused to bow down in the presence of Haman; how Haman had bribed the emperor for 10,000 talents of silver; how the emperor had issued a decree that all Jews should be slain because of Mordecai's actions. Mordecai apparently thought the

exact sum of the bribe was important information Esther would need for the intercession he was going to insist from her. Perhaps he felt Esther would be thus equipped to better appeal to Xerxes' conscience. Whatever the case, Mordecai had a copy of the whole royal decree made and instructed Hathach to "declare it unto her." Some infer from this that Esther was unable to read the Persian language. Mordecai charged Esther (the Hebrew word is *tzvah* which is usually translated *command, order*) to go before the emperor and interceed on behalf of *her* people. Whereas Mordecai had before commanded Esther not to make known her racial origin, now he apparently feels that the only significant influence that might be brought to bear to save the Jewish people would be the queen's ethnic relationship to them. This action, as we shall see, would be critical to the very life of the queen herself. Not only would the revelation that she was a Jewess put her life in jeopardy, but even the seemingly harmless act of approaching the emperor's presence without being summoned was to incur the death penalty. Esther had to decide between the crises of her personal danger and the danger to the whole race of her people. Would she be willing to lay down her life for others? Would you?

C. Contingency

TEXT: 4:10-12

- 10 Then Esther spake unto Hathach, and gave him a message unto Mordecai, saying:
- 11 All the king's servants, and the people of the king's provinces, do know, that whosoever, whether man or woman, shall come unto the king into the inner court who is not called, there is one law for him, that he be put to death, except those to whom the king shall hold out the golden sceptre, that he may live: but I have not been called to come in unto the king these thirty days.
- 12 And they told to Mordecai Esther's words.

Today's English Version, 4:10-12

and Esther gave him this message to take back to Mordecai: "If anyone, man or woman, goes to the inner courtyard and sees the king without being summoned, that person must die. That is the law; everyone, from the king's advisers to the people in the provinces, knows that. There is only one way to get around this law: if the king holds out his gold scepter to someone, then that person's life is spared. But it has been a month since the king sent for me."

COMMENTS

v. 10-12 Esther's first reaction was to remind Mordecai of the widely known law of the Persian monarchs about approaching his presence without being given the emperor's personal permission to do so. It was not only widely known but widely respected! The law was that "whosoever, whether man or woman, shall come unto the king . . . who is not called . . . he be put to death, except those to whom the king shall hold out the golden sceptre." Herodotus confirmed the existence of such a law but wrote that were six persons to whom the law did not apply (III. 84. 118). In the *bas reliefs* and other inscriptions of the Persian ruins of Persepolis the Persian emperor is always pictured with a scepter (*sharbit* in Hebrew, meaning, *rod, staff* or *club*) in his hand. The purpose for this law was probably to protect the emperor from assassination and from trivial and inane audiences with every Persian who might have "an axe to grind." Whatever the case, the law had its desired effect; it inspired fear of approaching the monarch unless bidden by the monarch himself to do so. Esther's immediate concern was fear for her life. It is not until Mordecai's sharp rebuke that Esther begins to consider the consequences of opting for her own personal safety.

D. Courage

TEXT: 4:13-17

- 13 Then Mordecai bade them return answer unto Esther, Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews.
- 14 For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then will relief and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place, but thou and thy father's house will perish: and who knoweth whether thou art not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?
- 15 Then Esther bade them return answer unto Mordecai,
- 16 Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast in like manner; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish.
- 17 So Mordecai went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him.

Today's English Version, 4:13-17

When Mordecai received Esther's message, he sent her this warning: "Don't imagine that you are safer than any other Jew just because you are in the royal palace. If you keep quiet at a time like this, help will come from heaven to the Jews, and they will be saved, but you will die and your father's family will come to an end. Yet who knows—maybe it was for a time like this that you were made queen!"

Esther sent Mordecai this reply: "Go and get all the Jews in Susa together; hold a fast and pray for me. Don't eat or drink anything for three days and nights. My servant girls and I will be doing the same. After that, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. If I must die for doing it, I will die."

Mordecai then left and did everything that Esther had told him to do.

COMMENTS

v. 13-14 *Reality*: Esther is human; Mordecai is human. They are ordinary people caught up in the struggle between good and evil, courage and cowardice. Esther's first reaction to the impending holocaust is self-preservation. Others may have to suffer but she will not risk her life in an action that is sure to bring death. Perhaps she thought the problem would go away in time; perhaps she thought she could be of more help to her Jewish people by staying alive as queen than by being a martyr. Surely Esther was not so hard-hearted as to have no compassion at all for her Jewish brethren, especially her uncle Mordecai and his family! Surely Esther was not so totally self-centered that she gave no thought at all as to how Mordecai, at least, might escape the edict of genocide upon the Jews.

Mordecai immediately sent back a message to Esther that would bring her face to face with reality. He reminded her that since she was a Jew too, and that her ethnic origin was now known (4:8), she need not think she will escape the massacre just because she lives in the palace. In fact, once it is known by the emperor and Haman that she is a Jewess and that she concealed this fact while being chosen as Vashti's successor, Esther might be one of the first to be slain!

Mordecai pleads with Esther that she seize her opportunity to be a heroine. Mordecai believes it is divine providence that has placed his adopted daughter in the position of queen of Persia for just such a time of great need by God's people. It is interesting that the word translated *relief* is the Hebrew word *ruach* (usually translated *spirit*). It probably means that, if Esther does not help save God's people then deliverance (*natzal*, Heb.), and the great sigh of relief (*ruach*, Heb.) that goes with deliverance, will come from some other source. If Esther does not seize her opportunity and exercise her responsibility, her father's house will perish and be disgraced. Where did Mordecai get the idea that Esther was probably chosen queen of Persia through providence in order to help deliver her people from their enemies? From God's word! The Jews in the captivities had some of the scrolls of the Old

Testament (cf. Dan. 9:2). Mordecai, as a child, like Jewish children centuries before him, had studied the Old Testament. He knew the providence of God had put Joseph in Egypt to deliver his people from famine; he knew the providence of God had put Moses in the palace of Pharaoh to deliver his people from bondage; he knew about David and a host of other Jewish heroes (even recent ones like Daniel) who by the providence of Jehovah had been put in circumstances and times of great danger. Mordecai knew that at great personal sacrifice these heroes of God had to willingly choose to be used by Him for delivering His people. Mordecai's challenge to Esther was based on the historical certainties of God's past dealings and His promises to fulfill the covenant made with Abraham through the prophets. Mordecai's evaluation of the situation was not based on human possibilities, but upon the certainties of God. The people of God today (Christians) have not only the historical certainties Mordecai had but a "covenant enacted upon surer promises," the historical certainties of the New Testament—specifically the victory over sin in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

v. 15-17 *Resolution*: How soon Esther answered, we do not know. We presume she took time to think through Mordecai's great challenge. One does not decide hastily to lay one's life on the line. Esther's reply is not one based on an unreasoned emotionalism, or arrogant self-confidence or fatalistic desperation; it is the result of searching, rational, earnestness based on Mordecai's warnings and challenge. Esther also believed in God! Her reply to Mordecai must be interpreted in the light of her proposal for a three-day fast. Esther's request for fasting is for the very purpose of intercession and supplication to Jehovah—there can be no other objective in mind! It certainly is to Esther's great credit that she looks immediately to God and not man for help. It is interesting to see that some of her "maidens" (attendants) were godfearing and would intercede to Jehovah through fasting also. Perhaps they were Jewish maidens; but they may have been Persian maidens influenced in the Jewish religion by Esther.

The resolution of Esther is that God's will may be done—she is willing to accept it. Jacob uttered a similar resolution when he

sent some of his sons back to Egypt for release of his hostage sons (cf. Gen. 43:14; "And as for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved."). Jesus decided to fulfill God's will with perfect resignation, "... nevertheless, not my will but thine be done..." (Mt. 26:39). We are told that our prayers, if we expect them to be answered, must be with the same resignation to the will of God (I Jn. 5:14-15).

We should like to close this chapter by quoting the conclusion of a masterful sermon, "If I Perish, I Perish," by our good friend, the late Charles A. Willbanks, preached at the Ozark Bible College Preaching Convention, Joplin, Missouri, February 18, 1959:

"Let us never forget that in this great drama of human history, a time element is involved. Mordecai said to Esther, 'Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?' Esther needed to do something—now!

"Esther had to act at once to save a people committed to destruction. The same is true for us. Unless there are some drastic changes, statisticians tell us that 14,800,000 persons will go to meet their God unprepared before next year.

"The Persian decree for the destruction of God's people could not be changed. It was a cruel, hideous plot which meant only death; and it could not be changed! But another decree was sent out enabling God's people to arm themselves for the battle. We face a similar situation today.

"The very nature of God, which provides freedom of choice, means that sin is present all about us and the wages of it is death (Romans 6:23). The whole human race is committed to destruction, for all have sinned (Romans 3:23). This verdict cannot be changed. But thanks be to God, we can arm ourselves for the battle; we can 'put on Christ'; we can 'put on the whole armour of God, that (we) may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil' (Ephesians 6:11; Galatians 3:27).

"Esther's fears were allayed, her appeal was effective, and her people were saved by her timely intervention. A nation rises up to call her blessed. What, may we ask, will be the cause of gratitude that others may feel for our having lived and faced our own times of decision?"

There is a time element for all of God's dealing with men. Sometimes God reveals the length of that time; sometimes He does not. He gave Hezekiah an additional 15 years of life (cf. Isa. 38:1-8); God gave the false prophet Hananiah two months to live (Jer. 28:1-17). The Lord gave the Jewish nation 490 years from the "going forth of the word to restore and rebuild Jerusalem" until the coming of the Messiah to accomplish God's work and prepare themselves to receive Him (Dan. 9:24-27). The Jews did not receive the Messiah (on the whole) when their time came so God took the kingdom from them and gave it to others (Mt. 21:33-46). We are now living in the "times of the Gentiles" (cf. Lk. 21:24; Rom. 11:11-36). After these times there will be no more time! Generally speaking God has numbered man's life-span upon the earth to be about 70 years (Psa. 90:9-12). Soon they are gone and we fly away. So let us put every day we have, each day at a time, to do what our hands find to do to glorify God and His Son, Jesus Christ.

We may learn the following lessons from this chapter:

1. There are times of rejoicing for those who believe in God (such as at the coronation of Esther); but there may also be times of mourning and supplication (such as at the decree for the slaughter of the Jews).
2. When such times of mourning and intercession are called for, godly people (like Mordecai) will not indulge in selfish release from the need for contrition, even when, in all innocence, suggested by others.
3. Great biblical heroes and heroines were made, nor born!
4. Great biblical heroes and heroines were as human as we are.
5. Decisions to choose or refuse great responsibilities in relation to the will of God should not be made without intercession and supplication.
6. If we do not carry out our responsibilities toward the kingdom of God, God can raise up others who will.
7. Resignation to the will of God is not fatalism.

CHAPTER FOUR

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What does Mordecai's action in putting on sackcloth and ashes and fasting say about the godliness of the book of Esther?
2. What was the original meaning of "fast"?
3. Why did Mordecai feel it necessary to mention the exact sum of money Haman had offered Xerxes?
4. Why did the emperor of Persia forbid people to come in unto him unless he extended the golden scepter toward them?
5. Why would Queen Esther be in danger of losing her life?
6. How could Mordecai believe God had brought Esther to the throne for this time?
7. Why do we conclude that Esther's resolution was not just human fatalism?
8. Is the providence of God involved in the length of our individual lives?

V. The Plan of Esther, 5:1-8

A. Coquetry

TEXT: 5:1-4

- 1 Now it came to pass on the third day, that Esther put on her royal apparel, and stood in the inner court of the king's house, over against the king's house: and the king sat upon his royal throne in the royal house, over against the entrance of the house.
- 2 And it was so, when the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, that she obtained favor in his sight; and the king held out to Esther the golden sceptre that was in his hand. So Esther drew near, and touched the top of the sceptre.
- 3 Then said the king unto her, What wilt thou, queen Esther? and what is thy request? it shall be given thee even to the half of the kingdom.
- 4 And Esther said, If it seem good unto the king, let the king and Haman come this day unto the banquet that I have prepared for him.

