

EZRA, NEHEMIAH, ESTHER

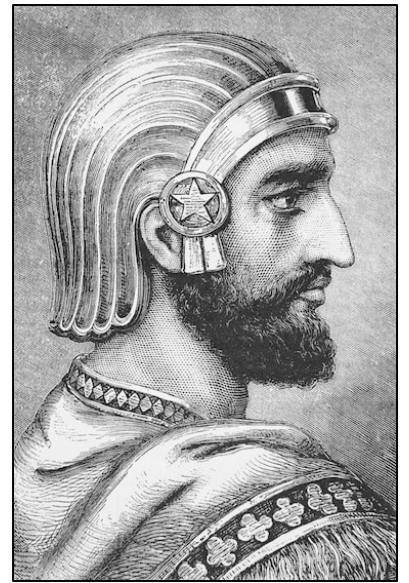
Ezra & Nehemiah

1 & 2 Chronicles ends with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian invaders. Fifty years later when Israel is permitted to return to Israel, Ezra, a Jewish priest joins the effort to rebuild the Temple and **“to study the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach his statutes and ordinances in Israel”** (Ezra 7:9). The prophets Haggai and Zechariah encourage the people in this great undertaking (Ezra 5:1). Nehemiah, the governor of Judah, also returns from Babylon for the rebuilding, not only of the Temple but the entire city of Jerusalem.

Both Ezra and Nehemiah tell the story of how God re-establishes Israel in the Promised Land. As such Ezra and Nehemiah constitute a smooth transition from the end of Chronicles to Israel’s return from Babylonian. Particular attention is given to the renewal of the covenant God made with Moses on Mount Sinai, and the enduring separation between Jews and Gentiles.

What was Israel’s situation?

Judah the capital city lay in ruins. Nothing had been spared. King Nebuchadnezzar destroyed not only the Temple and city, but deported the people to Babylon (Iraq). Now the Jews were living as exiles under the shadow of the Babylonian god, Marduk. Yet despite these circumstances the Jews are still able to practice their faith and keep the Law of Moses. For example, small groups of scholars of in the law began to meet in “houses of study”—synagogues—which became the centers for learning, places to meet and settle legal disputes and places for prayer. Far from their homeland and living as foreigners among native Babylonians, the Jews had to maintain a certain exclusivity so as to retain their identity—an exclusivity or “separateness” which later became a governing characteristic of Pharisaic Judaism.



King Cyrus

Seventy years pass and King Cyrus, the ruler of Anshan (a little province in southwest Iran) and flush with recent regional victories, set his sights on the much larger prize of Babylon. Fortunately for Cyrus, the people of Babylon were fed up with King



Babylonian god, Marduk

Nabonidus. Even the priests of Marduk were estranged from Nabonidus. When Cyrus’ forces approached, Nabonidus immediately surrendered and on October 29, 539 B.C., opened the city gates to him. Cyrus was now king of Babylon. Note: 150 years before Cyrus was born, the Lord had revealed that Cyrus would one day free the Jews. **“This is what the Lord says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of to subdue nations before him . . . ‘I summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honor, though you do not acknowledge me’”** (Isaiah 45:1, 4; 41:2-25; 42:6). God says of Cyrus, **“He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please”** (Isaiah 44:28).

The prophecy proved true. In 538 B.C., when Cyrus was shown the verses from Isaiah where his name appears, the king was so impressed that he immediately decreed the Jews should be free to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the

city and its Temple (2 Chronicles 36:22f; Ezra 1:1-4). In fact, Cyrus' handling of the Jews was in accord with Cyrus' general policy in dealing with conquered peoples. The Jews received the sacred vessels of their Temple which had been looted by King Nebuchadnezzar (Ezra 1:7).

As religion was the bond that united the Jews during the exile, their faith would hold them together upon their return. However, among the Jews who had *not* been deported to Babylon but who had remained and mingled with incoming foreigners, it was clear that *their* faith had declined. The returning exiles were naturally concerned about this; and so in addition to the reconstruction of the altar, Temple, and city, they sought to rid their land of all foreign influences. For the returning Jews—called the “remnant”—saw it as their mission to re-establish religious practice in strict conformity to the Mosaic law.

