

Dr. Elaine Phillips, OT History, Lit., and Theology, Lecture 35

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Well good morning. I think we'll probably start today. Those of you who are feeling a little less cheery about Monday morning singing, will be happy to know that there won't be singing this morning. We'll make up for it on Wednesday when we do a little Psalm recital. That means all of them. But actually, the reason for that is we just have a ton of stuff to cover today with Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther all in one fell swoop.

Before I do that, however, just a couple of these announcements up here that I want to flesh out. Those of you who are here a little bit early heard me doing my song and dance the about getting online and voting for the old Salem town hall. I know that Dr. Hevelone-Harper has sent an email to all the students to do this. Let me encourage you to the carry through with that. Hundred thousand dollars is no mean piece of cash, and if all the students that Gordon would indeed, between now and May 17, vote for the Old Stone Town Hall Restoration Project it could be a real boon to history of the North Shore and also Gordon College's involvement in that. It is not a long and involved process. I've sent you an e-mail that you can get this link straight off, but all you got to do is put a little note on your calendar to remind you that every morning you're going to do this, and pass it amongst your friends as well, because it really will be a help to us at Gordon in the history department particularly, and also an asset to the development of Salem particularly. We are a mere three percentage points behind being in first place right now, so it's worth our effort. Isn't that cool? Actually, a week ago, we were tied for first place. We've lost ground, which is why I'm doing this song and dance. All right, at any rate, other than that, it's all straightforward up here. Make up exams, May 7, 8th of May, final exam. Thanks to Mary for telling me it was at 8:00 and not at 10:30 so you all didn't come at the wrong time. Other than that, everything is straightforward. I've got the exam made up. You'll be happy to know, I don't think there are any true false questions on it. It's a whole pack of multiple-choice. Let me say this, be sure that you use the materials on Blackboard to study from. There is not a map, so count your blessings. A

tiny little essay, yes. Here, you know, this is extremely self-serving on my part, because I have to get all my grades turned in by a week from Friday since I'm leaving the country for two weeks after that, so no long essays this time around. You've had your chance to write papers and long essays, so there's a tiny little essay. Units one through four, all the questions come from the exams you have taken. It is straight from those exams, you can't miss. And it is 25% of your grade, all right? So use that to kind of bump up your grade a little bit. The last section is the one that students always all down on, and that's why I'm saying, go and use the study materials that are on Blackboard. The last section on prophets is going to be another one of those "which prophet did this?" type thing. All right, so learn those, it won't hurt you. The essay will come from your general knowledge. It's one of those open ended ones that if you say anything intelligent, you'll get the points for it, you know? It's one of those gifts, okay? Are there any more questions on the exam?

Wednesday's class is going to be a matter of singing a little bit, talking about how the three minor prophets that we will have not addressed until Wednesday, and then the last 20 minutes or so will be the course evaluation, just so you know what to do with Wednesday. Encourage your friends who have sort of been sleeping in, to come to the course evaluation, because I like to take seriously what everybody says about the class, not only those who have been faithful to come, although of course, you have been faithful to come so yours weighs a little bit more. But please do show up for that, that would be great.

Let's take some time to pray together as we start.

God our heavenly Father, we are thankful that you are with us that you're present, that you are walking with us day by day, and we are especially grateful that as we are up and about this morning and face, probably for each one of us, a week that is full, perhaps overflowing, with things that need to get done, help us to keep our eyes focused on you first. Then help us to focus on our work in ways that will be productive and honoring to you. We pray that we would encourage one another. We pray Lord especially that we would come alongside those who are struggling and need help, and help with our

prayers. Father, we ask that you would not only be blessing those of us who are here, we pray for the student body at Gordon at large. Father, we know there are those who struggle, and so we ask for your special grace and tender care. Lord we would also be mindful of our need to pray for our leaders and we ask for wisdom, beyond human wisdom to deal with the issues that are so pressing and difficult and complex. We appeal to you as Master of the universe, and we are so thankful that you are Master of our lives. We ask these things in Christ's name with thanksgiving. Amen.

We're picking up on post-exilic Judaism today, which means we're taking a step out of prophecy. It is often a problem that people identify Ezra and Nehemiah as prophets. Technically, they are not prophets. They're both statesmen, and Ezra is a priest and he is a scribe, but as you're thinking of prophets, don't lump Ezra and Nehemiah into that particular clump. So therefore, if you are answering that last set of questions, that's going to be on your final exam, and there's one you don't know, don't guess Ezra and Nehemiah, all right? Guess somebody else, but not Ezra and Nehemiah because they are not going to be one of those. At any rate, this is where we are going to talk a little bit about the overarching historical circumstances into which each of these folks fit and then the text themselves.