Today's English Version, 5:1-4

On the third day of her fast Esther put on her royal robes and went and stood in the inner courtyard of the palace, facing the throne room. The king was inside, seated on the royal throne, facing the entrance. When the king saw Queen Esther standing outside, she won his favor, and he held out to her the gold scepter. She then came up and touched the tip of it. "What is it, Queen Esther?" the king asked. "Tell me what you want, and you shall have it—even if it is half my empire."

Esther replied, "If it please Your Majesty, I would like you and Haman to be my guests tonight at a banquet I am preparing for you."

COMMENTS

v. 1-2 *Reception*: On the third day after Esther and Mordecai had communicated, Esther dressed herself in her royal finery and

stood in the inner court of the king's palace. The author of the account has described perfectly the arrangement of the Persian palace. The king's throne is opposite an open doorway leading into the inner court of the palace. Esther was using all her womanly intuition in simply standing so she might be seen by the emperor instead of sending word that she wished an audience with him. Esther was well aware of the fact that no one gained audience with the emperor unless he invited them! Besides, Vashti had recently been deposed because of her precociousness. Oriental men (and especially potentates) did not look favorably upon precocious wives.

But Esther also knew that the emperor had fallen to her beauty before and it had been over thirty days since he had feasted upon her beauty. Knowing male vulnerability as practically all women do, Esther "prettied herself up" and played the coquet. The emperor saw this vision of loveliness. She was irresistible! Immediately he held out the golden sceptre and beckoned her to enter the royal throne room and approach his royal presence and touch the sceptre. Esther has her audience. Now she must tread even more carefully. She must be wise; she must keep her wits; she must not rush or be rash. On the other hand, her task is not one for the weak or the vacillating.

v. 3-4 *Request*: Esther's beauty coupled with the fact that the emperor had not enjoyed her conjugal presence for more than a month, put him in a magnanimous mood. Actually, it was a customary thing with rulers of eastern empires to take pride in their generosity. Many Oriental emperors vied with one another in giving fabulous gifts to those who pleased them. It was a "status symbol." To refuse the generosity of such a potentate was a serious insult not usually forgotten or forgiven. Herod, tetrarch of Galilee, 450 years after Xerxes, made a serious mistake promising the sensuous Salome "half" of his "kingdom," (see Mark 6:21-28). Herod's motivation for magnanimity is plainly indicated to be pride (cf. Mk. 6:26); we suspect that Xerxes' motive was similar. It is interesting to note also that the emperor offered to grant Esther's request before she made it. That, too, was the custom of the Oriental ruler. Herodotus (9:3) indicates there was one day in the year on which the Persian emperor was

bound by custom to grant *any* request made by a guest at his table.

Knowing the extreme crisis facing the Jewish people, one would expect Esther to *immediately* and imploringly present her request that the order put forth to slaughter the Jews be rescinded. But amazingly, Esther simply extends an invitation to the emperor and his chief of state, Haman, to a merry-making feast (a *mishetteh*; see 1:7-8). Esther is keeping her wits. She will wait, gain time, be sure that she has fully won her way into the emperor's affections before she springs her trap. Her invitation was very unusual. Ordinarily the emperor and the queen feasted separately (cf. 1:3, 9) each in their own section of the palace. For the queen to invite not only the emperor but another male guest was also highly irregular. Esther sets out to disarm Haman by her cordiality. It worked! Haman was very pleased (cf. 5:9). The Septuagint version of Esther 5:1-4 differs so widely from the Hebrew text we have chosen to give an unbroken translation of the LXX text rather than include the variations as comments.

“And it came to pass on the third day, when she had ceased praying, that she put off her domestic apparel, and put on the glorious things she had. And being splendidly arrayed, and having called upon God the Observer and Savior of all things, she took her two maidens, and she leaned upon one of them, in all her delicate femininity, while the other maiden followed holding the train of her royal robe. She radiated the perfect beauty of youthfulness and cheerfulness and grace, but her heart shrank with fear. And having passed through all the doors, she stood before the king; and he was sitting upon his royal throne, and he had put on all his glorious apparel, covered all over with gold and precious stones; and was very awesome and frightening. And having raised his face to look at Esther with all his majestic mien, he looked with intense anger: and the queen fell, and grew pale and fainted; and she leaned her head against the head of the maiden that accompanied her. But God changed the spirit of the king to gentleness, and in intense feeling he sprang from off his throne, and took her into his arms, until she recovered: and he comforted her with words of peace, and said to her, What is the matter, Esther? I am your brother; be of good cheer, you shall not die for our command is openly declared to you, Draw near. And having raised the golden

sceptre he laid it upon her neck, and embraced her and said, Speak to me. And she said to him, I saw you, my lord as an angel of God, and my heart was troubled for fear of your glory; for you, my lord, are to be wondered at, and your face is full of grace. And while she was speaking, she fainted and fell. Then the king said, What do you wish Esther? and what is your request? ask even to the half of my kingdom, and it shall be yours. And Esther said, Today is my great day: if then it seem good to the king, let both him and Aman come to the feast which I will prepare this day."

A sizeable portion of the Hebrew original of Ecclesiasticus (an apocryphal book) has been discovered. This original Hebrew text, compared with the later Greek version of the LXX, shows that the LXX translator had dealt very freely with his original and had, in the interests of a more Hellenistic viewpoint, taken considerable liberties with the original Hebrew. The Septuagint shows a tendency to be more of a paraphrase of the Hebrew original in many places—especially in the Latter Prophets and Poetic Books. The Jews had an especial charitableness toward the Persians since they freed the Jews, returned them to their homeland and restrained those (Samaritans) who tried to thwart the rebuilding of the Temple. The authors of the LXX would wish to put Xerxes in the best possible light even if they must paraphrase here.

B. Curiosity

TEXT: 5:5-8

- 5 Then the king said; Cause Haman to make haste, that it may be done as Esther hath said. So the king and Haman came to the banquet that Esther had prepared.
- 6 And the king said unto Esther at the banquet of wine, What is thy petition? and it shall be granted thee: and what is thy request? even to the half of the kingdom it shall be performed.
- 7 Then answered Esther, and said, My petition and my request is:
- 8 if I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my petition, and to perform my request, let the king and Haman come to the banquet that I shall prepare for them, and I will do to-morrow as the king hath said.

Today's English Version, 5:5-8

The king then ordered Haman to come quickly, so that they could be Esther's guests. So the king and Haman went to Esther's banquet. Over the wine the king asked her, "Tell me what you want, and you shall have it. I will grant your request, even if you ask for half my empire."

Esther replied, "If your Majesty is kind enough to grant my request, I would like you and Haman to be my guests tomorrow at another banquet that I will prepare for you. At that time I will tell you what I want."

COMMENTS

v. 5-6 *Piqued*: It is evident from the emperor's immediate reaction that his curiosity is aroused. He knew that Esther had not risked her life just to invite him to a banquet! Xerxes insists that Haman *hurry* to the banquet. Esther has again used her female wiles to good advantage. Xerxes can hardly wait to find out Esther's real reason for approaching him. The Hebrew text uses not only the word *mishetteh* (drinking bout, see 1:8-9) but also uses the word *yayin* (wine) to describe Esther's feast. It was a party! Xerxes repeats his grandiose promise of half his kingdom if Esther shall request it.

v. 7-8 *Postponed*: Dangerous as it must have been to keep this impetuous monarch hanging on the hooks of curiosity, Esther postpones a second time the revelation of her real reason for violating the sacred law of the Persians about approaching the emperor uninvited. Esther begins as if she is about to divulge her secret request and then cleverly holds the king in suspense. Some think Esther hesitated to state her request because she was afraid. However, as Mordecai has already convinced her, she has little to lose by pleading with the king since she will perish with all her kinsmen once it is known that she too is a Jew. Esther seems already to have committed herself to making the pleas. She knows that, if she succeeds, one more postponement of her real request

will only intensify the desire of the king to please his queen by granting what must be a very spectacular request from her. He may even be thinking about the glory that will be his once this magnificent request Esther has is fulfilled in his imperial name.

We may learn the following lessons from this chapter:

1. God's providential assistance does not preclude Esther's (and our) best use of human capabilities.
2. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.
3. Although the urgency of some situations might seem to call for haste, if time permits one's first reaction should be postponed.
4. There is nothing like piqued curiosity as a tool for manipulation.

CHAPTER 5:1-8 REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How would Esther know where to position herself to be seen by the king?
2. How might she guess the king would grant her an audience in spite of the Persian law?
3. Why was Xerxes in such a benevolent mood?
4. What kind of banquet did Esther hold for the king?
5. Why didn't Esther state her request immediately?

VI. The Petulance of Haman, 5:9-14

A. Depression

TEXT: 5:9-13

- 9 Then went Haman forth that day joyful and glad of heart: but when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, that he stood not up nor moved for him, he was filled with wrath against Mordecai.
- 10 Nevertheless Haman refrained himself, and went home; and he sent and fetched his friends and Zeresh his wife.
- 11 And Haman recounted unto them the glory of his riches, and the multitude of his children, and all the things wherein the king had promoted him, and how he had advanced him above the princes and servants of the king.
- 12 Haman said moreover, Yea, Esther the queen did let no man come in with the king unto the banquet that she had prepared but myself; and to-morrow also am I invited by her together with the king.
- 13 Yet all this availeth me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate.

Today's English Version, 5:9-13

When Haman left the banquet he was happy and in a good mood. But then he saw Mordecai at the entrance of the palace, and when Mordecai did not rise or show any sign of respect as he passed, Haman was furious with him. But he controlled himself and went on home. Then he invited his friends to his house and asked his wife Zeresh to join them. He boasted to them about how rich he was, how many sons he had, how the king had promoted him to high office, and how much more important he was than any of the king's other officials. "What is more," Haman went on, "Queen Esther gave a banquet for no one but the king and me, and we are invited back tomorrow. But none of this means a thing to me as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the entrance of the palace."

v. 9-10 *Disregarded*: The Hebrew text says Haman left Esther's banquet *samecha veytov lev*, i.e., *joyful and good of heart*. He was exhilarated that he had been singled out by the queen for special favor this day and tomorrow also. The Jewish Haggadah also theorizes that Haman thought Esther prepared the banquet in his honor, little realizing that she had set a trap for him. According to the Haggadah, Esther's motive in inviting Haman to the banquet was that he should not discover that she was Jewish, and that the Jews should not say, "We have a sister in the king's palace," and so neglect to pray for God's mercy. Furthermore, says Jewish tradition, Esther thought that by being friendly to Haman she would arouse the king's jealousy to such an extent that he would kill both of them.

But when Haman came out of the queen's chambers he evidently went directly past Mordecai at the "king's gate." Mordecai made no move whatever to acknowledge Haman. Remaining in either a sitting or squatting position, Mordecai ignored the presence of the second most important man in the entire kingdom of Persia. "There is nothing more galling than such utter contempt shown openly in the presence of others" (*Pulpit Commentary*). The Hebrew word translated *wrath* is *chemah* and is more accurately *fury*. Anger raged within Haman's heart. The interesting thing to observe here is Haman's physical restraint. He must have recognized some danger in precipitous and public revenge or he would have seized Mordecai and executed him on the spot. He dared not do anything to jeopardize his new promotion to such high rank. He cunningly held his fury in check until he was on surer grounds. Then he would be prepared to fulfill his hidden wrath on this Jew, Mordecai. Rage, wounded pride and desire for revenge is psychological dynamite. It must explode—either internally or externally. All that is needed is a spark of self-justification and that is often supplied by sympathetic friends or "Yes" men. That is where Haman went. He called in his "friends" and his wife for supportive rationalizations to justify what he had already made up his mind to do.

v. 11-13 *Discontentment*: There is nothing more boring than to have to attend a party given by a man who uses the evening to brag

and boast about all that he has. Of course, if the braggart has the power Haman had, attendance is compulsory.

To be the father of many sons was counted an honor by the Persians (Herodotus 1:136) as with most cultures of the ancient world. We know already that Haman was rich enough to offer to Xerxes an amount of money equal to one year's tax revenue for the whole Persian empire (cf. 3:9). Haman also had been promoted to "chief of all princes." He probably went into great detail as he recounted all these honors. The more he embellished them the more he was sure of his own self-importance. To put the icing on the cake, Haman was even convinced that the queen herself was impressed with his importance. He alone had been invited to accompany the emperor to a place of honor at the queen's banquet. Not once, but twice had the queen invited him.

