

## **The Old Testament For Grown Ups** **Lesson 70 – Introduction to Ezra, Nehemiah, & Esther**

### **Introduction**

Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther conclude that portion of the Old Testament canon known as the historical books. They continue to tell the history of God's people during the postexilic period. Ezra and Nehemiah record the events of the return from exile and the restoration of Judah. Esther illustrates how the faithfulness and courage of a single Jew made a difference in the world in which she lived. These books have a common origin in the Persian period. They share a postexilic perspective on God's relationship with his people and a hope of future blessings.

These books are different in many ways. Ezra-Nehemiah is anchored in historical facts. The author used lists, records, royal edicts, memoirs, and the like to present his history of the restoration period. Esther, however, is an artfully written story that communicates through the skillful use of dialogue, intricate plot, and elaborate characterization. The author of Esther does not intend to record a documented historical account. Rather, the book of Esther engages the reader through the subtlety of relationships and faithfulness to God.

In this way, these books from the Persian period complement each other. Esther's secular atmosphere balances Ezra-Nehemiah's piety. Ezra-Nehemiah's historical details offset Esther's entertaining story line. Esther's view from the exile in Persia counters Ezra-Nehemiah's loyal devotion to the Jewish homeland. Although written with drastically different styles and purposes, these books share a common perspective. They are interested in God's continued blessings on the covenant community.

### **Ezra & Nehemiah**

The purpose of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah is to show the numerous ways that God was faithfully at work in restoring the people of Israel to their land after the Babylonian exile. God providentially brought favor with the Persian rulers and helped the Israelites overcome the obstacles presented by their enemies as they rebuilt the temple and walls of Jerusalem and established the Law of Moses as the foundation of society.

The books cover the time period from the first return (539/8 B.C.) to the end of the fifth century, but especially from 458 to 430, during the reign of Artaxerxes of Persia. Just as with Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, which appear in our English Bibles as separate books, originally formed one book in the Hebrew Bible. They were not separated until well into the Christian era. You will do well to read them together, since they do in fact tell one story, not two.

### **Structure of Ezra and Nehemiah**

Ezra 1:1—6:22 Return from exile and rebuilding the temple

Ezra 7:1—8:36 The Return of Ezra and others to Jerusalem

Ezra 9:1—10:44 The Crisis of mixed marriages

Neh. 1:1—7:73 Rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem under Nehemiah's Governorship

Neh. 8:1—10:39 The Covenant renewal

Neh. 11:1—13:31 Dedication of walls, and further reforms

In Ezra and Nehemiah, we have a series of "3's". Three parallel accounts, three major sections, three main characters, three movements, three forms of oppositions, and three results.

- **Ezra 1-6** Zerubbabel leads the first wave of exiles back from Babylon (with mixed results)
- **Ezra 7-10** Ezra attempts a spiritual revival among the returned exiles (again, with mixed results)
- **Nehemiah 1-7** Nehemiah leads the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls (with mixed results)

Each of these accounts follow a certain parallel. First, they each begin with a Persian king moved by God to send a leader to Jerusalem and offers resources and support. Then each leader encounters opposition in their efforts which they overcome, but thirdly, each end with a strange anti-climax to their story.

**Ezra 1-6** picks up about 50 years after the exile and tells of Zerubbabel. Cyrus, king of Persia is moved by God to allow a group of exiles to return to Jerusalem with the task of rebuilding the Temple. This is seen as fulfilling a prophecy made by the prophet Jeremiah in Jeremiah 25 that God would return the people to the land.

Zerubbabel's name means 'planted in Babylon' and represents the generation born in Babylonian captivity. After he leads the exiles back to the land, they settle there and rebuild the altar and begin to offer sacrifices. They would go on to rebuild the temple along with a foundation laying ceremony and the temple's final dedication (which should recall powerful past stories of the Tabernacle and Temple dedications – Leviticus 9, 1 Kings 8). However, unlike previous ceremonies, this one doesn't have the amazing power of God's tangible presence filling the temple, which causes sadness in some of the elders who had previously seen Solomon's temple as they begin to cry out in grief.