Before we do that, however, it's worth talking a little bit about the kinds of sources that we use in order to study this whole period. Post-exilic Judaism means after the exile, it means after the people return. It means post-539 B.C. So where do we find all of our sources? Well, first of all, we do have biblical sources. Ezra and Nehemiah are fascinating. By the way, in the Jewish canon, the Hebrew Bible, they are clumped together in one book. All right? We think of them as separate, they're together in the Jewish approach. If you want to think of Ezra particularly, Nehemiah somewhat, but Ezra particularly, as the ancient counterpart of the contemporary style of documentary. If you all want to learn something, you go to PBS, and you watch documentary. Those documentaries involve interviews and archived letters, and perhaps some photographs, and maybe a little clip of this, that, or the other thing. Ezra does the same thing without the video. So therefore he is telling some stories, he's incorporating some letters, he's got

documents in there that come out of the king's court. Parts of Ezra are also in Aramaic. Remind me, what's Aramaic? It's that language that was broadly spoken in the ancient Near East in that particular time period. So it is a sister language to Hebrew. You're absolutely right. Therefore as Ezra is talking about these things that have international consequences, so he is using that language. Chapters 4 through 6 approximately are in Aramaic, and that's incorporating some documents.

Also there are lots of lists. We don't get really excited about lists of names and lists of place names, but it's awfully important for this returning community. That's how you establish your identity. We talked about that way back in Genesis, a people establishes their identity with genealogy, and lists of names and places where these people were going to settle. It's awfully important to establish the identity of these people who are coming back from the exile, and they're landing themselves in a location that's got some opposition. Folks around them don't want them there, right? So it's awfully important that they establish their identity. That's why you're reading so many lists of names.

Then we do have Haggai and Zechariah. We are going to talk about them, Lord willing, on Wednesday. Esther we're going to do today, she is queen in a foreign court. It is a fascinating story in lots and lots of ways, we'll get back to that in moment. Then finally, our closing minor prophet is Malachi, and we'll do him along with Haggai and Zechariah on Wednesday.

We also have some extra-biblical sources, and it's worth noting, Herodotus. Those of you who have had Dr. Wick for history have probably been reading some of Herodotus, have probably been reading some of Herodotus because he is very keen on having his students read the primary sources. Herodotus is an extremely important Greek author, historian, who tells us a lot about the Persian period and Greece's encounters with Persia. Of course, that's important from our perspective because as we're reading about particularly the narratives in Esther there are some interesting connections that we can make in terms of nature of the King. You read about King Ahasuerus if you read Esther for today. Well, his Greek name is Xerxes and Herodotus tells us about Xerxes.

We also consult Josephus, Jewish historian. You learned all about him when you took New Testament from Dr. Green I think. He is a wonderful source of information on those intervening years between the close of the Old Testament and opening of the New Testament but also he does even go back further in his *Antiquities of the Jews* and tells us a lot about this.

Then we have some Persian inscriptions. We also have this that leads us into the archaeological material. The Persian inscriptions by the way are huge stone inscriptions, wonderful things that give us interesting material. Official seals with names, property, and also among those inscriptions are going to be cylinder seals. You've read about the Cyrus Cylinder Seal and I'll refer to that a little more in a moment. Okay, any questions on the sources?--just a quick overview.

Okay this is another one of my “you know when you get to the British Museum make sure you see.” This is in the British Museum. The famous Cyrus cylinder, that talks about Cyrus's decree not only to send Jews back to their land but it indicates he had a change of policy. You know we have seen up until now the Syrians and the Babylonians taking people into exile and really shuffling people around and ruining their identity. Cyrus's policy as a Persian changes, and he's intent on a much nicer, I suppose you could say, approach to people groups. He sends them back to their lands, and has them rebuild their own worship establishments meant of course, to make for good public relations. A lot of this is a public relations ploy. It's not only done with the Israelites or Jews, it's done on the broader sense as well. But at any rate, here is a picture of Cyrus Cylinder.

Now just a quick overview before we jump into some of our texts of some of the history of this period. Reminders first: these are dates you know I'm guessing. In 722 we learned that the Northern Kingdom fell to Assyria and lots of Jews are taken into exile at that point in time, already. In 612 Assyria and particularly Nineveh, as a major city in Assyria, is going to fall to Babylon. Of course, it's under Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar that the Jewish temple is destroyed, and a whole pack of people are taken into the exile. That of course sets the stage for the return from exile, which is what today is all about.

Now, in terms of important persons in the Persian Empire let's just get a few names down. Highlight these in your notes. These are names that are going to show up on your exam, I'll just tell you about that right now. Okay, so Cyrus the Great, major person, is the one who Isaiah talked about more than 100 years ahead of time, saying that Cyrus is going to give the decree to rebuild and restore Jerusalem, and then of course, here we see it happening. So you've got the return of a group of people, to Jerusalem, to Judah, to rebuild things. Now, one of the things that were going to see is when we start reading about this is this recorded in Ezra chapters 1 through 6. It's before Ezra's time; I'll say a little bit more about that in a moment. So as Ezra is talking about it, Ezra himself is not living through it, he is going back and looking at history, and saying this is what Cyrus has done. Don't worry about Cambyses we are just making connections here. He's an interesting character by the way; don't know exactly what happened to him in the end. He apparently and you probably know as much about this as I do if you had Dr. Wick's class. In all of the other empires in the Assyrians, the Babylonian and now Persian Empire the idea was to expand rule down into Egypt, because Egypt is a bread basket for the eastern Mediterranean. Cambyses was on his way down there, and as he came back there was some, very troubling news of the successor to the throne apparently, and it's all a very complicated complex mess, but the general take on it is that Cambyses committed suicide at this point on his way home to Persia, and his Empire, or his reign I should say, ends very quickly.