But Haman was bitter. He could not enjoy any of this. The Hebrew word translated *availeth* is *shoveh* and means *satisfy* or *suffice*. In other words, all the fame and fortune Haman had was not sufficient to satisfy his soul so long as there was one Jewish gate-keeper who ignored his importance! Today we would say Haman had "an identity problem." He suffered from a poor self-image. No matter how much he bragged about his own importance, he really didn't feel important so long as there was one person who did not agree with his own estimate of himself. Haman just could not handle that. It destroyed him. He did not understand that self-respect and respect from others does not accrue from titles but from character! One would come centuries after Haman and teach that the "greatest among men would be the servant of all."

B. Depravity

TEXT: 5:14

14 Then said Zeresh his wife and all his friends unto him, Let a gallows be made fifty cubits high, and in the morning speak thou unto the king that Mordecai may be hanged thereon: then

go thou in merrily with the king unto the banquet. And the thing pleased Haman; and he caused the gallows to be made.

Today's English Version, 5:14

So his wife and all his friends suggested, "Why don't you have a gallows built, seventy-five feet tall? Tomorrow morning you can ask the king to have Mordecai hanged on it, and then you can go to the banquet happy."

Haman thought this was a good idea, so he had the gallows built.

COMMENTS

v. 14 The name *Zeresh* (Haman's wife) according to *BDB Lexicon* is comparable to the name for an Elamite goddess *Kirisa*. One commentator says the name *Zeresh* is probably connected with the Zend word *zara* which means *gold*. Another Hebrew lexicon indicates *poor* as the meaning of *Zeresh*. The Hebrew phrase *Ya'asu* — 'etz means literally, *make a wooden tree*, and is translated, *let a gallows be made*. But the suggestion is not for a gallows upon which a person is hanged by a rope because hanging was not a Persian form of execution. What is meant is either crucifixion or impalement. Fifty cubits high for the impaling stake or cross seems excessive to us. If the cubit is 18 inches, it would make the "tree" 75 feet high; if the cubit is 21 inches it would be 88 feet high. These were not real friends to Haman—they were mere "Yes" people indulging him because of his position. How depraved the heart of those who would suggest taking a life to satisfy the lust for pride and recognition. It is serious enough to consider the taking of human life when a capital crime has been committed, but what reasoning is able to justify Haman's counselors! Lest we think such depravity applies only to those without access to the word of God, let us remember Joseph's brethren, Ahab who allowed Naboth to be slain for a vineyard, David who allowed Uriah to be slain for a woman, and many others who,

even in the name of Christ and His Church, have murdered thousands for pride and pleasure.

There seems to be no doubt in the minds of Haman's friends and wife that Xerxes will grant the petition for the execution of Mordecai. They may have expected Haman to present the petition on the pretense of some accusation of sedition or political rebellion by Mordecai. He might plead with the emperor that such open contempt for his "prime minister" could only lead to contempt for the emperor himself.

Except for the providential insomnia of Xerxes that night and his attempt to put himself to sleep by reading the dry and dusty official state records (6:1) Mordecai would probably have been executed the next day.

We may learn the following lessons from this chapter:

1. We should not be impressed when others do us some honor lest we are tempted to believe everyone should do us the same honor.
2. Respect from one's peers is a result of character, not title or position.
3. Human glory is a hunger that can never be satisfied.
4. Real friends will not suggest actions that are unjust or immoral.

CHAPTER 5:9-14 REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why did Haman leave the queen's banquet with a glad heart?
2. Why do you think Haman refrained from having Mordecai slain or arrested on the spot when Mordecai refused to acknowledge him?
3. What is your opinion of a man who would invite you to his home and then tell you how important he is?
4. If he told you the story Haman told and asked your advice, what would you advise?
5. What was the "gallows" Haman built?

VII. Panic of Haman, 6:1-14

A. Appreciation

TEXT: 6:1-5

- 1 On that night could not the king sleep; and he commanded to bring the book of records of the chronicles, and they were read before the king.
- 2 And it was found written, that Mordecai had told of Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's chamberlains, of those that kept the threshold, who had sought to lay hands on the king Ahasuerus.
- 3 And the king said, What honor and dignity hath been bestowed on Mordecai for this? Then said the king's servants that ministered unto him, There is nothing done for him.
- 4 And the king said, Who is in the court? Now Haman was come into the outward court of the king's house, to speak unto the king to hang Mordecai on the gallows that he had prepared for him.
- 5 And the king's servants said unto him, Behold, Haman standeth in the court. And the king said, Let him come in.

Today's English Version, 6:1-5

That same night the king could not get to sleep, so he had the official records of the empire brought and read to him. The part they read included the account of how Mordecai had uncovered a plot to assassinate the king—the plot made by Bigthana and Teresh, the two palace eunuchs who had guarded the king's rooms. The king asked, "How much have we honored and rewarded Mordecai for this?"

His servants answered, "Nothing has been done for him."

"Are any of my officials in the palace?" the king asked.

Now Haman had just entered the courtyard; he had come to ask the king to have Mordecai hanged on the gallows that was now ready. So the servants answered, "Haman is here, waiting to see you."

"Show him in," said the king.

COMMENTS

v. 1-3 *Insomnia*: That particular night (the same night Haman's friends advised him to petition the king) is indicated by the demonstrative pronoun *hahu'* in the Hebrew. The demonstrative pronoun also seems to emphasize that this was not mere chance, but the active providence of God. "It is among the objects of the writer of Esther to show how the smallest circumstances of life, those most generally regarded as left to chance, work together for good to such as deserve well, and for evil to such as deserve evil." (*Pulpit Commentary*). The authors of the Septuagint apparently were persuaded of Divine providence here for they translated, "But the Lord removed sleep from the king that night . . ." A turning-point in the destinies of both Haman and Mordecai pivoted on what might appear to some as a chance circumstance of a king's insomnia. The Hebrew text reads literally, ". . . the king's sleep fled away." The Hebrew verb *nigera'im* is an imperfect participle and should be translated, ". . . they kept on reading them before the king." He probably expected the monotonous intonation of the reader's voices to lull him to sleep. But his insomnia was providential.

And suddenly they read the official notation that Mordecai had been the informer of a plot to assassinate the king. That startled the king and for the moment he forgot his insomnia. Immediately the king asked what was not only a natural question, inasmuch as it had been his life which had been saved, but one that was also predicated upon Persian law. According to Herodotus (8:85) those who had done great deeds of honor and benefit to the king of Persia had their names written on a special roll of honor and they were esteemed as a special class of people. It would be a serious violation of Persian protocol and law and a great dishonor to the emperor should he not honor someone who had saved his life. So the emperor asks what the record shows about the honor done to Mordecai. The readers reply with a surprising, "Nothing!" It is difficult to guess why such a gross error was ever allowed to happen. Perhaps the emperor had given the order for Mordecai's reward when the event took place and fully expected one of his subordinates to take care of it, but due to some administrative mistake (or perhaps some prejudice against Mordecai) it had never been done.

v. 4-5 *Indecision*: Xerxes, unable to decide for himself, seeks counsel from any official who might be standing in the court of the palace. Xerxes certainly knew how to reward faithful service and give gifts (cf. 3:1, 11; 5:3, 6). Why does he now seek counsel on how to reward Mordecai? The only suitable answer is that the circumstances of the night are somehow under the providential guidance of Jehovah. For, who should be standing waiting in the court of the palace but Haman, archenemy of Mordecai. In fact, the very reason for Haman's presence in the court in the wee hours of the morning, before dawn, was to get the emperor's permission to impale Mordecai on the "tree" that he had prepared for the insubordinate Jew. Haman was obsessed with his rage against Mordecai. It drove him to stay awake all night pacing the floor in the court of the palace, hoping he would have the first audience with the king upon his arising. Haman's obsession to destroy Mordecai trapped him in circumstances which led to his own destruction. This is the way God has ordered the moral structure of His creation. Man has the freedom to choose personal salvation or personal damnation (cf. Rom. 1:18-32). Man can give himself to evil, be obsessed with it, and choose to have it eternally; or he may give himself to righteousness and have it eternally (cf. Rom. 6:12-23). Mordecai chose a righteous life and did good in saving the emperor's life; Haman chose evil and attempted to destroy Mordecai's life. Mordecai was protected and exalted by the hand of Providence; Haman was thwarted and destroyed by the same Hand.

B. Arrogance

TEXT: 6:6-9

- 6 So Haman came in. And the king said unto him, What shall be done unto the man whom the king delighteth to honor? Now Haman said in his heart, To whom would the king delight to do honor more than to myself?
- 7 And Haman said unto the king, For the man whom the king delighteth to honor,

- 8 let royal apparel be brought which the king useth to wear, and the horse that the king rideth upon; and on the head of which a crown royal is set:
- 9 and let the apparel and the horse be delivered to the hand of one of the king's most noble princes, that they may array the man therewith whom the king delighteth to honor, and cause him to ride on horseback through the street of the city, and proclaim before him, Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delighteth to honor.

Today's English Version, 6:6-9

So Haman came in, and the king said to him, "There is someone I wish very much to honor. What should I do for this man?"

Haman thought to himself, "Now who could the king want to honor so much? Me, of course."

So he answered the king, "Have royal robes brought for this man—robes that you yourself wear. Have a royal ornament put on your own horse. Then have one of your highest noblemen dress the man in these robes and lead him, mounted on the horse, through the city square. Have the nobleman announce as they go: 'See how the king rewards a man he wishes to honor!'"

COMMENTS

v. 6 *Immodesty*: Haman was a vain man. He was the kind of man who felt insecure unless he was constantly being honored and flattered. He had to have it. But he could not handle flattery. He no doubt thought his promotion (3:1) and his invitation to the queen's banquet (5:4) were deserved. His pride made him totally unaware of the possibility that anyone else might deserve to be honored by the emperor. The world is still plagued with a few people like Haman. Regretfully, some of them occasionally surface within the Kingdom of God in spite of Paul's admonition, "give preference to one another in honor . . ." (Rom. 12:10). There is a

difference between pride and proper self-worth. It is false humility when we pretend we do not have a capacity that we do have. Proper self-acceptance does not require one to pretend that he has no capabilities; it only requires that he remember that he did not create his capabilities himself. Real humility walks the fine line between self-abnegation and self-acceptance. That is the line Haman could not walk. He could not humble himself and so he could not accept himself unless he was being constantly applauded and honored by others. Immodesty is the result of a twisted vanity. Pride and vanity come from a fundamental insecurity. Immodest behavior and dress are compensations for a vain insecurity.

Haman rationalized that since he had been so deservedly honored in the last day or two, then the emperor must be preparing to honor him further. In Haman's mind there could be no one else whom the emperor would so delight in honoring.

v. 7-9 *Imperiousness*: Haman suggests the highest honors he can imagine; he suggests honors befitting an emperor. Such honors as Haman suggests were rarely given by Persian monarchs. They are not totally without parallel, however, as the writings of Plutarch and Herodotus testify. For anyone to wear royal apparel previously worn by the emperor was, under ordinary circumstances, a violation of Persian law. But Herodotus (7:17) points out that the emperor might, in certain circumstances, allow it. Apparently Haman was audacious enough to suggest that the one to be honored should even ride upon the king's very own, favorite horse. The horse was adorned with some type of royal ornament to signify it was the mount which belonged specifically to the emperor and was ridden by him only. Ancient *bas reliefs* of the Assyrians show king's horses with tall pointed ornaments like royal turbans on their heads. It is doubtful that the "crown royal" is the crown the emperor himself wore since Xerxes would scarcely have allowed such a travesty to be made of the imperial symbol of sovereignty. Actually, the relative pronoun *'asher* in the Hebrew text indicates that it is the crown of the horse rather than the crown of the emperor.

Haman's final suggestion was that one of the emperor's highest

ranking noblemen should be made valet for the one about to be honored. This nobleman-valet will assist the honored one in properly dressing in the royal robes and he will also go in front of the honored one in a procession through the streets of the great capital city proclaiming that the one sitting on the emperor's horse has been signally honored by the emperor himself. A similar kind of honor was bestowed upon Joseph by the Pharaoh of Egypt (cf. Gen. 41:41-43).

