

Dr. Elaine Phillips, Old Testament Literature, Lecture 35, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther

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Well, good morning. I think we're probably going to start today. Those of you who are feeling a little less cheery about Monday morning singing will be happy to know we're not going to sing this morning.

We'll make up for it on Wednesday when we do a little psalm recital on Wednesday. That means all of them. But actually, the reason for that is that we've got just 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 about getting online and voting for the Old Salem Town Hall. I know that Dr. Hevelon Harper has sent an email to all the students to do this.

Let me encourage you to carry through with that. \$100,000 is no mean piece of cash. And if all the students at Gordon would indeed, between now and May 17, vote for the Old Salem Town Hall restoration project, it would 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 have sent you an email so that you can get this link straight off. But all you've 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 on to your friends as well.

Because it will really be a help to us at Gordon and the history department. It is also an asset to the development of Salem, particularly. We are a mere 3 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. So, we've lost ground, which is why I'm doing this song and dance.

All right, at any rate. Other than that, hey, it's all straightforward up here. Makeup exams, May 7th and 8th, final exam. Thanks to Mary for telling me it was at 8 o'clock and not at 1030, so they all didn't come at the wrong time.

Other than that, everything's straightforward. I've got the exam made up. You'll be happy to know; I don't think there are any true or false questions on it.

It's a whole pack of multiple-choice. A whole pack of multiple choice. Let me say this, be sure that you use the materials on Blackboard to study from.

Sarah? There is not a map. Count your blessings. Yeah, Nick? A tiny little essay, yeah.

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 in long essays.

So, there's a tiny little essay. Mary? From exams that we have taken, or any other units? In units one through four, all the questions come from exams that you have taken straight from those exams. You can't miss it.

And it's 25% of your grade. So use that to kind of bump the grade up a little bit. The last section is the one that students always fall down on.

That's why I'm saying, go and use the study materials that are on Blackboard. The last section on profits is going to be another one of those, which profit did this? Type things. All right, so learn those.

It won't hurt you. Yeah, Trevor? So that's what you're talking about? Right, exactly. Exactly.

Yep. Can I see another hand over here? Sarah? I answered yours. OK.

The essay, will come from the section we have studied, or did we have an essay on the profits? The essay will come from your general knowledge. Shh. It's one of those open-ended ones that if you say anything intelligent, you'll get the points for it.

You know? Some of those gifts. OK, any other questions on the exam? Wednesday's class is going to be a matter of singing a little bit and talking about the three minor profits that we will not have addressed until Wednesday. And then the last 20 minutes or so will be the course evaluation, so that you know what to do with Wednesday.

Encourage your friends who have sort of been sleeping in to come for 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've been faithful to come, so yours waits a little bit more. But please do show up for that.

That'll be great. Let's take some time to pray together as we start.

God, our Heavenly Father, we're thankful that you are with us, that you're present, that you're walking with us day by day.

And we're especially grateful that as we're up and about this morning and facing, 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, and 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 really, indeed, 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.

And Lord, we would be also 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 the master of the universe, and we're so thankful that you are the master of our lives. We ask these things in Christ's name of thanksgiving. Amen.

We're picking up on post-exilic Judaism today, which means we're taking a step out of prophecy. It's often a problem that people identify Ezra and Nehemiah as prophets.

Technically, they are not prophets. They're both statesmen. And Ezra's a priest, and he's a scribe.

But as you're thinking of prophets, don't lump Ezra and Nehemiah into that particular clump. And so therefore, if you're 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're not going to be one of those. At any rate, this is where we're going, and we're going to talk a little bit about the overarching historical circumstances into which each of these folks fit, and then the texts 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 BC. So where do we find all of our stuff? 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're 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, you know, if y'all want to learn something, you go to PBS, and you watch a documentary, and that documentary's going to 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, and so he tells some stories, incorporates some letters, and has documents from the king's court.

Parts of Ezra are also in Aramaic. Remind me, what's Aramaic? Kelly. I said Kelly, I meant Kerry.

Yeah, it's that language that was broadly spoken in the ancient Near East in this particular time period, so it is a sister language to Hebrew. You're absolutely right, and therefore, as Ezra is talking about these things that have international consequences, he's using that language. Chapters four through six, approximately, are in Aramaic and incorporate 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 are 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? And so it's awfully important that they establish identity. That's why you're reading so many lists of names. Then we do have Haggai and Zechariah.