Then you have Darius I coming in. He is important for us; he's the one that's going to show up on the texts in terms of the ruling force when the Temple actually gets rebuilt. So, completion of the temple, as you know they started it, they got the foundations laid, as you read Ezra chapters 1 through 3, but then it all ground to a halt. We'll talk more about that in a moment. Under Darius, for a number of different reasons, they managed to get this Temple done. One of those reasons is that Haggai and Zechariah the Prophets start really prodding them, and we'll look at those prods on Wednesday. Another reason is suggested that Darius needed the help and the support of that community of Jews out there because he too, was making a press for Egypt. If you've

got people on your front here it's a good idea to have them favorable to you and not unfavorable. So if he helps them and pushes them and gives them permission to restore their Temple, what better thing is done? He's done a great PR act. It works, all right? It works.

Then after that, we have the person in whom Herodotus refers to as Xerxes. The biblical text calls him Ahasuerus; they're the same person. Keep in mind these guys have Persian names, and it's not always easy to transliterate from a Persian alphabet and Persian pronunciation into, on the one hand, the Greek language, and, on the other hand, into a Semitic language which is Hebrew. Not all the letters are always there. So Hebrew is pronounced, *Ahash-ve-rosh*. Okay, *Ahash-ve-rosh* you can hear little bit of the things that are in Xerxes, "ha" and "he." Dr. Hildebrandt can do that Greek a whole lot better than I could. At any rate it is the same person and it's all the deriving from a Persian name there.

Esther is our major person here we are going to get back and talk an awful lot about Xerxes. Herodotus tells us what an ugly, lascivious, brutal person Xerxes was, and you see that as you read, especially chapters 1, and following in Esther.

Then finally we have our Artaxerxes, under whom we have Ezra, and Nehemiah actually living, and doing their work. So again, notice that when Ezra is writing about the earlier stuff, it's not that he's on the scene, he's making his documentary of that point. Any questions on the history? Do I need to say this again? Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes, and Artaxerxes: know them. You're going to see a question on the exam...

No, that's one of those interesting challenges, when the Book of Daniel mentions Darius the Mede; it's a different person, okay? That's somebody who's functioning before Cyrus the Great or is Cyrus the Great. I tend to think as I think I said the other day in class with a 65-70% certainty rate that those two are the same individual. But he's not the same person as Darius I, and there's lots of interesting issues going on with the rise of Darius I. He's a another whole picture... Artaxerxes is going to be King particularly under whom we have the ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah, and that's important because those two are major figures in Artaxerxes's court. Nehemiah is cupbearer, and Ezra is

fairly significant. Let me just make, since I am pressing/going a little further in your question, it's very interesting that you've got a generation after Esther, and Mordecai is being raised to the second in command. The threat against the Jews being squelched, within a generation, even less actually, you've got two people who are so important in the Persian court. It's almost like they've gotten a reprieve and Mordecai has paved the way for something these other two can do.

What are the reasons why Darius may have allowed them to complete the Temple? The first one is the prophets are just prodding them. So that's not Darius, it's just they get it done because you got these two prophetic voices that are really pushing them. The second one is: Darius is doing a politically smart thing, its strategy on his part.

Okay, here is where we start thinking about what Ezra says in chapters 1 through 6, and I know I've said this twice already, but I'm going to say it again: Ezra is looking back historically. It would be like someone now writing a history of World War I, about that time frame. He's looking back. As he does, he goes through some important things, and first of all we have Cyrus edict. This actually establishes some important connections with what we have in 2 Chronicles, because it's pretty much repeating it. This is what Cyrus king of Persia says, "the Lord, the God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem. Any one of his people may his God be with him, and let him go to Jerusalem and Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem."

Now Cyrus's idea is, and it's not only Cyrus's the idea it's sort of an ancient Near Eastern concept that particular locations have particular gods. So that's why he gives this edict: that all these peoples can go back to their particular places, this one affects Jerusalem.

The people of any place where survivors may now be living are to provide him with silver and gold, goods, and livestock. Does that sound like any interesting parallel of something we know already? What happens when people left Egypt? They went well supplied didn't they? In some ways this is intended to be viewed as a second Exodus. There was the Exodus from bondage in Egypt, and as they left the Israelites went out

wealthy. Here they are coming out of exile, and that coming out of exile and coming back to the land where God had covenanted to have them to be. The same kind of pattern is established, interesting. Well, that's Cyrus's edict.

We have some returnees that are listed here. Interesting number, verse 64 of chapter 2--42,360. Now there are all sorts of fascinating issues with numbers that I'm not going to get in to. Take a further course in Old Testament where we focus in on some of these things cause these numbers here if you contrast them with Jeremiah chapter 52 look a little big, but there are some reasons for that I think.