There was probably some expression on the emperor's face indicating that Haman's suggestions were pleasing him. Haman's heart was probably beating rapidly as he anticipated the excitement which would soon be his as he rode through the streets on the emperor's horse.

C. Abasement

TEXT: 6:10-14

- 10 Then the king said to Haman, Make haste, and take the apparel and the horse, as thou hast said, and do even so to Mordecai the Jew, that sitteth at the king's gate: let nothing fail of all that thou hast spoken.
- 11 Then took Haman the apparel and the horse, and arrayed Mordecai, and caused him to ride through the street of the city, and proclaimed before him, Thus shall it be done unto the man whom the king delighteth to honor.
- 12 And Mordecai came again to the king's gate. But Haman hasted to his house, mourning and having his head covered.
- 13 And Haman recounted unto Zeresh his wife and all his friends every thing that had befallen him. Then said his wise men and Zeresh his wife unto him, If Mordecai, before whom thou hast begun to fall, be of the seed of the Jews, thou shalt not prevail against him, but shalt surely fall before him.
- 14 While they were yet talking with him, came the king's chamberlains, and hasted to bring Haman unto the banquet that Esther had prepared.

Today's English Version, 6:10-14

Then the king said to Haman, "Hurry and get the robes and the horse, and provide these honors for Mordecai the Jew. Do everything for him that you have suggested. You will find him sitting at the entrance of the palace."

So Haman got the robes and the horse, and he put the robes on Mordecai. Mordecai got on the horse, and Haman led him through the city square, announcing to the people as they went: "See how the king rewards a man he wishes to honor!"

Mordecai then went back to the palace entrance while Haman hurried home, covering his face in embarrassment. He told his wife and all his friends everything that had happened to him. Then she and those wise friends of his told him, "You are beginning to lose power to Mordecai. He is a Jew, and you cannot overcome him. He will certainly defeat you." While they were still talking, the palace eunuchs arrived in a hurry to take Haman to Esther's banquet.

COMMENTS

v. 10-11 *Humiliation*: What a shock for Haman to hear the emperor's order that the highest honors imaginable are to be given to Mordecai, the man he most hated. Haman had not only to see that these great honors were done for Mordecai, he must do them himself! How humiliating! Many of the noblemen of the emperor's court no doubt knew of Haman's contempt for the Jew, Mordecai. Now Haman is about to be publicly abased. It was a bitter degradation but inescapable. To disobey the emperor after he has spent a sleepless night worrying about rectifying a serious default of royal Persian protocol would undoubtedly mean immediate death for Haman. He was instructed to make all haste to carry out every detail suggested. Nothing was to be omitted. He must be Mordecai's valet; he must go in front of Mordecai throughout the streets of the great capital city proclaiming the honor of the Jew who rides upon the emperor's own

horse, dressed in the emperor's own robes.

v. 12-14 *Hysteria*: It is worth noticing that Mordecai, after the parade, put off the royal robes and returned to his lowly place of service at the "king's gate." Most men would have been so intoxicated with the excitement they would have sought more recognition or, at least, promotion. It is interesting, in retrospect, that Mordecai, after saving the emperor's life, did not seek reward or recognition. This sharpens even more the contrast in the characters of Haman and Mordecai.

Haman, mortified and ashamed, fled to his own home expecting to find some solace or security there. He was so destroyed that he put a covering over his face so he would not be recognized as he fled to his house. He had no sooner told the sordid details of his humiliation than his counselors and his wife advised him that Mordecai, the Jew, would ultimately cause his complete fall from power. These "wise men" were probably Haman's official advisors. The TEV translation has chosen irony to characterize the "wise" men, as if they were self-professed wise men. We prefer to assume they were more like the Chaldeans of the book of Daniel — official advisors to kings and noblemen.

Why would these Persians conclude that Mordecai's being a Jew would make it impossible for Haman to prevail in his struggle against him? As a matter of fact, Haman had already secured an edict from the emperor that all Jews are to be massacred (cf. 3:10ff). Perhaps these advisors and Haman's wife were wise enough to see that since Mordecai had been singularly honored (given the highest honors) by Xerxes himself, it would be unreasonable to allow the man so gloriously honored to be massacred. The LXX translated the last phrase of verse 13, ". . . and thou wilt not be able to withstand him, for the living God is with him." Some commentators think the miraculous nature of Mordecai's victorious exaltation over Haman impressed the truth upon Haman's advisors and wife that the Jews must be under special divine protection. Such an impression is not altogether improbable. Pharaoh's magicians were compelled to explain: "This is the finger of God . . ." and the Egyptians cried: "Let us flee before Israel, for the Lord fighteth for them" (Ex. 8:19; 19:25). Jewish

history and scriptures were well known by the “wise men” of the cultures of Mesopotamia and Persia. So the warnings of Haman’s wise men and his wife are based on more than a fear of the shrewdness and expertise of the Jews. The very fact that the Jewish people still existed in spite of all the captivities and persecutions which they had endured must have impressed many thinking people with the conviction that there was some higher power providentially caring for them.

These predictions of Haman’s “fall” before Mordecai must have pierced Haman’s heart with great trepidation. Insecurity breeds paranoia. Insecure people persistently fantasize that others are determinedly “out to get them.” Haman was probably near hysteria from his paranoia. His “friends” certainly did not give him any relief.

We may learn the following lessons from this chapter:

1. The good that we do, though unrewarded at first, will always have its rewards.
2. Evil has a way of obsessing the whole man.
3. Flattery is dangerous; it usually blinds the one being flattered.
4. Inordinate pride is self-destroying.

CHAPTER SIX REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why did the king ask about the honor done for Mordecai?
2. Why was Haman standing in the court of the palace at such an unusual time?
3. Why did the king ask Haman’s advise on how to honor the one who saved the king’s life?
4. Why did Haman suggest such great honors? How great were the honors he suggested?
5. Why didn’t Haman refuse to carry out the order to do these honors for Mordecai?
6. Why did Haman’s counselors and wife say he would fall before Mordecai?

VIII. Plea of Esther, 7:1-10

A. Massacre Disclosed

TEXT: 7:1-6

- 1 So the king and Haman came to banquet with Esther the queen.
- 2 And the king said again unto Esther on the second day at the banquet of wine, What is thy petition, queen Esther? and it shall be granted thee: and what is thy request? even to the half of the kingdom it shall be performed.
- 3 Then Esther the queen answered and said, If I have found favor in thy sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request:
- 4 for we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish. But if we had been sold for bondmen and bondwomen, I had held my peace, although the adversary could not have compensated for the king's damage.
- 5 Then spake the king Ahasuerus and said unto Esther the queen, Who is he, and where is he, that durst presume in his heart to do so?
- 6 And Esther said, An adversary and an enemy, even this wicked Haman. Then Haman was afraid before the king and queen.

Today's English Version, 7:1-6

And so the king and Haman went to eat with Esther for a second time. Over the wine the king asked her again, "Now, Queen Esther, what do you want? Tell me and you shall have it. I'll even give you half the empire."

Queen Esther answered, "If it please Your Majesty to grant my humble request, my wish is that I may live and that my people may live. My people and I have been sold for slaughter. If it were nothing more serious than being sold into slavery, I would have kept quiet and not bothered you about it; but we are about to be destroyed — exterminated!"

Then King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, "Who dares to do such a thing? Where is this man?"

Esther answered, "Our enemy, our persecutor, is this evil man Haman!"

COMMENTS

v. 1-2 *Promise*: The king was anxious to hear Esther's request. She had piqued his curiosity by postponing what was her heart's desire. Now the king repeats his magnanimous promise, ". . . even to the half of my kingdom it shall be performed . . ." for the *third* time (cf. 5:3; 5:8). Note that the king addressed her as "queen" probably tacitly inviting her to make her request great and promising the certain granting of the request.

v. 3-4 *Petition*: In spite of the urgency of the crisis and in spite of every good reason for Esther to be livid with anger at Haman, she controls her emotions and produces the proper protocol in addressing the king. Esther's petition is verbalized in only four Hebrew words, *napheshi bishe'elathi, ve'ammi bebaqqashathi*; translated into English, "my life at my petition, and my people at my request." These are poignant to modern Jews. They have been preserved in Jewish traditional liturgy called the Selichoth. The Selichoth are penitential prayers in the form of liturgical poems recited on all fast days and days of special intercessions and during the "penitential season" which begins before Rosh Ha-Shanah (Jewish New Year) and concludes with the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). Esther showed great diplomatic skill in pleading for her own life first. The revelation that the life of his "favorite" was in danger would rouse any protective instinct the king might possess. Who would dare threaten the life of his queen? Then, perhaps for the first time, the king learned that Esther was a Jewess. She must now acknowledge her genetic origin if she is to secure the salvation of her kinsmen.

She does not hesitate; she does not mince words. She tells the king plainly that she and her people have been "sold" to be slaughtered. Is there an inference in her use of the word "sold" that the king himself is implicated in the massacre about to be executed? — perhaps! What she most certainly does is tabulate the great loss in human resources to the king should this genocide be carried out. Apparently the Jews, even though a people in exile, and technically "prisoners of war," were not looked upon as prisoners but were given privileges of freedom practically equal

to Persian citizenship so long as they did not seek to disobey the laws of Persia. Esther indicates that she, at least, might have accepted a change of social status to that of bondage or slavery for her people. However, she is quick to point out, Haman's ten thousand talents of silver (3:9) would not be able to pay for the economic, intellectual, political, ethical loss to the Persian empire should the status of the Jews be changed to slave. The Jews evidently were making great contributions to the Persian society in all the areas mentioned above so long as they were given rights nearly equal to those of native Persians.

The plight of the Jews is not slavery, but imminent annihilation. Now the king realizes he is not only about to lose his queen, his favorite wife, he is also about to suffer irreparable loss of human resources to his empire if he allows this slaughter to take place.

v. 5-6 *Perpetrator*: Xerxes immediately asks, "Who is he . . ." The Hebrew phrase is literally, "... who is filled in his heart to do so?" He knows very well that Haman secured the imperial decree to exterminate the Jews. There may have been a subtle attempt to make himself appear free of any involvement in the matter. Esther could have justifiably said, "Thou art the man!" He was involved. He accepted the money from Haman and put his royal seal to the decree. But Esther was interested more in saving her people than placing blame. Besides, the king had been told a false story by Haman alleging Jewish insurrection.

Esther put the blame where it really should be — Haman. Her accusation was that Haman was a *tzar* (Hebrew for adversary, persecutor, vexer) and an *'ayav* (Hebrew for enemy) and a *ra'a'* (Hebrew for evil-doer, wicked-one). Esther does not have one word to say in favor of Haman. There were no mitigating circumstances to soften the enormity of his evil intention. His motives were completely wicked.

Haman was afraid. Well he might be. Now he was the condemned, and the Jews his condemners. Now it was his life in the balance. Now he knows how the Jews felt when they heard the royal edict for their massacre — terrified! The justice of the One whose very Nature is Absolute Justice is about to be manifested.

Someday, just as surely as that day of Haman, all the injustices and persecutions and slayings of all the faithful believers of God and His Son, Jesus Christ, will be corrected and vindicated. Final, complete eternal, absolute justice will be executed by the Judge of all the earth. The enemies of God and His people will receive what they have imposed upon God's precious saints. The destruction of Haman and the salvation of the Jewish people is simply another historical demonstration of how the Creator intends to consummate all of history — with justice!

B. Minister Doomed

TEXT: 7:7-10

- 7 And the king arose in his wrath from the banquet of wine and went into the palace garden: and Haman stood up to make request for his life to Esther the queen; for he saw that there was evil determined against him by the king.
- 8 Then the king returned out of the palace garden into the place of the banquet of wine; and Haman was fallen upon the couch whereon Esther was. Then said the king, Will he even force the queen before me in the house? As the word went out of the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face.
- 9 Then said Harbonah, one of the chamberlains that were before the king, Behold also, the gallows fifty cubits high, which Haman hath made for Mordecai, who spake good for the king, standeth in the house of Haman. And the king said, Hang him thereon.
- 10 So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then was the king's wrath pacified.