We're going to talk about them, Lord willing, on Wednesday. Esther, we're going to do it today. She's queen in a foreign court.

It's a fascinating story in lots and lots of ways. We'll get back to that in a moment. And 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've had Dr. Wick for history have probably been reading some of Herodotus because he's very keen on having his students read the primary sources, and Herodotus is an extremely important Greek author and historian, who tells us a lot about the Persian period and Greece's encounters with Persia. And, 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 the 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, the Jewish historian.

You learned all about him when you took the 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 the opening of the New Testament, but he does even go back further in his antiquities of the Jews and tells us a lot about this. And then we have some Persian inscriptions.

We also have that leads us right into the archeological material. The Persian inscriptions, by the way, are huge stone inscriptions. Wonderful things that give us some interesting material.

Official seals with names, papyri, 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. Bless you.

Okay, any questions on the sources? Just a quick overview. That's not a question, okay. This is another one of my, you know, when you get to the British Museum, be sure you see it.

This is in the British Museum. The famous Cyrus cylinder. The talks about Cyrus's decree, not only to send Jews back to their land, but it indicates that he had a change of policy.

You know, we had seen up till now the Assyrians 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, and he sends them back, sends them back to their lands, and has them rebuild their own worship establishments. Of course, it makes for good public relations, and a lot of this is a public relations ploy.

It's not only done with Israelites or Jews. It's done in a broader sense as well, but at any rate, here is our picture of the 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 were 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. And, of course, it's under Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar that the Jewish

temple is destroyed and a whole pack of people are taken to 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. You know, highlight these in your notes. These are names that are going to show up on your exam.

I'll just tell you that right now. Okay, Cyrus the Great, a major person. He's the one who Isaiah talked about more than 100 years ahead of time, saying 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 we're going to see as we start reading about this, this is recorded in Ezra, chapters one through six.

It's before Ezra's time. I'll say a little bit more about that in a moment. So, as Ezra talks about it, Ezra himself does not live through it.

He's going back and looking at history and saying this is what Cyrus has done. Don't worry about Cambyses. We're just making some 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've had Dr. Wick's class, but along with all the other persons in the Syrian, Babylonian, and now Persian Empire, the idea was to expand rule down into Egypt because Egypt is a bread basket for the eastern Mediterranean.

And Cambyses was on his way down there. And as he came back, there was some very troubling news of a usurper 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. His empire, or his reign, I should say, ended very quickly. And then you have Darius I coming in.

He's important for us. He's the one that's going to show up in the texts in terms of the ruling force when the temple actually gets rebuilt. So, completion of the temple.

You know, they started it. They got the foundations laid. As you read Ezra chapters one through three, you know that.

But then it all ground to a halt. And 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 him. And we'll look at those prods on Wednesday. Another reason is suggestion.

Darius needed the help and the support of that community of Jews out there because he, too, was making a press for Egypt. And if you've got people on your frontier, it's a good idea to have them favorable to you and not unfavorable. And so, if he helps them and pushes them and gives them permission to restore their temple, what better thing has he done? He's done a great PR act.

It works. All right, it works. After that, we have the person whom Herodotus refers to as Xerxes.

The biblical text calls him Ahasuerus. They're the same person. Keep in mind that 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 Ahasuerus.

And in the H, sh, okay, Ahasuerus, you can hear a little bit of the things that are in Xerxes, Khi. Dr. Hildebrand could do that Greek a whole lot better than I could. At any rate, it is the same person.

And it's all deriving from a Persian name there. Esther's our major person here, and we're going to come 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 in chapters one and following in Esther. Well, then, finally, we have Artaxerxes, under whom we have Ezra and Nehemiah actually doing, living, doing their work. So, again, notice that when Ezra's writing about the earlier stuff, it's not that he's on the scene.

He's making his documentary at that point, okay? 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.

Sarah? 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 about a 65, 70% certainty rate that those two may be the same individual.

But it's not the same person as Darius I. And there are lots of interesting issues going on with the rise of Darius I. He's another whole picture. Yeah, Trevor. 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' court. Nehemiah's cupbearer. Ezra's fairly significant.

Let me just make, since I'm pressing or going a little further on your question, it's very interesting that you've got a generation after Esther and Mordecai's being raised to the second in command and the Jews, the threat against the Jews being squelched, that 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's paved the way for something that these other two can do. Yahweh, Ro.