Know the names of the leaders. Exam flag, know the names of the leaders. Sheshbazzar the first one, he's mentioned in Ezra. He seems to be kind of the prominent person, but for some reason or another he loses that pride of place to the next two. The next two are the ones who are going to be more important for a longer period of time. They are the ones who are to be mentioned also in Haggai and Zechariah. Zerubbabel is the individual who is the descendent of the Davidic dynasty, so he is representing the royal line. Jeshua, or Joshua, you're going to see it as Jeshua in some of your texts. Same name, Jeshua, Joshua, is going to be the person who is representative of the priestly line. So there is a kingly line, priestly line. Two major focuses and of course, we are going to see both those names come up repeatedly in the prophets that we're going to study. Well unfortunately once they get the temple foundation and the altar built, they encounter some opposition. Notice, I'm going to go back to, particularly, chapter 3, Jeshua, this is verse 2, and Zerubbabel began to build the altar of the Lord God, to sacrifice burnt offerings verse 4 in accordance with what was written. They celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles they do all these wonderful things. They build the foundations, verse 10, when they've laid the foundation of the temple, the priests were there with their vestments and their trumpets, and they sing to the Lord and it's a glorious celebration. Verse 12, older priests who had seen the former temple wept aloud. Now, they could have been weeping because this is such a paltry effort or maybe they're just weeping because restoration is happening, but of course, the real sad thing, is that they stopped building.

Chapter 4 does talk about the opposition. Chapter 4 verse 1, “When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard the exiles were building a temple, they said, ‘Let us help you because we’ve been celebrating and sacrificing and doing all the same things you are.’” Why were they refused? Why were the enemies of Judah and Benjamin refused who came and said we’d like to help you? Why were these people excluded and not allowed to help? It doesn’t sound very PC and multicultural to me. What’s going on here? How would they have corrupted them? Yes, this is the people who are in the land, right? And remember our Samaritan problem? All the way from 2 Kings 17 where the people who are there are worshipping Yahweh, sort of, but they have been taught by a priest from Bethel. So that leaves you a little bit of question in terms of how authentic that is, but they are also worshipping all the gods that they had imported. So you’ve got this whole mess called syncretism, you may remember that. And therefore when they say you’ve been worshipping your God, well they don’t really necessarily know who that God was and what was really entailed in it. That’s why Trevor has said they would’ve corrupted it. It would have become another mishmash of material. So you got that kind of thing going on now. We have Samaritan opposition as well, okay? They are both the same kind of issues.

Now, I need to save this as you read chapter 4 of Ezra, it not only talks about the opposition in the day when they were, right away, having trouble with this, it’s going to give a whole sweep of opposition all the way through though the reign of Artaxerxes. So chapter 4 is interesting. Thinking of our documentary, right? We’ve got a documentary. Stuck right in the middle of that documentary is this big broad approach that is going to survey about 100 years and that’s going to come back and zero in on some of the things that were happening earlier on.

Finally, they do indeed get the temple rebuilt. Chapter 6, they completed the temple it, was completed verse 15 on the third day of the month of Adar in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius. The people of Israel celebrated the dedication of the house of the Lord with joy. They install priests and, guess what, they celebrate the Passover. No surprise there because remember whenever there has been a reformation what is the feast

that is celebrated?--Passover. Passover marks their coming out of Egypt. Passover marks redemption. Passover marks the reign of Hezekiah. Passover marks the reign of Josiah. Now you've got it here as well, so it is not a surprise that they would celebrate that. We're going to take a break from Ezra because we are going chronologically today.

So we have now looked at things from the events from 539 down to 516, all right? Then next time Ezra picks up, in chapter 7, is going to be in 465, approximately, and in between we have this wonderful narrative of Esther. Now we're going to do Esther a little differently. We're going to do Esther in pictures. Esther in works of art that I sort of culled from all these wonderful websites that have biblical artwork have you ever been on any of those? They're fascinating. Those of you, who are art majors, explore them. There are wonderful, wonderful examples that are free access of art and I just picked out a few of them. This happens to be a Torah scroll. Esther is one of the five scrolls that is read in major festivals. They are little scrolls that are at the end of the back of the Hebrew Bible but a terribly important book as we are going to see. We made a first read of it, just read it as a good story and it's a great story. I'm going to talk about the literature of the story in a moment, but it's got some profound theological truths in it. Interestingly enough Maimonides, who is an extremely important Jewish scholar from the 12th century, said, if all the books of the Hebrew Bible were to vanish except the Torah and Ester that would be enough. Isn't that interesting? Now we're going to see why, at least I hope we're going to see why.

Let's carry-on a little bit, here is the feast of the Ahasuerus. Chapter 1, and I am going to say more about chapter 1 in a moment and what we see going on in chapter 1 because it's a fascinating chapter, but what of Ahasuerus? All Xerxes is doing is actually not only showing off, he's showing off, 180 days it says he's having feast after feast and everyone is coming to it. He's feeding them, and wining them, and dining them, and drinking them. By the way the Hebrew word for "feast," which is *mishday*, comes from the word to drink. So this is a lot of stuff going on here, but here is the thing, he became king in 486. Those of you who had Dr. Wick's class what does Xerxes do within three years of 486? He heads west, doesn't he? He's got his eyes on that land beyond the

Aegean Sea, Greece, and probably what he's doing with this whole feasting thing that is going on in Esther, chapter 1, is getting support, so that he can get an army that can march right across Asia minor, camp at Sardis, go across the Helisport, and then take over Greece. It's a little plum and he wants it, so that might be part of what's going on.