Today's English Version, 7:7-10

The king got up in a fury, left the room, and went outside to the palace gardens. Haman could see that the king was determined to

punish him for this, so he stayed behind to beg Queen Esther for his life. He had just thrown himself down on Esther's couch to beg for mercy, when the king came back into the room from the gardens. Seeing this, the king cried out, "Is this man going to rape the queen right here in front of me, in my own palace?"

The king had no sooner said this than the eunuchs covered Haman's head. Then one of them, who was named Harbonah, said, "Haman even went so far as to build a gallows at his house so that he could hang Mordecai, who saved Your Majesty's life. And it's seventy-five feet tall!"

"Hang Haman on it!" the king commanded.

So Haman was hanged on the gallows that he had built for Mordecai. Then the king's anger cooled down.

COMMENTS

v. 7-8 *Faux Pas*: The text pictures the king rising with suddenness and anger from the banquet. The banquet is called *mishetteh* of *yayin* or "drinking bout of wine." In the feasts of Mesopotamian aristocracy food was not the main course; the time was mainly spent in drinking and eating desserts (cf. Herodotus 1:133; and Daniel 1:5 — "rich food" RSV; Dan. 5:1-4). The king strode angrily into the palace garden. He had been duped by this Haman who lied to him about the Jews being disobedient to Persian laws (cf. 3:8). He knew his queen was aware he had been duped. Not only so, but he had been tricked into issuing an order to kill his beloved Esther! The king probably felt like killing Haman himself, but he bolted out into the palace garden to cool his anger and consider what he would do about his dilemma. He has issued a Persian law; the law of the Persians cannot be revoked; Haman has tricked him to order the death of his queen along with all the Jews; but Haman is second in the kingdom — his "chief of staff" as it were. What to do?

Meanwhile Haman began discretely at first to request that the queen spare his life. The Hebrew word is *baqesh* and is not quite as intense as the TEV "beg." Since, however, discrete requesting

did not move Esther, Haman proceeds to "fall" upon Esther's couch and implore her to spare his life. Haman knew the king well enough to interpret his actions. When the king rose angrily and strode into the palace garden, Haman knew he was in trouble.

Haman committed a serious *faux pas* (error, blunder, mistake) when he fell upon Esther's feasting couch. Apparently his only intention was to beg Esther to spare his life. He had no sooner fallen down beside her than the king entered the room having returned from the garden. The king's evaluation of what he saw is described by the Hebrew word *likebosh* which means to "subdue by conquest." Actually there is another Hebrew word, *shagal* (cf. Isa. 13:16), which is nearer the English word *rape*. Did the king think Haman was trying to rape her as the TEV translates, or did he think Haman was trying to assault her as if to kill her and thus force her to grant him his life? We think the latter more likely describes Haman's action. Whether the king innocently or deliberately misinterpreted Haman's posture on Esther's couch we may only conjecture. Some think he could plainly see that Haman was not beating or choking the queen and therefore the king deliberately misinterpreted Haman's posture to justify his decision to kill Haman. Whatever the case, the king's mighty eunuchs took it as a signal that Haman was a doomed man and that he should be taken into custody to await execution. According to Roman historians Livy (1:26) and Cicero (4:13) and some of the Greek historians, it was customary to place a hood or covering over the face of a condemned man who was no longer worthy to see the light. The Greeks and Romans must have copied the practice from the Persians.

v. 9-10 *Finished*: Harbonah was one of the seven chamberlains that served in the presence of the king (1:10) and was one of those sent to bring in Vashti. He apparently was well informed of Haman's plot to have Mordecai executed because he knew all about the "tree" 50 cubits high upon which Mordecai was to be impaled. This is the first time we are told that Haman had put the "tree" in the courtyard of his own house. This information adds a touch of sadistic barbarity to the characterization of Haman. He wanted to personally witness the gruesome death of his enemy

Mordecai. Harbonah also knew that Mordecai had “spoken good” toward the king in the past. He knew Mordecai’s persecution by Haman was not justified.

The king cried out immediately, “Hang him thereon!” Haman did not get a trial by a jury of his peers. There were no other witnesses called to confirm his guilt — none were needed. Esther had described him for what he was and the king knew it was true for the king himself had been deceived by the wicked man. Harbonah’s information indicated Haman had a special grudge against Mordecai and had intended to “enjoy” executing Mordecai before the date set by the decree to exterminate the Jews.

But what Haman had planned for an innocent man, turned out to be his own fate — and that justifiably. The writer of Proverbs said, “Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein: and he that rolleth a stone, it will return upon him (Prov. 26:27).” How true! Listen also to the words of the Psalmist, “I have seen the wicked in great power, and spreading himself like a green bay tree. Yet he passed away, and, lo, he was not: yea, I sought him, but he could not be found. Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright: for the end of that man is peace.” (Psa. 37:35-37).

We may learn the following lessons from this chapter:

1. A nation’s best resources are industrious, obedient citizens.
2. Money cannot replace people.
3. Evil and wicked people who would unjustly harm others must be identified.
4. Our actions are not always what they appear to be to those who see them through eyes of anger.
5. The wickedness that men do and the good that men do is often observed by those least expected to have observed it. (e.g. Harbonah)
6. “Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein . . .”

CHAPTER SEVEN

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How many times did the king promise Esther “half the kingdom”?
2. Where, in Jewish traditional literature, is the request of Esther used today?
3. What is Esther admitting when she asks for the lives of “her” people?
4. Why wouldn’t Haman’s ten thousand talents compensate for the king’s damage?
5. If the king knew already who had asked to slaughter the Jews, why did he ask Esther who the culprit was?
6. Why did the king leave the banquet when Esther named Haman?
7. How did the king interpret Haman’s being on Esther’s couch?
8. Why did Haman have the “gallows” erected in his own house?

IX. Proclamation of Xerxes, 8:1-17

A. Mordecai's Reward

TEXT: 8:1-2

- 1 On that day did the king Ahasuerus give the house of Haman the Jews' enemy unto Esther the queen. And Mordecai came before the king; for Esther had told what he was unto her.
- 2 And the king took off his ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it unto Mordecai. And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.

Today's English Version, 8:1-2

That same day King Xerxes gave Queen Esther all the property of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. Esther told the king that Mordecai was related to her, and from then on Mordecai was allowed to enter the king's presence. The king took off his ring with his seal on it (which he had taken back from Haman) and gave it to Mordecai. Esther put Mordecai in charge of Haman's property.

COMMENTS

v. 1 Endowed: When a criminal was executed, everything that belonged to him became the property of the royal treasury. His estate was either used by the king for his own personal pleasure or for the programs of his government. Sometimes the king would make such an estate a gift to those who had been wronged by the criminal. In this case the king gave Haman's fortune to Esther. As pointed out in 3:9-11 Haman's fortune probably exceeded ten million dollars. This was an extraordinary thing to happen to a Jewish woman of the exiles. Some of the male exiles among the Jews became rich (e.g. Daniel), but for a woman to reach such heights of power and property was unheard of.

Haman is called "the Jew's enemy." Haman continued to be

regarded as the prototype of the enemy of the Jews throughout the ages. It became customary to make loud noise in the synagogues to drown out his name whenever mentioned in the Purim reading of the book of Esther. A late 19th century Jewish work of art from Poland pictures Haman leading Mordecai through the streets of Susa. Haman's wife Zeresh, mistaking him for Mordecai, dumps slop on her husband from the window of her house.

From this day forward Mordecai became a high official ("came before the king") and attended the king's court.

v. 2 *Empowered*: The king had retrieved the very important signet ring which he had given to Haman (3:10). He took it off his own finger and gave it to Mordecai. Thus the power so greedily coveted and wickedly used by Haman was transferred to the man he had hated so vehemently. Mordecai could act in the king's name with the same power Haman formerly possessed. And Esther, although she would not want to insult the king by giving to Mordecai what had been given to her, did the next best thing and appointed him administrator of Haman's estate. Mordecai moved into the palatial dwellings formerly occupied by Haman and was thus provided a residence befitting his new position. No doubt, Mordecai ordered the removal of that gruesome "gallows" and the body of Haman before he moved in.

B. Monarch's Reparation

TEXT: 8:3-8

- 3 And Esther spake yet again before the king, and fell down at his feet, and besought him with tears to put away the mischief of Haman the Agagite, and his device that he had devised against the Jews.
- 4 Then the king held out to Esther the golden sceptre. So Esther arose, and stood before the king.
- 5 And she said, If it please the king, and if I have found favor in his sight, and the thing seem right before the king, and I be pleasing in his eyes, let it be written to reverse the letters devised

- by Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to destroy the Jews that are in all the king's provinces:
- 6 for how can I endure to see the evil that shall come unto my people? or how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?
- 7 Then the king Ahasuerus said unto Esther the queen and to Mordecai the Jew, Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and him they have hanged upon the gallows, because he laid his hand upon the Jews.
- 8 Write ye also to the Jews, as it pleaseth you, in the king's name, and seal it with the king's ring; for the writing which is written in the king's name, and sealed with the king's ring, may no man reverse.

Today's English Version, 8:3-8

Then Esther spoke to the king again, throwing herself at his feet and crying. She begged him to do something to stop the evil plot that Haman, the descendant of Agag, had made against the Jews. The king held out the gold scepter to her, so she stood up and said, "If it please Your Majesty, and if you care about me and if it seems right to you, please issue a proclamation to keep Haman's orders from being carried out — those orders that the son of Hammedatha the descendant of Agag gave for the destruction of all the Jews in the empire. How can I endure it if this disaster comes on my people, and my own relatives are killed?"

King Xerxes then said to Queen Esther and Mordecai, the Jew, "Look, I have hanged Haman for his plot against the Jews, and I have given Esther his property. But a proclamation issued in the king's name and stamped with the royal seal cannot be revoked. You may, however, write to the Jews whatever you like; and you may write it in my name and stamp it with the royal seal."

COMMENTS

v. 3-6 *Dilemma*: Haman has been properly dispatched. He is no longer a problem to the Jewish people. However, his wicked

machinations still exist in the form of a Persian decree. Persian laws cannot be changed. So Esther falls at the feet of the king begging him with tears to take royal action and reverse the decree Haman tricked the king into publishing throughout the empire. The king indicated his readiness to do what he could to fulfill Esther's plea by holding out to her the royal scepter. He signaled that he would give her the full force of the throne to help her.

Esther may have had some doubts, now that the king knew she was a Jewess that she would be "pleasing" to the king for she said, "If I have found favor . . ." She also appealed to the king's pragmatic instincts when she said, ". . . and the thing seem *right* before the king . . ." The Hebrew word *kasher* does not mean right in the sense of *ethical* right, but in the sense of *advantageousness, successfulness, propriety*. It is the word used by modern Hebrews to designate *kosher* food, etc., meaning ritually clean, legitimate, or that which is sanctioned. She had earlier cautioned the king that Haman's genocide of the Jews would be economic disaster to the Persians.

But she and her people are on the horns of a dilemma. The law of the Medes and Persians cannot be changed. Not even the king can change what has been decreed and sealed with the royal signet ring (cf. Esther 3:7-15 and Daniel 6:14-15).

v. 7-8 *Deliverance*: The king points out to Esther that he has done what he could without violating a fundamental policy necessary to sustaining the very structure of Persian government. The king has executed Haman, the arch enemy of the Jews, and given Haman's position and power over to Esther and Mordecai to wield. The king cannot, without destroying the very fibre of Persian government, rescind his former edict for the massacre of the Jews. But the king has a suggestion that will not only make possible the saving of the Jewish people but will also keep the most fundamental law of all Persia intact. He suggests, or infers: "It is impossible to grant your request to rescind my former edict, because any edict sealed with the signet ring of the king is irrevocable, and the edict Haman made against the Jews was sealed with my signet ring. However, I have given you the power of my signet ring now. Surely you can, with all the royal power at your

disposal, devise some way to save your people.” The king is apparently hinting that Esther and Mordecai compose another decree that will provide some way for the Jews to counteract the decree authorizing the Persians to attack them. The Hebrew word *tov* is translated *pleaseth* in the ASV, but more correctly means, *good*. In other words, the king said, “You write to the Jews what you think would be *good* for them in these circumstances, and seal it with the king’s ring . . .” So the king repared, in a sense, the disastrous decree made previously by giving both the power and the suggestion as to what to do. This was all Esther and Mordecai needed.