The reasons why Darius may have allowed them to complete the temple. Yeah, the first one is that the prophets are just prodding them. So that's not Darius.

It's just that they get it done because you've got these two prophetic voices that are really pushing them. And the second one is, Darius is doing a politically smart thing. It's a strategy on his part.

Okay. Okay. Here's where we start thinking about what Ezra says in chapters one through six.

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 timeframe, right? He's looking back.

As he does, he goes through some important things. And first of all, we have Cyrus's edict. This actually establishes some important connections with what we have in Chronicles, Second 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's 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's in Jerusalem.

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

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

Here, they're coming out of exile, and coming out of exile and coming back to the land where God had covenanted to have them 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 two, 42,360. Now there are all sorts of fascinating issues with numbers that I'm not going to get into.

Take a further course in Old Testament where we focus in on some of these things. If you contrast these numbers with Jeremiah chapter 52, they look a little big. But there are some reasons for that, I think.

Know the names of the leaders. Know the names of the leaders, okay? Exam flag, know the names of the leaders. Sheshpazar is the first one.

He's mentioned in Ezra twice. And he seems to be kind of a prominent person. But for some reason or other, he loses that pride of place to the next two, all right? The next two are the ones who are going to be more important for a longer period of time.

They're the ones who are going to be mentioned also in Haggai and Zechariah. Zerubbabel is an individual who is a descendant of the Davidic dynasty. So he's 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, the kingly line and priestly line are two major focuses. And of course, we're going to see both those names come up repeatedly in the prophets that we're going to study.

Well, unfortunately, once they get the foundation and the altar built, they encounter some opposition. Notice, I'm going to go back to particularly chapter three. Jeshua, this is verse two, and Zerubbabel began to build the altar of the Lord God to sacrifice burnt offerings.

Verse four, 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 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 was such a paltry effort or maybe they're just weeping because restoration is happening.

Of course, the real sad thing is that they stopped building. Chapter four, verse one, does talk about the opposition.

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 who came and said, we'd like to help you? Why are these people so exclusivistic and don't allow them to help? Doesn't sound very PC and multicultural to me. What's going on here? Trevor.

They would have corrupted them. How would they have corrupted them? Yeah, these are the people who live in the land, right? And remember our Samaritan problem? All the way from 2 Kings 17, all the way back to 2 Kings 17, where the people who are there are worshiping Yahweh, sort of, but they've 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 also worship all the gods that they had imported.

So, you've got this whole mess called syncretism. I mean, they remember that. And therefore, when they say, we've been worshiping your god, well, they don't really necessarily know who that god was and what was really entailed in it.

That's why, and that's why Trevor has said they would have corrupted it. It would have become another mishmash of material. So, we've got that sort of thing going on and we have Samaritan opposition as well, okay? They're both the same kind of issues.

Now, I need to say this. As you read chapter four of Ezra not only talks about the opposition in the day when they were right away having trouble with this, but it also gives a whole sweep of opposition all the way through to the reign of Artaxerxes. Okay, so chapter four is this interesting, thinking of our documentary, right? We've got a documentary.

Stuck right in the middle of that documentary is this big, broad-brush approach that's going to survey about 100 years, and then it'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 six, they completed, the temple 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's the feast that's celebrated? Passover.

Passover marks their coming out of Egypt. Passover marks redemption. Passover marked the reign of Hezekiah.

Passover marked the reign of Josiah. Now, you've got it here as well. So, it's not a surprise they would celebrate that.

We're going to take a break from Ezra because we're going chronologically today. So we've now looked at things from events from 539 down to 516, all right? The next time Ezra picks up in chapter seven 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've 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 of free art, and I've 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, okay? Little scrolls that are at the end of the back of the Hebrew Bible, but a terribly important book, as we're going to see. We may, the 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 in this story in a moment but it's got some profound theological truths in it, all right? They read 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 Esther, 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's the Feast of Ahasuerus, chapter one, and I'm going to say more about chapter one in a moment. What we see going on in chapter one is a fascinating chapter, but what Ahasuerus or Xerxes is doing is actually not only showing off, he's showing off. 180 days, it says he's having feast after feast after feast, and everybody's coming to

it, and he's feeding them, he's wining them and dining them and drinking them. By the way, the Hebrew word for feast which is *mishte* comes from a root which means the drink.