Now, of course, there are some interesting things going on simply in terms of the literature of this chapter. Let's look at some of them. This chapter pokes fun at the Persian court, I hope you watched that, you know, all these lists of names and the opulence is just verbage all over the place. Maybe you don't get it quite so much in English, but the Hebrew of Esther chapter 1 is just way too many words, way too many words. Even the words themselves, you know there are some of them you don't even see them anyplace else, so it's trying to just say, what an over done production all this extravagance is, but it's even funnier.

Did you notice this? There are at least four ironies going on here, three ironies really, and some good sense of humor. First of all, when Xerxes displays his court he also wants to display his wife, the verb is prominent in both of those situations. And of course, what does Vashti do? That is another name you need to know for your exam. What does Vashti do? She refuses. She is not going to be displayed, particularly, since the Hebrew suggests, and the rabbis suggest, based on the way they're reading the Hebrew, that he was asking her to come to this drunken feast of men with only her crown on, nothing else. Anyway, she refuses to come, and of course, when Xerxes gets all upset and wonders what is there to do about this thing, they say she is not going to be banned from the court, and so the thing she just refused to do, they need a royal decree to make that certain forever. It's a great irony, good part of the story.

Then, of course, the second thing all the leaders are concerned about is that it's going to be public knowledge, and all the women are just going to revolt against their husbands, etc. etc. etc., but they issue of public decree that makes it public knowledge. I hope you see the humor in this, I mean the whole narrative, especially in this first chapter, is really poking fun at Persia. It's poking fun at the opulence and frankly, the stupidity.

Third one, it takes a public decree for the men to rule in their houses. That is what the public decree says. And then, finally, all of these wonderful servants 7 pairs, 2 pairs of sevens, they managed to, as I note for you, escalate Xerxes's domestic problems into a state crisis. We're supposed to be smiling and laughing at that, we really are, but see, here is the dark side of it: this is a funny introduction to something that is going to be really, really ugly, because when we see how the Persian court works at the whims of the King's advisers, it's setting the stage for a turn in a very nasty way once Haman comes on the scene. Now, of course, in God's providence all of that gets overruled, but not before there are some uncertainties and distress and despair on part of the Jewish population, empire wide. Okay? But make sure you got a handle on this, don't just breeze through chapter 1 and miss the humor here. We're supposed to see the humor.

You should know once Vashti is banned along comes Esther, by the way, isn't this a wonderful representation? This is typical European 17th-century painting. I guess Ester didn't look quite like that, right? She's probably about fourteen, and I just guess Ester didn't look just like that, but here's the story as you know: Vashti is banned, Xerxes remembers that he had a wife once, and so they go out searching for all the most beautiful women in the empire. There are a lot of issues among scholars in terms of whether Esther and Mordecai should have put her in a position where she would basically be a sex object for the King. But if you read the text carefully you find that they didn't have a choice. This is a roundup, and it's a roundup for the King's harem.

So she gets taken, and as you know she pleases the king. Mordecai, who is her cousin, very carefully watches day by day by day. He's out in that courtyard in front of the palace making sure everything is all right with his former ward. She is identified, and here is another important point, she is identified as an orphan, and a Jew. Both outsiders marginalized, and yet she's brought right into the center. Talk about "for such a time as this." This is God's providence in bringing her to the place from the most unlikely of circumstances.

The identity of Mordecai is equally important. What tribe does he come from? Benjamin. Why is that important? Have we had a first king of Israel from the tribe of

Benjamin, named Saul? This extremely important, because now, we are going to visit some unfinished business. What was the second reason why Saul lost the kingship? I know, that's two months ago, how on earth are you supposed to remember that? Yes, he doesn't follow through on the Lord's command to get rid of all of the Amalekite stuff and kill the King Agag. Who is Haman a descendent of? An Agag guy, he's an Agag guy isn't he, a descendent of Agag. Don't think for a moment there's not some literary threads being tied up in here as well. Mordecai from the tribe of Benjamin is going to finish some business, which Saul should have done a long time ago, interesting.

Well, at any rate, we have got that whole thing, and then one more thing we need to say about the Esther and Mordecai connection? Saul, is from the tribe of Benjamin, with a long lineage, read on down to Mordecai. It's Agag the king of the Amalekites with the long lineage right on down to Haman. I should be going the other direction right on down to Haman. Well shortly after Esther is moved into the harem, Mordecai does something very important. What is it? Well he is sitting in the gate. What does he hear? A plot to take the King's life. By the way, Ahasuerus died by assassination, eventually, it just wasn't at this particular point in time. Mordecai hears this plot, he tells Esther, Esther warns the king, and the two guys that were planning it are done away with, and Mordecai's name is written in the Chronicles. And that's right at the end of chapter 2, what do we see next?