C. Massacre Resisted

TEXT: 8:9-14

- 9 Then were the king’s scribes called at that time, in the third month, which is the month Sivan, on the three and twentieth day thereof; and it was written according to all that Mordecai commanded unto the Jews, and to the satraps, and the governors and princes of the provinces which are from India unto Ethiopia, a hundred twenty and seven provinces, unto every people after their language, and to the Jews according to their writing, and according to their language.
- 10 And he wrote in the name of king Ahasuerus, and sealed it with the king’s ring, and sent letters by posts on horseback, riding on swift steeds that were used in the king’s service, bred of the stud:
- 11 wherein the king granted the Jews that were in every city to gather themselves together, and to stand for their life, to destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish, all the power of the people and province that would assault them, their little ones and women, and to take the spoil of them for a prey,
- 12 upon one day in all the provinces of king Ahasuerus, namely, upon the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar.

- 13 A copy of the writing, that the decree should be given out in every province, was published unto all the peoples, and that the Jews should be ready against that day to avenge themselves on their enemies.
- 14 So the posts that rode upon swift steeds that were used in the king's service went out, being hastened and pressed on by the king's commandment; and the decree was given out in Shushan the palace.

Today's English Version, 8:9-14

This happened on the twenty-third day of the third month, the month of Sivan. Mordecai called the king's secretaries and dictated letters to the Jews and to the governors, administrators, and officials of all the 127 provinces from India to Sudan. The letters were written to each province in its own language and system of writing and to the Jews in their language and system of writing. Mordecai had the letters written in the name of King Xerxes, and he stamped them with the royal seal. They were delivered by riders mounted on fast horses from the royal stables.

These letters explained that the king would allow the Jews in every city to organize for self-defense. If they were attacked by armed men of any nationality in any province, they could fight back and destroy them along with their wives and children; they could slaughter them to the last man and take their possessions. This decree was to take effect throughout the Persian Empire on the day set for the slaughter of the Jews, the thirteenth of Adar, the twelfth month. It was to be proclaimed as law and made known to everyone in every province, so that the Jews would be ready to take revenge on their enemies when that day came. At the king's command the riders mounted royal horses and rode off at top speed. The decree was also made public in Susa, the capital city.

COMMENTS

v. 9-10 *Letters and Languages*: Verse 9 is one of the longest sentences in the Hebrew Old Testament and is, in fact, the longest

sentence in the Hebrew Hagiographa (O.T. books of poetry and wisdom). Haman's decree had gone out on the 13th of Nisan (Jewish first month corresponding to our March-April). Two months later, on the 23rd of Sivan (Jewish third month corresponding to our May-June), Mordecai issues his decree in the name of the king. The revelation of Haman's plot and his execution would surely have occurred shortly after his decree to massacre the Jews had been published. Why then did Mordecai wait two months to issue his decree for the Jews to defend themselves? Probably for reasons of political protocol and subtlety. It would also allow time for better preparations and decrease the margin for political errors to be made.

Haman's edict was not to go into effect until the 13th of Adar (Jewish twelfth month corresponding to our February-March). Mordecai's edict was issued in the third month. There would be ample time for the Jews (as much as eight months or more) to organize themselves, to collect arms and make all necessary preparations to resist the decreed massacre. For the division of the Persian empire see comments on 1:1-2. The empire was composed of about 60 nations. The Persian rulers probably divided these 60 nations into 127 Persian provinces. The edict of Mordecai was sent throughout the whole Persian empire, from Asia Minor on the west to India on the east and from southern Russia on the north to Ethiopia on the south. There were many languages and dialects into which this edict had to be translated. Persian scribes had to be multi-lingual experts. The Jews had not received copies of the edict of Haman ordering their slaughter and were left to learn their danger indirectly from the people among whom they lived. Mordecai took care that the Jews would not have to learn of their right to fight against their enemies second-handedly from their neighbors. He sent copies of the edict to the Jews in their own language.

The Hebrew phrase describing the way in which these letters were carried throughout the empire is: "*bassusim rokevey harekesh ha'achasheteranim beney harammakim*" and literally translated would be, "on horses, riders on swift steeds, male offspring of

royal mares.” In other words, the Persian postal system and the royal palace spared nothing to get the message out with speed and official sanction. The Persian postal system was unique for that era. The Persian emperor could expect to receive mail through it from the farthest reaches of his empire within one week after its posting.

v. 11-14 *Legislation*: Mordecai’s message to the whole empire was that, in the name of the king, the Jews were permitted to organize, unite and prepare to “stand” for their life. They were given permission to resist any aggression by any people. Their resistance could go so far as to “destroy, slay, and cause to perish,” all the power of any people or province that would assault them. The Hebrew word *hatzarim* is translated *assault* and is from a root word meaning, besiege, show hostility, treat as a foe. The edict of Mordecai specifically allows only defensive action. The Jews were not permitted to attack unless attacked. Of course, once the Jews were attacked they would do their best to survive. They were granted the liberty to slay even women and children just as Haman’s edict permitted their women and children to be slain (3:13). The Jews were also granted permission to seize the property of any people who should assault them. Some writers of the past have accused the Jews of aggressive assault upon the Persians on the 13th of Adar but there is no historical evidence to support such accusations.

So, since the edict they carried was a very unusual commandment of the king of Persia, the government’s “pony express” riders made a point to be swifter than they had ever been to deliver the copies of it to every province in the empire. The reason for more haste than usual may have been to provide an opportunity for further communications between the provinces and the royal court in case there might be questions about the authenticity of the edict. It was an unusual edict! Few kings would ever issue conflicting edicts such as these which would allow actual civil war to take place within his kingdom!

D. Multitudes Rejoice

TEXT: 8:15-17

- 15 And Mordecai went forth from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue and white, and with a great crown of gold, and with a robe of fine linen and purple: and the city of Shushan shouted and was glad.
- 16 The Jews had light and gladness, and joy and honor.
- 17 And in every province, and in every city, withersoever the king's commandment and his decree came, the Jews had gladness and joy, a feast and a good day. And many from among the peoples of the land became Jews; for the fear of the Jews was fallen upon them.

Today's English Version, 8:15-17

Mordecai left the palace, wearing royal robes of blue and white, a cloak of fine purple linen, and a magnificent gold crown. Then the streets of Susa rang with cheers and joyful shouts. For the Jews there was joy and relief, happiness and a sense of victory. In every city and province, wherever the king's proclamation was read, the Jews held a joyful holiday with feasting and happiness. In fact, many other people became Jews, because they were afraid of them now.

COMMENTS

v. 15-16 *Passions*: Mordecai was apparently given royal robes to wear signifying his appointment by the king to the position once held by Haman — prime minister. The king probably gave him robes from his own palace wardrobes. A “great” crown of gold was given Mordecai. The Hebrew word for crown here is *'atereth* and not the word *kether* which is used in 2:17 to designate Esther's royal crown of office. Mordecai's crown was one which

would be plainly inferior to the king's crown, but great enough to symbolize his high office. Whereas the city of Susa had formerly been upset and perplexed at the edict of Haman (3:15) to slaughter the Jews, now the city shouts its gladness that the Jews will be able to defend themselves. The Hebrew word *tzahalah* is translated *shout* and is often translated *to neigh* like a horse. The majority of men are possessed of a fundamental sense of justice and right. Only a very few (like Haman) take pleasure in the sufferings of others and are so perverted they have no sense of justice. Most of the people of Susa, even though Persian, would be glad that the Jews would have, at least, the liberty of self-defense.

As for the Jews, there was great rejoicing. The word *orah* means *light* in the literal sense but can also mean happiness, prosperity, truth or passion in the figurative sense. It probably means happiness in this context (cf. also Isa. 58:8).

v. 17 *Proselytes*: The Hebrew text uses the word *rabbim* (from the root *ravav*) and is translated *many* from among the peoples . . . became Jews. . . . One commentator says, "It can only have been a small minority of the population in each city that took this view (becoming Jewish proselytes)." However, the word *rabbim* means myriads, much, abundance, great, vast, so *many* of the peoples did become Jewish proselytes. Jewish commentators are reluctant to admit that *many* uncircumcised Persian subjects from all over the empire actually became Jewish proselytes. One Jewish commentator writes, "The Hebrew verb is a denominative from *Yehudi*, 'Jew.' Since nowhere else, either in the Bible or in Rabbinic Hebrew, is this verb used to denote proselytization, it may be argued with some reason that a better translation is 'took the part of the Jews.' " However, the Hebrew word *mitheyhedim* is a participle; a participle is a verbal adjective. That is, a participle actively modifies the noun of the sentence. This participle indicates that the "many" were *becoming Jewish*. This being the case, *many* who were proselyted to Judaism in Esther's day may have been the ancestors of many who today call themselves Jews. Ezra (2:59-63) found of the approximately 50,000 Jews who returned to Palestine after the exile at least 652 who could not prove they were Jews. According to the book, *The Thirteenth Tribe*, by

Arthur Koestler, pub. Random House, (the author himself a Jew), most East-European "Jews" today are descended from the Khazars. The Khazars were Caucasians of southern Russia who were proselyted to Judaism about 900 A.D. According to Jacob Gertenhaus (in *Christianity Today*, 3-13-70), no Jew today can trace his ancestry beyond 200-300 years backward. Exclusive genetic purity of the Jewish race began to disappear as a result of the Assyrian and Babylonian exile. The many Gentiles who became Jewish proselytes here in the days of Esther is a case in point! Most Jews today are no more genetically pure Israelite than Americans are genetically pure Englishmen!

To be sure, the motive for these myriads of people who became Jewish was not the best. The two edicts from the royal throne made it very apparent that there was about to be a time of struggle and bloodshed. The Jews would have the government's authority on their side (cf. 9:3). Most people would reason that the Jews would probably be victorious and they could be expected to take revenge upon all who had not been sympathetic to them. So many thought the most practical thing to do was to become Jewish.

We may learn the following lessons from this chapter:

1. Civil power may be used for good.
2. The Jews would not have been delivered if Esther and Mordecai had not used some ingenuity of their own in composing a counteracting edict.
3. Sometimes those expensive (royal stables) trappings of government, which seem so impractical, may be of very crucial usefulness.
4. The Lord does not always work miracles to protect the oppressed, sometimes he uses letters, languages, couriers, kings and queens and commoners.
5. Even pagan emperors and peoples recognize the need for the sanctity of human life against unwarranted and unjustified homicide.
6. Not all Jews today were born Jews — many may be descendants of proselytes.

CHAPTER EIGHT

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What did Esther receive when the king gave her “the house of Haman?”
2. Why did she give it to Mordecai?
3. What was the significance of the king giving the ring formerly belonging to Haman to Mordecai?
4. Why couldn't the king revoke the edict of Haman to kill the Jews?
5. What did the king suggest Esther and Mordecai do for the Jews?
6. What did Mordecai's proclamation allow the Jews to do?
7. When the Jews read Mordecai's proclamation what did they do?
8. What did many of the Gentiles in the Persian empire do when they learned of Mordecai's proclamation?

X. Preservation of the Jews, 9:1-19

A. Power

TEXT: 9:1-5

- 1 Now in the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's commandment and his decree drew near to be put in execution, on the day that the enemies of the Jews hoped to have rule over them, (whereas it was turned to the contrary, that the Jews had rule over them that hated them,)
- 2 the Jews gathered themselves together in their cities throughout all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus, to lay hand on such as sought their hurt: and no man could withstand them; for the fear of them was fallen upon all the peoples.
- 3 And all the princes of the provinces, and the satraps, and the governors, and they that did the king's business, helped the Jews; because the fear of Mordecai was fallen upon them.
- 4 For Mordecai was great in the king's house, and his fame went forth throughout all the provinces; for the man Mordecai waxed greater and greater.
- 5 And the Jews smote all their enemies with the stroke of the sword, and with slaughter and destruction, and did what they would unto them that hated them.

Today's English Version, 9:1-5

The thirteenth day of Adar came, the day on which the royal proclamation was to take effect, the day when the enemies of the Jews were hoping to get them in their power. But instead, the Jews triumphed over them. In the Jewish quarter of every city in the empire the Jews organized to attack anyone who tried to harm them. People everywhere were afraid of them, and no one could stand against them. In fact, all the provincial officials—governors, administrators, and royal representatives—helped the Jews because they were all afraid of Mordecai. It was well known throughout the empire that Mordecai was now a powerful man in the palace and was growing more powerful. So the Jews could do what they wanted with their enemies. They attacked them with swords and slaughtered them.