So, there is a lot of stuff going on here, but here's the thing. He became king in 486. Those of you who've 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's going on in Esther chapter one is getting support so that he can get an army that can march right across Asia Minor, camp at Sardis, go across the Hellespont 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. All these lists of names and the opulence, it's just verbiage all over the place.

Maybe you don't get it quite so much in English, but the Hebrew of Esther chapter one has just way too many words. Even the words themselves, there are some of them you don't even see them any place else. So, it's trying to just say what an overdone production all this stuff 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. Of course, what does Vashti do? That's another name you need to know for your exam. What does Vashti do? She refuses. She's not going to be displayed, particularly since the Hebrews 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 he should do about this thing, they say she's now going to be banned from the court, and so the thing that she had just refused to do, they need a royal decree to make that certain forever. It's a great irony, good part of the story.

And then of course, the second thing all the leaders are concerned about is that this is going to be public knowledge and all the women are going to just revolt against their husbands, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, but they issue a public decree that makes it public knowledge. I hope you see the humor in this. I mean, the whole narrative, especially this first chapter is really poking fun at Persia.

It's poking fun at the opulence and, frankly, the stupidity.

The third one is that it takes a public decree for the men to rule their houses. That's what the public decree says.

And then finally, all these wonderful servants, seven pairs, two pairs of sevens, they managed to, as I note for you, escalate Xerxes' domestic problems into a state crisis and we're supposed to be smiling and laughing at that. We really are, but see, here's the dark side of it. This is the 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 king's advisors, 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 that gets overruled, but not before there are some uncertainties and distress and despair on the part of the Jewish population, empire-wide. Okay, but make sure you got a handle on this. Don't just breeze through chapter one and miss the humor here.

We're supposed to see the humor. Whoops, I forgot the title; there it is. Well, as you know, once Vashti is banned, along comes Esther.

By the way, isn't this a wonderful representation? I mean, this is typical European 17th-century painting. I guess Esther didn't look quite like that, right? She's probably about 14 and I, well, anyway, I just guess Esther didn't look quite like that. But here's the story, as you know.

Vashti's banned, Xerxes remembers that he had a wife once, and so they go out searching for all the beautiful women, the most beautiful women in the empire. There's 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 out they didn't have a choice.

They didn't have a choice. This is a roundup, and it's a roundup for the king's harem. And so, she gets taken, and as you know, she pleases the king.

Mordecai, who was 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's another important point, she is identified as an orphan and a Jew.

Both outsiders, marginalized, and yet here she's brought right into the center. Talk about it for such a time as this, okay? This is God's providence in bringing her to that

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? Right. This is extremely important because we're going to visit some unfinished business now.

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, Sarah? Yeah, he doesn't follow through on the Lord's command to get rid of all the Amalekite stuff and kill the king Agag. Who's Haman a descendant of? An Agag guy, he's an Agag guy, isn't he, right? Descendant of Agag.

Don't think for a moment there are not some literary threads being tied up in here as well, or Mordecai from the tribe of Benjamin is going to finish some business that Saul should have done a long time ago, interestingly. Well, at any rate, we've got that whole thing, and then one more thing we need to say about the Esther and Mordecai connection. Yeah, Trevor.

Sorry, are all Saul and? Okay, it's Saul, and so forgive me, it's Saul, tribe of Benjamin, long lineage right on down to Mordecai. It's Agag, the king of the Amalekites, long lineage right on down to Haman. I should be going the other direction.

Right on down to Haman. Yeah, good, thanks. Well, shortly after Esther is moved into the harem, Mordecai does something very important.

What is it? Well, he's sitting in the gate. What does he hear, Kate? Yes, 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, and Esther warns the king, and the two guys that were planning it are done away with it. Mordecai's name is written in the chronicles.

And then what do you, that's right at the end of chapter two. What do you see next? Chapter three 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 as 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 this saving of the king's life. And instead, you've 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 are some intervening details, aren't there? I couldn't find a picture of Haman having everybody bowing down to him, but Haman

has a ego that's 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's this Haman. However, there's 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's the interesting thing: Let me drag out my text for you. Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job.

Let's see if I can find it fairly quickly. When Haman goes to the king to ask for this permission to do this dastardly deed, he says the following. I'm in chapter three, verse eight.