Chapter 3 starts out with Haman doesn't it? The elevation of Haman. Now it's five years later, we're not told that right away, but you read through the rest of the chapter we find out it's five years later, and Mordecai of course has never been recognized for his saving of the King's life, and instead you got Haman elevated to a position second in the kingdom. Well, what's our next photograph? How is it that Esther has to come before the King? Well, there is some intervening details aren't there? I could not find a picture of Haman having everyone bowing down to him, but Haman has an ego that is fairly expansive, and so he wants decrees that everybody must bow down to him. Mordecai won't, and you can posit a number of reasons why that might be true. Mordecai might not do it because, quite frankly, his own pride has been injured because he wasn't

recognized, and here is this Haman. However there was also the possibility that bowing down to Haman would be something that Mordecai, as a good Jew wouldn't do. Because the words there mean "to prostrate yourself in front of," which would involve some sort of possible worship. As you know, Haman gets angry at this, and therefore instead of taking it out on Mordecai, he takes it out, or plans to take it out on the entirety of the Jewish population, which seems to be fairly extensive by this time.

Now here is the interesting thing, and let me drag out my text for you. When Haman goes to the King to ask for this permission to do this dastardly deed, he says the following, I'm in chapter 3 verse 8. "There is a certain people, dispersed and scattered among the peoples and all the provinces of your kingdom, who keep themselves separate." True, isn't it? That's the truth. Notice how Haman is very insidious, he starts out with what is true, and then he is going to just twist it a little bit and make a real ugly lie out of it. "Their customs are different than ours, and all those of other people and they don't obey the King's laws." That's where it gets troubling. The only instance of that, of course has been that Mordecai won't bow down to Haman, but this wholesale blanket accusation means that they're traitors, and the King then has every right, and it would be wise, as Haman is advising him, to do this whole people in. It's not in the King's interest to tolerate them.

"If it pleases the King, let a decree be issued to destroy them." Now here is another fascinating thing, and I will just expound on this a little bit because it is so interesting to me. He only uses one word here: let a decree be issued to destroy them. What's fascinating is that the Hebrew word for "destroy," *abed*, if it's just tweaked a little bit, it can mean "to enslave" them. Do you get the deal of what is going on? I'm suggesting, we don't know this for sure, but I'm suggesting that maybe Haman, when he is speaking in the king's presence, is saying, enslave them. In other words make them like what we had back in the Egyptian thing, way back when. It is going to be another parallel if that's true. If he is saying that, and then he says I will put 10,000 pounds of silver into the coffers to carry out this business, and you are saying, aren't you really stretching it a little bit? Well maybe, but maybe not.

Notice the king goes along with it. When Mordecai issues the actual decree, the decree says destroy, kill, and annihilate. Verse 13, three words: destroy, kill, and annihilate. He's only asked the king for this one thing, which again the word can mean "enslave." Why am I thinking that works? It's not really my idea, lifted it from somebody else. But Esther, when she is making her appeal to the King, in chapter 7. Notice what she says. Verse 4, "I, and my people have been sold, for all that money, I and my people have been sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation. If we had merely been sold as slaves I would have kept quiet." So again that thing about selling, and slavery, as opposed to destruction, there may be an interesting wordplay going on here. Is that making sense to you? It may, I mean I'm not trying to whitewash Xerxes, but it may give us a little bit of an understanding in terms of why he goes along with this thing. Haman isn't really telling him, because Haman's intent only shows up in the decree: destroy, kill, and annihilate. Of course, once the decree comes out.

Mordecai is in sack cloth and ashes in front of the palace. Esther hears about it. She tries to give him some clothing to get him to dress properly and he says, no you don't understand what is going on. He appeals to her to appeal to the king, and of course the classic line out of Esther is... what is the classic line out of Esther? "For such a time as this." Chapter 4 verse 14, "if you remain silent at this time," now the next clause is translated as a statement in your NIV, it can be a question as well, so let me read this to you as a statement first: "if you remain silent at such a time as this, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish." Let me read that as a question: "if you remain silent at this time, will relief and deliverance come from another place? You and your family are going to perish." In other words, the Jews are all going to get it, and because she is Jewish, she's going to be found out, even though she is in the Kings court, because there will probably be enough turncoats. Now that they know that Mordecai is Jewish, that it'll bring her to an end as well. And I'm suggesting that Mordecai is actually not saying, necessarily, God's going to raise up a deliverance, and giving her a potential out, but he's saying you're going to perish, and there may be no other hope for the Jews. Then it goes on and says, "who

knows, you have come to royal position for such a time as this.” So Esther agrees to fast for three days. It’s a complete, drastic fast, no eating, no drinking, and then she says, in verse 16, at the end, when this is done, “I will go to the King even though it goes against the law,” your NIV translates it, “if I perish I perish.” It can also translated: “when I perish, I perish.” So, you know we could read this as either of them, feeling a great deal of hope that anything is going to happen.