So the Book of Ezra begins with much hope. Families are being restored and reclaiming their lands. The Jews were ready to rebuild the Temple. Levites are appointed as project overseers, which included paying the residents of Sidon and Tyre to deliver much needed cedar wood from Lebanon

The Jews first set to construct a Temple altar. It may seem odd to build an altar before erecting the Temple itself, but the Jews had their reasons: **“They set the altar in its place, for fear was upon them because of the peoples of the lands, and they offered burnt offerings upon it to the Lord, burnt offerings morning and evening”** (Ezra 3:7). In fact, the “people of the lands” who were the current inhabitants—the Samaritans—were very upset at having been rebuffed in their offer to help rebuild the Temple. The Jews did not want the Samaritan's help because they considered them as “half-breeds” who had intermarried with foreigners during the exile. So in retaliation the Samaritans threw up all sorts of obstacles by preventing the re-supply of materials and provisions, and enticing workmen away from their tasks. In answer God sent the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to encourage and support Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah and also a returnee from Babylon (Ezra 5:1-2).

Seventeen years passed before the work finally began again in 520. Four years later, in 516 B.C., the Temple was completed and dedicated. Perhaps this is the reason the new Temple was simply called the “Second Temple.” Zerubbabel, who had spearheaded the project was only a governor and not a king.

Still, older Jews who looked upon the now completed structure and courtyards could only think of the greater size and grandeur of Solomon's Temple. They thought the Second Temple a poor copy of the original. True enough, with fewer resources the Second Temple was built on a smaller scale; and true also, Solomon's temple had once housed the Ark of the Covenant (which was now lost). And when Solomon's Temple was dedicated, the Holy of Holies was filled with the *Shekinah* (Hebrew, “dwelling”), the *fire* that came from above indicating God's presence. No such miraculous fire occurred at the Second Temple's dedication.

Besides the work was not yet finished. Forty years passed and the walls of Jerusalem were still not rebuilt (again due to Samaritan opposition). Nehemiah finally completed the task of constructing the city walls in only fifty-two days.

Thus Ezra and Nehemiah were chosen by God to spearhead religious renewal among the Jews. Slowly the people began to adopt a more religious lifestyle and to grow more hopeful for the future. They realized that as God's Chosen People, their primary pursuit was holiness of life and trust in God. For now, national sovereignty no longer seemed to be the priority.

In sum, Ezra and Nehemiah played a key part in the religious restoration of the Jewish people after the Babylonian exile. This was the “faithful remnant” of the Chosen People called upon to bring about the religious restoration so vigorously encouraged by the prophets.

Esther

The Book of Esther is an anonymous work written in the 400s B.C. The Book of Esther is a “free narrative,” that is, an embellished historical event intended to explain the origin and significance of the Jewish feast of Purim. This does not mean it is a total fiction; for the historical accuracy of the book is confirmed by its precise knowledge of Persian (Babylonian) customs. In synagogues today, the Book of Esther is the last of the five scrolls that are regularly read at the great festivals of the Jewish year.

Esther was of the tribe of Benjamin whose family had been deported to Babylon in 597 B.C. Esther's uncle and guardian, Mordecai, was born while in captivity, which explains his Babylonian name, derived from the name of the Babylonian god, Marduk.

In the third year of his reign, King Ahasuerus (a.k.a. King Xerxes) gives a sumptuous week-long banquet for his high officials in the city of Susa (southern Iran), the winter residence of the kings of Persia. Near the end of the banquet, the king, in a drunken stupor, decides to show off his wife's beauty. The king commands Queen Vashti (daughter of King Balshazzar, last king of Babylon) to wear her crown and appear before his male guests. Hebrew scripture scholars agree that "wearing her crown" meant the king was commanding his queen to appear wearing *only* her crown. Risking the king's wrath, Queen Vashti refuses to be so humiliated. Furious, the king consults with his advisers who recommend that he depose the queen. Furthermore they urge him to issue a public edict to prevent the queen's defiance from possibly stirring up domestic turmoil. Therefore on the advice of his counselors, the king stages a kind of "beauty contest" to select a new queen. Beautiful virgins from throughout the realm are brought before the king. The one who most pleased the king would become the new queen.