COMMENTS

v. 1-2 *Reversal of Massacre*: For comments on the date for assault upon the Jews see our comments on 8:9-14. The Jews prepared as their enemies prepared and they were surely aware of one another's preparations for they both had nearly nine months to make preparations for the great struggle. Those who hated the Jews and anticipated slaughtering and plundering their families and goods suffered a calamitous reversal. The Hebrew word *shelot* translated *rule* in verses one and two, means more precisely, *prevail over*.

The Jews gathered in "their" cities through all the provinces. This does not mean there were cities set aside for exclusive habitation by the Jews, but cities where Jews had formed an element in the population. It was not the intention of the Jews to provoke hostility by going where they did not belong. They were not the aggressors. They simply knew that for purposes of defense, there would be strength in numbers, so they grouped together in any city or town where enough Jews lived to organize their resistance. They were so well organized and highly motivated "no man could withstand them." They fought with such ferocity, all the people of the Persian empire stood in awe and fear of them. The Jews were faced with the possibility of total extinction. It was all precipitated by personal prejudice and a personal vendetta. There were no great issues of territorial infringements, rebellions, or national sovereignty involved. The war against them was irrational, unjust and genocidal. They had done nothing whatsoever to deserve such murder. Right was on their side. They fought with abandon to preserve their race and to uphold the justness of the cause.

v. 3-5 *Regency of Mordecai*: In addition to the fervor with which the Jews fought against those who attacked them, they had on their side the Queen (Esther) of the empire and Mordecai, prime-minister to the king. Many ruling and administrative officials of the Persian empire *helped* the Jews. One of the reasons behind the aid of the officials of the provinces is their fear or respect for the position of Mordecai, the Jew. Mordecai's

authority was, of course, equal to that which Haman had possessed—second to the emperor. In addition, Mordecai's greatness was much more enhanced and respected because he cared for others and used his office for their sake and not his own glory as Haman had done (cf. 8:2, 15; 10:3). Verse 4 is somewhat different in the Septuagint, reading thusly: "For the decree of the king was being enforced that he (Mordecai) should be reputed in all the kingdom." And, strangely enough, verse 5 is entirely omitted from the Septuagint. The Hebrew word *ratzah* is translated *what they would* in verse 5, but the Hebrew word has more the connotation, *what was good or acceptable, as they saw fit*. The Hebrew resistance was not unbridled willfulness, but they were able to defend themselves against their enemies to whatever extent they deemed necessary. Their enemies were defeated on every hand, but the Jews did not plunder their enemies property—although the Jews had official sanction to do so!

B. Progress

TEXT: 9:6-15

- 6 And in Shushan the palace the Jews slew and destroyed five hundred men.
- 7 And Parshandatha, and Dalphon, and Aspatha,
8 and Poratha, and Adalia, and Aridatha,
9 and Parmashta, and Arisai, and Aridai, and Vaizatha,
10 the ten sons of Haman the son of Hammedatha, the Jews' enemy, slew they; but on the spoil they laid not their hand.
- 11 On that day the number of those that were slain in Shushan the palace was brought before the king.
- 12 And the king said unto Esther the queen, The Jews have slain and destroyed five hundred men in Shushan the palace, and the ten sons of Haman; what then have they done in the rest of the king's provinces! Now what is thy petition? and it shall be granted thee: or what is thy request further? and it shall be done.

- 13 Then said Esther, If it please the king, let it be granted to the Jews that are in Shushan to do to-morrow also according unto this day's decree, and let Haman's ten sons be hanged upon the gallows.
- 14 And the king commanded it so to be done: and a decree was given out in Shushan; and they hanged Haman's ten sons.
- 15 And the Jews that were in Shushan gathered themselves together on the fourteenth day also of the month of Adar, and slew three hundred men in Shushan; but on the spoil they laid not their hand.

Today's English Version, 9:6-15

In Susa, the capital city itself, the Jews killed five hundred people. Among them were the ten sons of Haman son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews: Parshandatha, Dalphon, Aspatha, Poratha, Adalia, Aridatha, Parmashta, Arisai, Aridai, and Vaizatha. However, there was no looting.

That same day the number of people killed in Susa was reported to the king. He then said to Queen Esther, "In Susa alone the Jews have killed five hundred people, including Haman's ten sons. What must they have done out in the provinces! What do you want now? You shall have it. Tell me what else you want, and you shall have it."

Esther answered, "If it please Your Majesty, let the Jews in Susa do again tomorrow what they were allowed to do today. And have the bodies of Haman's ten sons hung from the gallows." The king ordered this to be done, and the proclamation was issued in Susa. The bodies of Haman's ten sons were publicly displayed. On the fourteenth day of Adar the Jews of Susa got together again and killed three hundred more people in the city. But again, they did no looting.

COMMENTS

v. 6-10 *Names*: The Masoretic text requires that the names of the ten sons of Haman be written in a perpendicular column on

the right-hand side of the page, with the *vav* ("and"), on the left-hand side. The origin of this may be from the tradition that the ten sons were hanged on a tall stake, one above the other. It is also traditional that when the book of Esther is read at Purim celebration, the names of the ten sons plus the word "ten" are all to be read in one breath, because, as the Talmud states, "they all died together."

All the names except Adalia have Persian meanings: Parshandatha means "given to Persia"; Dalphon means "arrogant"; Aspatha means "horse"; Poratha means "having many chariots"; Aridatha means "liberal"; Parmashta means "greatest"; Arisai means "to conquer"; Aridai means "to give"; and Vaizatha means "strong as the wind." Since much of the book of Esther has as its source the royal chronicles, the author was probably impressed with the importance of these ten sons of the former prime-minister and decided such documentation would be beneficial for all subsequent readers. The listing of the names certainly fits in with the precise and exact character of the whole book of Esther.

In verse 10 we are told that the Jews did not lay their hands on the property of those they killed. The edict given by Haman (3:13) was that the Jewish victims should have their property plundered. When Xerxes allowed Mordecai to give official permission to the Jews to resist the massacre, permission was also given (8:11) to plunder the property of their attackers. The fact that the Jews did *not* seize the property of those they killed in their resistance is mentioned a number of times (9:10, 15, 16) in order to emphasize that they were concerned only with defending themselves. They were not motivated by greed in the grizzly work of lethally defending their lives.

v. 11-15 Numbers: The king received an official report of the number slain. It was customary even in ancient days to keep a "body count." In the Babylonian transcript of the Behistun Inscription the numbers of those slain in battle are given with precise exactness (546, 2024, 4203, etc.). The king was careful to keep himself informed on the progress of the resistance. Because of this, the Jews knew they were not left to kill indiscriminately.

The area of the hill where the palace complex stood was more than 100 acres. Archaeologists have found the ruins of many

houses in this area. It was probably densely populated. It is not at all improbable that 500 men (9:6) would be slain in their attempt to attack the Jews within the palace complex itself.

When the king heard the number slain within the walls of the acropolis (hill area), he immediately informed Esther (probably to prove to her that he most certainly had the best interests of his queen and her people at heart). He also knew this initial success of the Jewish resistance would not be all that was needed to wipe out the violence aimed at the Jews. So the king offers further assistance to whatever extent his queen has determined to be needful.

Perhaps Mordecai had information that a second day of purging the city of those plotting violence against the Jews would be necessary, Susa was, after all, the chief capital and would naturally be the center of anti-Jewish violence. Mordecai knew how matters really stood, and as prime-minister advised the queen of Persia, that another day would be necessary to rid the capital city of the avowed murderers. It is really doubtful that Esther would have made this request for another day without the prompting of Mordecai. The request for making the dead bodies of Haman's sons public spectacles was to provide a strong deterrent to any non-Jews who had not participated in the violence but might be contemplating it! Capital punishment of those convicted of capital crimes is both biblical and practical. Capital punishment serves not only as a deterrent but also produces a proper execution of justice (see our Special Study, "The Christian and War," *Isaiah, Vol. II*, pg. 72, College Press).

Ancient cities usually consisted of a walled portion (sometimes with an acropolis or hill where the governmental complex stood) and an unwalled portion. Many people lived in houses outside the city walls and usually fled inside the walls when sufficiently warned in advance of an enemy's approach. The 300 slain (9:14) on the day following the slaying of the initial 500 were probably people residing outside the palace complex, perhaps outside the walls of Susa. The necessity of taking two days in the capital city of Susa to dispatch all those who would attack the Jews apparently resulted in a difference in days of celebrating the victory (cf. 9:19). The Jews of Susa could not "rest" on the 14th of Adar with those in other places of the empire for they had to continue their struggle against their foes on that day.

C. Peace

TEXT: 9:16-19

- 16 And the other Jews that were in the king's provinces gathered themselves together, and stood for their lives, and had rest from their enemies, and slew of them that hated them seventy and five thousand; but on the spoil they laid not their hand.
- 17 This was done on the thirteenth day of the month Adar; and on the fourteenth day of the same they rested, and made it a day of feasting and gladness.
- 18 But the Jews that were in Shushan assembled together on the thirteenth day thereof, and on the fourteenth thereof; and on the fifteenth day of the same they rested, and made it a day of feasting and gladness.
- 19 Therefore do the Jews of the villages, that dwell in the un-walled towns, make the fourteenth day of the month Adar a day of gladness and feasting, and a good day, and of sending portions one to another.

Today's English Version, 9:16-19

The Jews in the provinces also organized and defended themselves. They rid themselves of their enemies by killing seventy-five thousand people who hated them. But they did no looting. This was on the thirteenth day of Adar. On the next day, the fourteenth, there was no more killing, and they made it a joyful day of feasting. The Jews of Susa, however, made the fifteenth a holiday, since they had slaughtered their enemies on the thirteenth and fourteenth and then stopped on the fifteenth. This is why Jews who live in small towns observe the fourteenth day of the month of Adar as a joyous holiday, a time for feasting and giving gifts of food to one another.

COMMENTS

v. 16-17 *Cessation*: Out in the "provinces" (which included the entire Persian empire—from Asia Minor to India) the Jews

organized and mobilized themselves. With the help of the Persian officials who had Persian and provincial troops at their command, the Jews killed 75,000 people who had attacked them on the 13th day of Adar. The LXX has the number 15,000 here rather than 75,000 and some critics have declared the Hebrew text to be "incredible." Rawlinson says that the number 75,000 is believable. When one considers the vastness of the empire, the wide dispersion of the Jewish communities within that empire, the fact that the Persian officials throughout the empire gave aid to the Jews (probably with their troops), and the fact that the Persian officials were not all that careful to preserve the lives of "provincials;" one must admit that the number 75,000 is more credible than 15,000. The Jews killed 800 in the city of Susa alone. Multiply that number by 94 cities and you have slightly over 75,000. Do not forget there were 127 *provinces* in the empire (8:9). The author repeats the fact that the Jews did not plunder the properties of their dead enemies.

They needed only one day out in the provinces to kill all those who hated them; that was all done on the 13th of Adar (February-March). On the day following (while the Jews in the capital city of Susa were still fighting) these Jews of the provinces "rested" and declared a holiday. The Hebrew word *nucha* is translated *rest*. *Nucha* is more generic than *shavat* (Sabbath). *Nucha* connotes physical repose and tranquility while *shavat* denotes the legislative, ceremonial, spiritual rest.

v. 18-19 *Celebration*: The circumstances of the struggle within the city of Susa (two days duration) resulted in a difference regarding the date of the day of rejoicing between the Jews of the capital city Susa, and the Jews of the provinces. The Jews of Susa could not "rest" until the third day which was the 15th of Adar; the provincial Jews rested on the 14th of Adar. When Esther and Mordecai attempted to set up a national celebration for this great deliverance some difficulty arose as to which day would be set aside for all Jews to commemorate it. It was diplomatically decided that both days would be kept (9:21).

We may learn the following lessons from this chapter:

1. When justice and truth is on the side of a people, they command the respect of reasonable men.

2. The forces of human government are ordained of God as tools for preservation of ordered society.
3. The consequences of a man's evil is often suffered by his offspring.
4. While it may be ethical to preserve the sanctity of human life by force, it is not ethical to take by force another's property.
5. Memorializing great victories of justice with holidays has didactic benefit for future generations.