Yet notice, in spite of that, she goes through with this, and goes to the King, and appeals to the King. As you know Xerxes stretches out the scepter to her, and then she asks for Haman and Xerxes to come and have a feast, or a banquet. By the way you don't have to read it in the negative call that I just laid over it, but those are possible readings as well, equally possible. The real key is that she is in God's providence, in that place, at that time. However, we understand their sense of hope, or otherwise, she’s there at that place at that time, which is precisely why Jews throughout history have seen Esther is such an important book. They recognize that no matter how hideous circumstances have been, and by the way, for 2000 years the circumstances the Jewish people have been really, really terrible, often at the hands of the church. But they read Esther, and recognize in Esther, that they have a God, who indeed, does deliver his people. Well I'll come back to that in a moment.

Esther has a banquet for the King and Haman. It’s the first of two. This whole book is made up of pairs by the way. Pairs of words, pairs of instances, pairs of banquets, and of course, she puts the king off when he says, up to half my kingdom I'll give it to you, and she says, “Oh, just come to another banquet.”

What happens in the meantime? What’s the next story? Part of the story, chapter 6, is completely God's working. He does build the gallows, that’s true because he is kind of vexed on his way home after the banquet. He sees Mordecai and gets mad again. But something else happens right at the beginning in chapter 6, and that is entirely God's doing. Let me just say this by the way, if you are in Esther and Mordecai's place, you would be planning like crazy how are you going to work this? How are you going to reveal Haman’s plan? How are we going to keep the King happy? How? How? How?

All their scheming from a human standpoint is necessary, but in God's providence, what happens? The king has insomnia, at the exact right point in time. So, of course, all the things of the injustice with Mordecai's not being rewarded five years earlier. Now the King hears about it, because of course, there is nothing more soporific than court Chronicles and he is expecting them to put him to sleep, but they don't until after the important issue is revealed. And so of course, as you know the story we have our next incident, Haman comes rampaging into the court early next morning because he is expecting to get permission to hang Mordecai on those gallows that he's just built. The King, who always gets to speak first, says, what's to be done for the person the King so wishes to honor? Some people suggest by the way, that the reason the King doesn't name Mordecai at this point, is that the King maybe a little onto Haman and he is going to set Haman up for a real fall, by making Haman think Haman is the person the King wants to honor. At any rate Haman lists this whole thing, King's robe, King's horse that has the King's crown on it, parades through the city, screaming out, "This is the person the King wishes to honor." And of course, Haman must do that for Mordecai, which is utterly humiliating, but he only has time to get home, being totally humiliated, when he's dragged back to the second banquet, as you know, and at that point, Esther is going to reveal the identity of the perfidious person who is trying to do away with the entire Jewish race. Notice that statement in verse 4 of chapter 7 that I read for you earlier: if we've only been sold as slaves that would've been tolerable, but this person is out to destroy, kill, and annihilate my people. Just a quick note, some people have often said, this whole business about horses with crowns is a bit unusual, but you know what? Here they have crests, a way of decorating your royal horses is put a little crown on them.

All right, here we go, Haman is going to beg Esther for mercy, and of course, as he does the king who has been outside, venting in a little bit, comes back in, and thinks that Haman is about to molest Esther, and that is the last straw. Haman is taken out and executed. Just a couple of things to draw this together, and by the way, I need to say this as well, that as you read the rest of the book, chapters 8 through the very short chapter 10, Mordecai is elevated to the position that Haman had been in, so those roles are reversed

considerably. The decree that had been given to annihilate the Jews has a counter decree written in exactly the same language.

As you read chapter 9, perhaps you were a little bit of appalled at the disgusting amount killing of the Jews did. You should've been, until you realize that according to the decree, they were operating in self-defense, and what that does is really tell us the extent of the anti-Jewish hatred that was apparent in the Empire at that point, because if in spite of that decree, you still have a whole bunch of people that are still out to kill Jews, that also tells us something.

One of the interesting issues as you read that decree and the counter decree, the Jews were allowed to take plunder, in self-defense. They were supposed to defend themselves, they were allowed to take plunder. Three times in chapter 9, when it's talking about the people that the Jews killed, it says, but they took no plunder. So they are forewarned that part they could have done.

All right, literary masterpiece I suggested most of these already, and you've got them in your notes anyway, reversals, the position of Jews from being almost annihilated, to being people that other folks wanted to join. At the end of the book we have other people wanting to become Jews, Haman going from first or second in the kingdom, to hanging on the gallows that he had planned for Mordecai, Esther being an orphan and a marginalized Jew, going to be queen, all kinds of reversals of fortunes of Jews. Then as I said a long thread of biblical allusions.

Interestingly enough, not only do we have some of our connections that I've mentioned already but the decree, the original decree for the lot that was cast to have this happened on Passover. The 13th of the first month, right before the 14th. Then we've already talked about the comic portrayal of the Persian court. Two more things we need to say. Once you have the return from exile in 539, what had been exile is now called "Diaspora." "Diaspora" means "dispersion," and its referring to the Jewish communities that were dispersed throughout the empire. So when we use the term "diaspora" we're talking about those people who, for whatever reason, stayed outside of Israel, they didn't come back. And we see in this text, our first illustration, as far as I know, of the ongoing

anti-Semitism that has characterized world history ever since. You see it in the community in Alexandria in the first century; you see it throughout European history. You see now, in fact there is a return of virulent anti-Semitism. Just keep your ears open and you will hear it.