It's here in chapter 4 that we get the first story of opposition. Others living in the land (not of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin) come to offer help in rebuilding the temple but Zerubbabel refuses their help. When this happens the people began to discourage the Jews and bribe officials to work against them. This matter was finally settled and the people finished dedicating the temple.

**Ezra 7-10** takes place about 60 years later when Ezra arrives in Jerusalem to teach the Torah and rebuild the community of faith. Ezra is a leader among the exiled Israelites in Babylon and he's also a Torah scholar and teacher of the law. He gets appointed by King Artaxerxes of Persia to lead another wave of people back to Jerusalem. Ezra's goal is to bring about spiritual and social renewal among the people.

However, we quickly come to another moment of opposition in the story when Ezra learns that many of the exiled Israelites (including priest and Levites) had come back and married non-exiles who had been living around Jerusalem. This is a direct violation of the law and Ezra appeals to the commands of the Torah involving mixed marriages. Ezra offers a prayer of repentance, then enacts a divorce decree that states all these mixed marriages should be annulled and the women and children should be sent away. The mass divorce is undertaken but instead of being rushed, the people set a specific order in how this should be done beginning with the officials and family heads. The book ends with a list of those who had married foreign women.

**Nehemiah 1-7** Using Nehemiah's memoirs, the narrator describes in some detail the circumstances surrounding the rebuilding of the wall. He begins with how Nehemiah, a prominent court figure serving in the Persian government, who secured King Artaxerxes permission, authority, and resources to return to Jerusalem (as governor, you learn in 5:14) to rebuild the walls (chs. 1-2). Chapter 3 describes in detail the who and the where of the participants in the project, while chapter 4 describes the opposition of those who had already been living around Jerusalem (thus recalling Ezra 4:6-23). Nehemiah, like Zerubbabel tells the people that they have no part in Jerusalem. This provokes the hostility.

**The conclusion of Nehemiah (chapters 8-13)** comes in the form of two climactic moments in our author's narrative. First (chs. 11-12) comes the ceremony of the renewal of the covenant. It begins with a long celebratory reading of the Law (7:73b-8:12) and includes the great celebratory Feast of Tabernacles (8:13-18). This is followed by a time of community confession (ch. 9) including a long history of disobedience recounted and the corporate signing of the renewal agreement (Neh 10). Then the new population (ch.11) and the priestly community (12:1-26) are listed. With that the walls that give them definition and protection are dedicated (12:27-43)—in great ceremonial pageantry and with much music and praise.

The book ends with Nehemiah after returning to Persia comes back to tour the city finds that the people have not been fulfilling their covenant vows and neglected the house of God. The book ends with Nehemiah's prayer to God asking God to remember him for his efforts in purifying the people.

## **The Book of Esther**

### **Introduction**

The book of Esther is similar to the book of Ruth. After deep historical and theological accounts of events taking place, we now come to a narrative centered around a Jewish woman who makes a great impact for her people. The book of Esther tells the story of a Jewish community living in exile in the Persian empire. While Ezra and Nehemiah focus on the return to Jerusalem following Cyrus' decree, Esther has no such interest. In Esther, Jewish life goes on at the heart of empire itself, with no apparent sense that Jews ought to return there.

The issue in Esther is how Jews can survive as a community under a foreign king and empire. Most of the story takes place during a single year during the reign of Xerxes (486–465 B.C.), a generation before the events recorded in Ezra-Nehemiah. It emphasizes God's providential care of the Jews in a context of a plan against them (please note that God is not even mentioned in the story, but his actions are certainly there). In it we also have the Jewish remembrance of their survival through the feast of Purim.