Esther, an orphan who was being raised by her uncle Mordecai (himself a royal official), enters this "beauty contest" and is named queen. A great banquet is given in her honor. Meanwhile Mordecai, in the course of his official duties, overhears palace eunuchs plotting to assassinate the king. Through Esther, the king is informed and the eunuchs are executed. However it is Haman, an Amalekite and also one of the king's officials, who was rewarded with a promotion.

Haman's plot to destroy the Jews

Due to Haman's promotion all the other servants were expected to bow before him. Mordecai refuses to bow before Haman. Not content to have Mordecai alone executed for this disrespect, Haman wants to wipe out all the Jews. To ensure this happens, Haman bribes the king to obtain an edict of extermination, and casts lots to choose the day on which the Jews would be destroyed (Esther 3:9).

Queen Esther saves the Jewish people

Greatly distressed, Mordecai mourns publicly in sackcloth and ashes and sends word to Esther, asking her to intervene with the king. Esther sends word back explaining that despite her status as queen, at the risk of her life she is not free to initiate contact with the king. Mordecai insists that she take the chance. Esther concedes but asks the Jews to fast for three days before her attempt to intercede with the king.

After the fast, Esther beautifies herself and, unannounced, enters the king's throne room. Fortunately the king is pleased with her and extends his scepter as a sign of welcome. Touching the scepter, Esther delivers her invitation to the king and his royal advisor, Haman, to attend a private banquet she will be hosting that very evening. The king and Haman accept. At the banquet the king asks Esther her real reason for coming into his presence. Esther demurs, asking the king to come to dine with her again the following evening when she will explain.

After Esther's banquet, Haman leaves the palace and encounters Mordecai who still refuses to bow before him. Haman returns home and orders a gibbet (sharpened wooden pole), about 75 feet high to be erected and on which he planned to impale Mordecai.

Meanwhile the king, unable to sleep, calls for the Royal Chronicles to be read to him. At that time scribes or officers faithfully kept a record or chronicle of the day's events. Often the king would have the chronicle read aloud to him. This was not merely to pass the time or as a "cure" for insomnia, but as a way of reviewing the important incidents of his own life and those of his ancestors.

Providentially, the recent account of Mordecai's intervention to save the life of the king is read. The king asks whether Mordecai was ever rewarded for his deed, and is told that he was not. The king resolves to rectify the injustice. At that very moment Haman enters the palace ready to request permission for Mordecai's execution. But the king asks Haman his counsel as to how he should honor a very faithful servant. Haman, thinking that the king wishes to honor *him*, suggests an elaborate parade in the royal chariot with the honoree garbed in royal robes. The king agrees and orders Haman to carry it out precisely

for Mordecai. Haman has no choice but to obey and arranges for Mordecai to be paraded around the capital city of Susa.

No sooner has Haman returned home that he is summoned to attend Esther's second banquet. After the meal the king asks Esther—with Haman present—the reason for this special second dinner. Esther reveals her concern and pleads for the king to act to save her and her fellow Jews from the king's edict of extermination. Indignant at Haman for manipulating him into authorizing this action against the nation of his new queen, the king storms into the garden. Meanwhile Haman prostrates himself on Esther's couch to beg for his life. Soon the king re-enters and is convinced Haman is attempting to violate the queen. The king orders Haman to be hanged on the gibbet that had been erected for Mordecai.