And then here's the other thing. Esther is a remarkable book for all of us, who have the feeling that life is messy, and it is, and sometimes we don't really see or perceive God as very active in our worlds. The book of Esther shows that, because the name of God doesn't show up in this book, and the only possible reference is chapter 4 verse 14, coming from another place, it's the only possible reference. Yet knit throughout the entire text is the providence of God. In terms of Mordecai's, the injustice to him, not even having that business revealed to him for five whole years, and yet all at the right time. I'll say this really fast and then we need to get on to Nehemiah and all that kind of thing. The book of Esther is a very interesting structure, the king's insomnia problem is right at the center of the book, all right? All around it unfolding are instances of the reversals that God himself effects. So, it is fascinating to see all that unfold.

Well, we just really need to move along. We could spend an hour on Esther. We need to talk about Ezra, and then very briefly about Nehemiah. These are more straightforward. As you read chapter 7 of Ezra, we find out, as I said already, that he was a priest and that is pretty important for him. He is the teacher who knows the Torah. Ezra is going to be responsible for reconstituting Judaism as they come back from exile. Sometimes this task was very painfully difficult. He had to do some tough things but he is responsible for that. His mission? Well, Artaxerxes gives him a mission: go back, get that community back in shape again, okay? That is what he was called to do. In the book of Ezra, and counterpart with Nehemiah, the chapters are up here, we see the need for reformation.

Now again, the date is going to be about 465. It's our standard second-generation problem. They were there in the land, the fervor of the Temple being rebuilt had sort of waned. People are just becoming complacent, lackadaisical, spiritually un-alive, dead, ok? Here's the problem. They're intermarrying. I'm suggesting to you, that as they're

dealing with this, part of the issue is simply they no longer have national boundaries. They are a reconstituted little community. The whole area around Jerusalem, Judea, is very small. There are no national boundaries and so there has to be a deeper concern for social boundaries. Now we could go all the way back to Deuteronomy chapter 7, and remember God's admonition not to intermarry because it would lead to idolatry. The problem is going to crop up here and Ezra wants to cut it off before it does lead to idolatry and so, no intermarriage.

Ezra prays, he identifies himself with the sins of his people, and prays earnestly for God's restoration. The punishment for the disobedience is very interesting. They put those were foreign wives and their children away, which again sounds very harsh, but we need to remember that sin has wide ranging consequences, sometimes for the people who were not perpetrators of the sin.

We see a wonderful incident where all the people are called together. This is Nehemiah chapter 8. They're all called together, in the public square. It's the Feast of Tabernacles, which according to Deuteronomy 31 we know is the time when they are supposed to gather together and read the Torah. Ezra reads the Torah from dawn until noon, and everybody is listening. Did you catch that? From five o'clock in the morning until noon. It's fascinating. They are convicted. There is fasting, confession of sin; they covenant to keep the Torah.

Now, there are going to be lapses, and we're going to see that at the end of Nehemiah 2. But nevertheless, there is a profound sense that they need to do a major reformation of themselves. The intent of the reform, particularly putting away these foreign wives, you can read all that in Ezra, chapter 9, in parallel with Nehemiah 8, present another exile. They have now experienced the horror of being ripped out of the land and taken into exile. The leaders don't want that to happen again, that is the intent of this.

Now, we are going to run through the rest of Nehemiah really fast. Got your running shoes on your fingers? Here we go. The beginning of Nehemiah tells us something about this man, as I said earlier, high up in the reign and in the kingdom of

Artaxerxes. If you know nothing else about Nehemiah, just remember that he does some important things simultaneously. He prays and he acts. He has got people building the walls, rocks in one hand, weapons in the other, and he is praying constantly, short prayers. He is very concerned about strengthening Jerusalem's defenses. The walls have been broken down, that is not good. So in a very physical, real, strategic way, he is building up the defenses. He engages in this reformation with Ezra that I just talked about a moment ago he is part of that; he will actually have more of a sociological approach to it. Ezra is going to have more of a religious approach to it, but the same basic thing going on.

Then, our final thing with Nehemiah that we need to say: he is the governor, right? He is governor, and he is concerned about Jerusalem, the fact that it's not very populated, nobody wants to live there, it's a dangerous place to be. So he moves people into Jerusalem, they build the walls, and they dedicate the walls.

Then when Nehemiah gets called back to the king's court back in Persia, he leaves, and here is the tragedy: he seems to have been the focus of the religious reform, and it doesn't seem to have really penetrated into the lives and hearts of the rest of the people. Because, when you read chapter 13, it all just disintegrates, and when Nehemiah comes back he's got to start all over again. Doing these kinds of things, removing foreigners, getting the people who had stopped paying tithes to support the Levites, the widows and the aliens. He has to get them to do that again. Sabbath was an important issue, and when he was gone they quit keeping the Sabbath, he has got to reinstitute that again. You know you get an interesting feeling for what it is like to be someone who is in a position of leadership. It's a never-ending battle, because those of us who are sheep don't follow very well unless we're really poked and prodded.

What a happy note to end on. See you on Wednesday.