There are a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom who keep themselves separate. Truth, isn't it? That's the truth. Notice how Haman is very insidious.

He starts out with what is true, and then he's going to just twist a little bit and make a real ugly lie out of it. Their customs are different from 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 best interest to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them.

Now, here's another fascinating thing, and I'll just expound on this a little bit because it's 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, l'abed, if it's just tweaked a little bit, can mean to enslave them. Do you get the deal, what's going on? I'm suggesting we don't know this for sure, but I'm suggesting that maybe Mordecai, when he's 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 then.

It's going to be another parallel if that's true. If he's saying that, and then he says, and I'll put 10,000 talents of silver into the royal treasury for men to carry out this business, and you're 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 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 do I think that that works? It's not really my idea, lifted it from somebody else.

But Esther, when she's making her appeal to the king in chapter seven, notice what she says. Verse four, I and my people have been sold, remember all the money that's going to, 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. Does that make 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 Haman's intent because Haman's intent only shows up in the decree: destroy, kill, and annihilate.

And of course, once the decree comes out, Mordecai is in sackcloth and ashes. He's 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's going on. He appeals to her to appeal to the king.

And, of course, what's the classic line out of Esther? For such a time as this. Chapter four, 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 it first as a statement.

If you remain silent at a time like this, or sorry, at this time, 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's Jewish, she's going to be found out even though she's in the king's court because there'll probably be enough turncoats now that they know that Mordecai is Jewish, and that'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 give her a potential out, but he's saying, you're going to perish.

And there may be no other hope for the Jews. And then it goes on and says, who knows, but you have come to royal position for such a time as this. So Esther agrees to fast for three days.

It's a completely 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's against the law. Your NIV translates it, if I perish, I perish.

It can also be translated as, when I perish, I perish. So, we could read this as neither of them feeling a great deal of hope that anything's going to happen. And yet notice in spite of that, she goes through with this and goes to the king and appeals to the king.

And as you know, Xerxes stretches out the scepter to her. Then she asks Haman and Xerxes to come and have a feast or a banquet. By the way, you don't have to read it in this negative Paul that I've 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, that she was there at that place at that time, which is precisely why Jews throughout history have seen Esther as such an important book. They recognize that no matter how hideous circumstances have been, and by the way, for 2,000 years, the circumstances of the Jewish people have been really, really terrible, often at the hands of the church.

But they read Esther and recognize that in Esther, 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. The whole book is made up of pairs.

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, no, just come to another banquet.

And what happens in the meantime? What's the next story, part of the story? Chapter six. It is completely God's work. Trevor.

Yes, but he would build the... He does, yeah, he does build the gallows, that's true, because he's kind of vexed on his way home after the banquet, he sees Mordecai,

he's mad again. But something else happens right at the beginning of chapter six, and that's entirely God's doing. Let me just say this, by the way.

If you were in Esther and Mordecai's place, you'd be planning like crazy, wouldn't you? How are we going to work on this? How are we going to reveal Haman's plan? How are we going to keep the king happy? How, how, how? And all their scheming from a human standpoint is necessary. But in God's providence, Mary, what happens? Yes. The king has insomnia at the exact right point in time.

And 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's nothing more soporific than court chronicles, and he's expecting those 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's expecting to get permission to hang. Mordecai on those gallows that he's just built.

And the king, who always gets to speak first, says, what's to be done for the person whom the king 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 may be a little bit on to Haman. And he's going to set Haman up for a real fall by making Haman think that it's going to be Haman 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 therefore, of course, Haman has to do it for Mordecai, which is utterly humiliating. But he only has time to get home after being totally humiliated when he's dragged back to the second banquet, as you know. And that's at that point that Esther's going to reveal the identity of the perfidious person who's trying to do away with the entire Jewish race.

But notice that statement in verse four of chapter seven that I read for you earlier. If we'd only been sold as slaves, that would have been tolerable. But this person is out to destroy, kill, and annihilate my people.

All right. 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 was to 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 a little bit, comes back in and thinks that Haman is about to molest Esther. And that is the last straw.

And Haman is taken out and executed. Just a couple of things to draw this together. And by the way, I need to say as well that as you read the rest of the book, chapters eight through that 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 nine, perhaps you were a little bit appalled at the disgusting amount of killing that the Jews did.