### **The Characters of Esther**

The story revolves around the actions of its four main characters:

1. the Persian king Xerxes (mentioned by name 29x), an arrogant Eastern despot who serves as God's foil in the story;
2. the villain Haman (48x), a foreigner who has been elevated to the highest place in the empire, next to Xerxes himself—who is even more arrogant than Xerxes, and full of hatred for the Jews;
3. the Jewish hero Mordecai (54x), a lesser court official who uncovers a plot that saves the king's life, but whose refusal to bow to Haman sets in motion the basic intrigue of the plot—a plan to kill all Jews in the empire, which ultimately backfires on Haman; and
4. the heroine, Mordecai's younger cousin, Hadassah, given the Persian name Esther (48x), who by winning a beauty contest becomes Xerxes' queen and the one responsible for unraveling Haman's plot, thus saving the Jews from annihilation.

### **The Theology of Esther**

Some would suggest it is futile to speak of theological ideas in Esther, since God is nowhere mentioned in the book. But the story contains a remarkable series of "coincidences." Esther happened to be selected as Vashti's successor; Mordecai happened to uncover the plan to assassinate the king; Xerxes happened to have insomnia on the night before Haman planned to kill Mordecai; the selection of royal chronicles read to the king that night happened to contain the report of Mordecai's good deed. These "coincidences" are not limited to the realm of God's people. Persian kings and royal officials also move and act under the unseen hand of the great Sovereign Lord. Although God is not mentioned, he is the central character of the book, more so than Esther or Mordecai. This makes the book of Esther extremely relevant for our day, for God is still sovereignly at work saving his people.

### **Overview of Esther**

#### **1:1–2:18 The Setting: Xerxes, Vashti, Mordecai, and Esther**

The story begins in the palace complex at Susa, where Xerxes gives a great state banquet as a display of his wealth and splendor, while his queen, Vashti, is giving a banquet for the women. Her refusal to also be put on display leads to her being deposed as queen, which sets the stage for Esther. Enter the hero and heroine (2:5–7). Mordecai's—and Esther's—actions in this matter are not without their ethical flaws, but both Esther's beauty and her keeping her origins quiet are crucial to the story that follows. Note how this first section ends with yet another banquet, this time in Esther's honor— but especially as a way for the king to show off his new queen.

### **2:19–3:15 The Plot Thickens: Mordecai and Haman**

Observe how this section begins by repeating Esther's readiness to follow her cousin's instructions. The plot itself begins with Mordecai using Esther's position as his way of warning the king about an assassination plot. Enter the villain (3:1), who is elevated to his high position and thus demands homage of all others, but Mordecai will not bow down or pay him honor. With his pride pricked, Haman sets in motion the plot to exterminate Mordecai and his people from the empire. Note how this "chapter" concludes with the king and Haman sitting down to drink (in contrast to the Jews, who will proclaim a fast).

### **4:1–7:10 The Plot Unfolds: Mordecai and Esther, Haman and Xerxes**

Again Mordecai turns to Esther for help, this time urging that she has "come to royal position for such a time as this" (4:14). Note especially the literary skill of the author in chapters 5–7, where he encloses the irony of Mordecai's and Haman's reversals, including Xerxes' sleepless night and the recall of the matter in 2:21–23, within the framework of Esther's two banquets. At the end of the second banquet, the ultimate irony is narrated: Haman is hanged on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai!

### **8:1–17 Xerxes' Edict in Behalf of the Jews**

Since Xerxes cannot repeal his former edict, he does the next best thing: Mordecai assists in framing a new decree in which the Jews are allowed to defend themselves against all attacks on the day of the pur (the day "the lot" fell for the extermination of the Jews; see 3:7). Notice how the decree is sent to all the provinces in their own languages and that the end result is the conversion of many Gentiles (further fulfilling the Abrahamic covenant, Gen 12:3).

### **9:1–10:3 The Triumph of the Jews**

Here you will see the three ways the story is wrapped up: (1) The Jews engage in the holy war and slay many of their enemies, (2) the final feast in the book is narrated—the feast of Purim that will be celebrated annually on the fourteenth and fifteenth days of Adar—and (3) Mordecai is promoted to a position where he is able directly (not through the less certain means of the queen) to benefit the Jews.

The book of Esther tells the story of God's providential protection of his people during a bleak moment in the Persian Empire, thus preserving them for the future gift of the Messiah.