CHAPTER 9:1-9

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is the purpose of the Jews "gathering" in their cities?
2. How did the princes and satraps and governors help the Jews?
3. How far did the Jews go in destroying those who hated them?
4. What is peculiar about the Masoretic listing of the ten sons of Haman?
5. Why did Esther ask for a second day for killing those who hated the Jews?
6. What does the exactness of the names and numbers of those slain say about the source of the book of Esther?
7. Why were there two days for the celebration of the feast of Purim?

XI. Purim Instituted, 9:20-32

A. Practiced

TEXT: 9:20-22

- 20 And Mordecai wrote these things, and sent letters unto all the Jews that were in all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus, both nigh and far,
- 21 to enjoin them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar, and the fifteenth day of the same, yearly,
- 22 as the days wherein the Jews had rest from their enemies, and the month which was turned unto them from sorrow to gladness, and from mourning into a good day; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, and of sending portions one to another, and gifts to the poor.

Today's English Version, 9:20-22

Mordecai had these events written down and sent letters to all the Jews, near and far, throughout the Persian Empire, telling them to observe the fourteenth and fifteenth days of Adar as holidays every year. These were the days on which the Jews had rid themselves of their enemies; this was a month that had been turned from a time of grief and despair into a time of joy and happiness. They were told to observe these days with feasts and parties, giving gifts of food to one another and to the poor.

COMMENTS

v. 20-22: Mordecai's proclamation settled the issue of which Jews would keep which days of the Feast of Purim; all Jews were to keep it both days. At the time of Josephus it appears the Jews were uniformly keeping Purim (Antiq. VI:13). In Hasmonean times the feast was known as the "Day of Mordecai" (II Macc. 15:36). The day is still kept by Jews all over the world. Purim is classified as a "minor" festival and work is permitted on its day.

There is a Yiddish saying that as a high temperature does not denote serious illness neither is Purim a festival.

The main feature of Purim is the unique chanting (different than the Pentateuch or the Haphtarah) of the Megillah (scroll) of Esther both evening and morning, with its accompanying blessings and hymns. The four verses of "redemption" (2:5; 8:15-16; 10:3) are read in louder voice than the other verses. It is customary for the children to hiss and boo and stamp their feet and make noises with specially made rattles every time the name of Haman is mentioned. When the name of Esther or Mordecai is mentioned they cheer. At some celebrations an effigy of Haman is burned. At least two "portions" of food (often confectionery) is sent to a friend, and one must give a present of money to at least two poor men. A special festive meal is eaten on Purim evening of boiled beans and peas (commemorating Daniel's "pulse" diet, Dan. 1:12), and three-cornered pies known as *hamantaschen* ("Haman's ears"). One Jewish-Babylonian teacher named Rava has said that a man is obliged to drink so much wine on Purim that he becomes incapable of knowing whether he is cursing Haman or blessing Mordecai. The more ascetic-minded rabbis tried to explain this away, but liberal imbibing of alcohol is generally encouraged on Purim. Among the masses it became almost a general rule that "on Purim everything is allowed." It became customary to have plays and carnivals on the day and people dressed up in costumes, fancy dress, masquerading and often times men were dressed as women and women dressed as men.

B. Perpetuated

TEXT: 9:23-28

- 23 And the Jews undertook to do as they had begun, and as Mordecai had written unto them;
- 24 because Haman the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy

- them, and had cast Pur, that is, the lot, to consume them, and to destroy them;
- 25 but when the matter came before the king, he commanded by letters that his wicked device, which he had devised against the Jews, should return upon his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows.
- 26 Wherefore they called these days of Purim, after the name of Pur. Therefore, because of all the words of this letter, and of that which they had seen concerning this matter, and that which had come unto them,
- 27 the Jews ordained, and took upon them, and upon their seed, and upon all such as joined themselves unto them, so that it should not fail, that they would keep these two days according to the writing thereof, and according to the appointed time thereof, every year;
- 28 and that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, every family, every province, and every city; and that these days of Purim should not fail from among the Jews, nor the remembrance of them perish from their seed.

Today's English Version, 9:23-28

So the Jews followed Mordecai's instructions, and the celebration became an annual custom.

Haman son of Hammedatha — the descendant of Agag and the enemy of the Jewish people — had cast lots ("purim," they were called) to determine the day for destroying the Jews; he had planned to wipe them out. But Esther went to the king, and the king issued written orders with the result that Haman suffered the fate he had planned for the Jews — he and his sons were hanged from the gallows. That is why the holidays are called Purim, the word for "lots." Because of Mordecai's letter and because of all that had happened to them, the Jews made it a rule for themselves, their descendants, and anyone who might become a Jew, that at the proper time each year these two days would be regularly

observed according to Mordecai's instructions. It was resolved that every Jewish family of every future generation in every province and every city should remember and observe the days of Purim for all time to come.

COMMENTS

v. 23-26a *Symbolism*: Among the more esoteric and mystical Jews (known as the *Kabbalists*) and the modern *hassidim*, much is made of Purim as the celebration "of God at work, as it were, behind the scenes," unlike Passover which celebrates God's more direct intervention. The "lots" of Purim are compared with the "lots" cast on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:8), so what men call "fate" or "luck" is, in reality, a manifestation of Jehovah's providential care.

It does appear from the text (9:26) that the reason the festival is named Pur ("lots") is because Haman's "lots" turned out to be his undoing. On the basis of God's redemptive deliverance documented in the past, it would be logical for any believing Jew to think that the massacre planned through the casting of lots by Haman was reversed by the providence of God as He worked "behind the scenes."

v. 26b-28 *Solemnity*: This feast was not commanded by the Law and was, in fact, legislated by a Jew who had chosen to remain among the Diaspora. It is interesting that the feast was accepted and perpetuated among the more rigidly conservative Jews who returned to Judea after the captivities. But apparently Joiakim, High Priest at that time (Neh. 12:10-12), must have given his approval to the feast and adopted it into the ritual of the nation; or it would not have become so universally accepted and perpetuated.

Mordecai must have taken special care to impress on all Jews through the whole world of that day the solemnity of the reason for the holiday and the imperative need for its perpetuation for all succeeding generations or it would have long since fallen into disuse. It is still observed by most Jews today. The *Adloyada*

carnival in Tel Aviv has been a prominent feature of Purim observance in modern Israel. The words *ad de-lo yada* mean, "Until one no longer knows the difference" between "Blessed be Mordecai" and "Cursed be Haman."

C. Posted

TEXT: 9:29-32

- 29 Then Esther the queen, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew, wrote with all authority to confirm this second letter of Purim.
- 30 And he sent letters unto all the Jews, to the hundred twenty and seven provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, with words of peace and truth,
- 31 to confirm these days of Purim in their appointed times, according as Mordecai the Jew and Esther the queen had enjoined them, and as they had ordained for themselves and for their seed, in the matter of the fastings and their cry.
- 32 And the commandment of Esther confirmed these matters of Purim; and it was written in the book.

Today's English Version, 9:29-32

Then Queen Esther, the daughter of Abihail, along with Mordecai, also wrote a letter, putting her full authority behind the letter about Purim, which Mordecai had written earlier. The letter was addressed to all the Jews, and copies were sent to all the 127 provinces of the Persian Empire. It wished the Jews peace and security and directed them and their descendants to observe the days of Purim at the proper time, just as they had adopted rules for observance of fasts and times of mourning. This was commanded by both Mordecai and Queen Esther. Esther's command, confirming the rules for Purim, was written down on a scroll.

COMMENTS

v. 29-32: Apparently Mordecai's first letter was more in the form of suggestions about commemorating their deliverance with a day of festivities. The suggestions having been approved and adopted by the Jews of the whole Persian empire, both Mordecai and Esther now lead the prestige of their official proclamation to the Feast of Purim.

Included in these official letters from the queen and the prime-minister of all Persia were declarations of peace and pledges of truth. This seems to be a proclamation to the whole Persian empire that the violence is over and there will now be peace (especially for the Jews) based on truth so long as Esther and Mordecai retain their positions of authority and power.

Verse 31 suggests that the Jews of the provinces had added to their form of commemorating Purim certain observances with respect to *fasting* and *wailing* (probably mourning the Jews killed in the struggle). The letters of Mordecai confirmed their practices as *kosher*, (acceptable).

Some commentators think *the book* of verse 32 is the Book of Esther. Others think it means nothing more than "it was committed to writing." We think it probably refers to the documentation of this empire-wide Jewish observance in the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia (cf. 2:23; 6:1; 10:2).

We may learn the following lessons from this chapter:

1. What may be intended as a very spiritual festivity may be turned into mere festivity.
2. It is probably better not to institute religious observances where the revealed Word of the Lord has not instituted them.
3. One of the best ways to express gratitude for providential deliverance is to give to the poor.
4. There is precedent from past historical deliverances by the providence of God that men may expect His providence to be working in the vindication of truth and justice in events throughout history.

CHAPTER 9:20-32
REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How did Mordecai settle the issue of which day would be kept as a feast day?
2. What are "Haman's ears"?
3. Why did the Jews name the feast, Purim?
4. Why do you think the Jews of all ages have perpetuated the feast of Purim inasmuch as it is not in the O.T. Law?
5. What was the point of Mordecai and Esther sending a second letter concerning the feast of Purim?

XII. Postscript, 10:1-3

TEXT: 10:1-3

- 1 And the king Ashasuerus laid a tribute upon the land, and upon the isles of the sea.
- 2 And all the acts of his power and of his might, and the full account of the greatness of Mordecai, whereunto the king advanced him, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia?
- 3 For Mordecai the Jew was next unto king Ahasuerus, and great among the Jews, and accepted of the multitude of his brethren, seeking the good of his people, and speaking peace to all his seed.

Today's English Version, 10:1-3

King Xerxes imposed forced labor on the people of the coastal regions of his empire as well as on those of the interior. All the great and wonderful things he did as well as the whole story of how he promoted Mordecai to high office, are recorded in the official records of the kings of Persia and Media. Mordecai the Jew was second in rank only to King Xerxes himself. He was honored and well-liked by his fellow Jews. He worked for the good of his people and for the security of all their descendants.

COMMENTS

10:1-3: The natural conclusion of the Book of Esther would be the establishment of the Feast of Purim (ch. 9). This chapter is probably added by the author out of gratitude to Mordecai's great courage and beneficence. The postscript emphasizes the power of Ahasuerus (Xerxes) in order to reflect on the power and authority of Mordecai since the Jew stood next to the emperor himself in power and authority. If Xerxes could command the service of the continent of Asia and the coast of the Mediterranean, then Mordecai's power and command was that all-encompassing too. The author cannot bring himself to lay down

his pen until he has recorded for all posterity the greatness of Mordecai. And well he should record it!

The full account of the greatness of Xerxes, and the emperor's promotion of Mordecai, was recorded in the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia. But those chronicles have perished with the dust of ancient empires. The only records we have of Xerxes are those of the Greeks and the Book of Esther. The greatest of men are soon forgotten.

The Hebrew word *mas* is translated *tribute* but means *a body of forced laborers* (cf. I Kings 5:27; Jos. 17:13; II Sam. 20:24; Ex. 1:11). In his expedition into Greece, Xerxes lost the islands of the Aegean, but he still held Asia Minor and some of the islands of the Mediterranean and all its coastland except North Africa. In all these territories he imposed forced labor on his subjects, probably to recoup some of the losses he suffered in his debacle in Greece.

It is certainly not unusual for a Jew to be promoted to a very high position in a Gentile government (cf. Gen. 41:40; Dan. 5:7; 6:3, etc.). This Jew, Mordecai, has won for himself the name of a great and good statesman. So the real measure of Mordecai's greatness after all is not power but the beneficent use of that power for the good of others. That is the measure of every man. In his high position Mordecai did not forget his kinsmen, but constantly labored for their good and their peace (*shalom*—prosperity, well-being, wholeness).

“Little children, let no one deceive you. He who does right is righteous, as he is righteous . . . he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.”
I John 3:7 and 4:20

“Whoever would be great among you must be your servant . . .”
Mt. 20:26