You should have 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 second decree, you still have a whole bunch of people that are out to kill Jews, that tells us something. One of the interesting issues as you read that decree, 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 nine, when it's talking about the people that the Jews killed, it says, but they took no plunder. They took no plunder.

So, they foreswore that part that they could have done. All right, it's a literary masterpiece. I've suggested most of these already.

And you've got them in your notes anyway. Reversals, the position of the 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 went from first and second in the kingdom to hanging on the gallows that he had planned for Mordecai. Esther, being an orphan and a marginalized Jew, is going to become queen. All kinds of reversals in the fortunes of the Jews.

As I said, there is 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 about the lot that was cast to have this go out, happened on Passover, the 13th of Nisan, for the 13th of the first month, right before the 14th. And 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 it refers to the Jewish communities that were dispersed throughout the empire. And 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 Alexandria and the community in Alexandria in the first century. You see it throughout European history.

You see it now. In fact, there's a return of anti-Semitism that's virulent anti-Semitism. Just keep your ears open.

You're going to hear it, all right? 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 very actively in our worlds.

The book of Esther shows that. Because the name of God doesn't ever show up in this book. And the only possible reference is chapter four, verse 14, coming from another place.

It's the only possible reference. And yet, knit throughout the entire text is the providence of God. In terms of Mordecai's, you know, that injustice to him, not even having that business revealed 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. This insomnia problem, or the king's insomnia problem, is right at the center of the book, right? And all around it unfolding are instances of the reversals that God himself affects.

It's so 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, Nehemiah. These are more straightforward. As you read chapter seven of Ezra, we find out, as I've said already, that he was a priest.

And that's pretty important for him. He's a teacher who knows the Torah. Ezra's 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's responsible for that. His mission, well, Artaxerxes gives him a mission.

Go back, get that community back in shape again. That's what he's called to do. I have no idea what that bellow was out there.

All right, at any rate. In the book of Ezra and counterpart with Nehemiah, the chapters are up here, we see the need for reformation. Now again, the date's 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.

And people are just becoming complacent, lackadaisical, spiritually alive, unalive, dead, whatever. Here's the problem, they're intermarrying. I'm suggesting to you that as they're dealing with this, part of the issue is that they simply no longer have national boundaries.

There are reconstituted little community, the whole area around Jerusalem, Judea, 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 seven 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, so there is no intermarriage. Ezra prays, identifying himself with the sins of his people and earnestly praying for God's restoration. The punishment of the disobedient is very interesting.

They put those foreign wives with their children away, which again sounds very harsh, but we need to remember that sin has wide-ranging consequences, sometimes for the people who are not perpetrators of the sin. Also, we see a wonderful incident where all the people are called together. This is Nehemiah, chapter eight.

They're all called together in the square, in the public square. It's the Feast of Tabernacles, which, according to Deuteronomy 31, we know is the time when they were supposed to gather together read the Torah; and Ezra reads the Torah from dawn until noon, and everybody's listening. Do you catch that? From five o'clock in the morning until noon.

It's fascinating. They're convicted. There's fasting and confession of sin.

They covenant to keep the Torah. Now, there's going to be lapses, and we're going to see that at the end of Nehemiah too, 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 about it in Ezra chapter nine and the parallel in Nehemiah eight, 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's the intent of this.

Now, we're going to run through the rest of Nehemiah really fast. Have 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 of Artaxerxes, 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's got people building the walls, rocks in one hand, weapons in the other, and he's praying constantly, short prayers. He's very concerned about strengthening Jerusalem's defenses.

The walls have been broken down. That's not good. And so, in a very physical, real, strategic way, he's building up the defenses.

He engages in this reformation with Ezra that I've just talked about a moment ago. He's part of that. He actually will have more of a sociological approach to it.

Ezra's going to have more of a religious approach to it, but they're the same basic thing going on. And then our final thing with Nehemiah that we need to say, he's governor, right? He's governor, and he's concerned about Jerusalem's, well, 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, they dedicate the walls.

When Nehemiah gets called back to the king's court in Persia, he leaves. And here's 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 has to start all over again doing these kinds of things. Removing foreigners, getting the people who had stopped paying tithes to support the Levites and the widows and the aliens, get them to do that again. Sabbath was an important issue, and when he was gone, they quit keeping the Sabbath.

He has to reinstitute that again. You know, you get an interesting feeling for what it's 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.