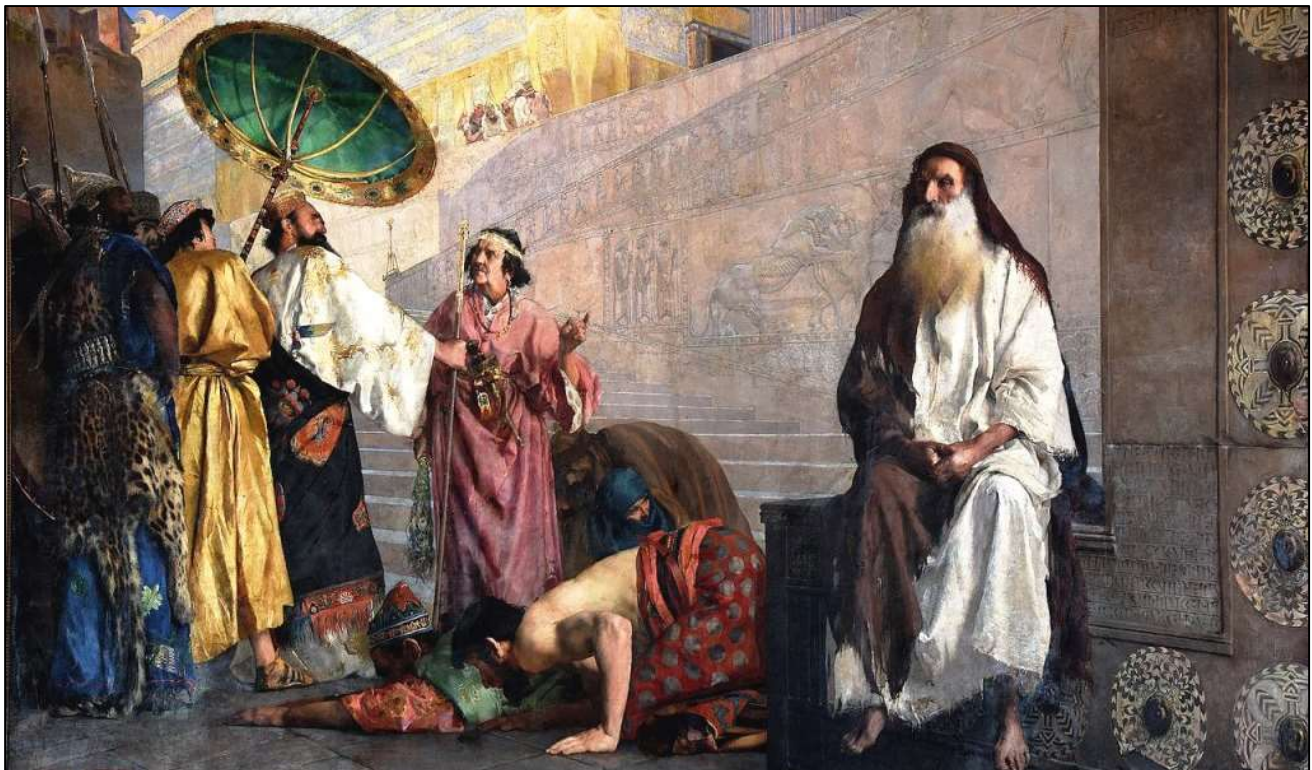
Deliverance of the Jews and the feast of Purim (March 6-7, 2023)

But this is not the end. Because the king's previous edict of extermination could not in fact be repealed once issued (Esther 8:8; Daniel 6:8, 15), Esther suggests that the king issue a second edict permitting the Jews to arm and defend themselves against their enemies. The king consents. When the appointed day arrives, the Jews prevail against their enemies and win a great victory. Together with Mordecai, whom the king installs to replace Haman, Queen Esther commands her people to commemorate a yearly festive holiday on the thirteenth of Adar. This becomes known as the Feast of Purim (*pur*, Hebrew for "lots").



Queen Esther

The Book of Esther records how an attempt to eliminate the Jewish people from the Persian Empire was foiled through the efforts of two Jews, Mordecai and Esther, who had risen to prominence within the Persian court and used their influence to better the fortunes of their people. The book emphasizes the providence of God in history, even through seemingly "chance" encounters or events.



Mordecai refuses to bow before Haman