CONTINUING LAY TRAINING BIBLE STUDY

THE **DISCIPLESHIP** PLACE

# Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther

CHURCH OF NAZARENE

# **CLT Bible Study**EZRA, NEHEMIAH, AND ESTHER

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- 1. Since this is a Bible study, have your Bible near you at all times. This study outline is only designed to help you read the Bible.
- 2. The Bible version used for this study is the New International Version (NIV). The editor primarily used the language of the NIV to prepare the lessons. You may use other versions of the Bible if you choose. While the language may be different, the meaning will be the same.
- 3. Before you begin each section, read the entire Scripture passage. This is very important. The study outline will help you understand the particular Bible verses, but it does not tell what they say.
- 4. IMPORTANT: Note that scriptures from Ezra, Nehemiah, or Esther may not have the book's name. In sections referring specifically to the Book of Ezra, if the Bible reference is (1:6-8), you will find these verses (6-8) in the first chapter of Ezra. Whereas other books of the Bible will include the name in the reference, for example, Isaiah 53:1 and John 17:1.
- 5. Go through the study outline carefully. Take time to look up all the Scripture verses in the outline.
- 6. You may want to mark your study Bible as you go. Marking your Bible will help the words become more and more your own. It will be well if you have colored pencils at hand to mark the Bible as you go along. A simple system is to mark promises in blue and warnings in red. But, however you do it, mark your Bible and it will become more and more your very own.
- 7. Finally, read the Bible passage again to better understand its meaning. Perhaps you may benefit from listening to the reading of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther.
- 8. The editor has also included how to pronounce some of the more difficult proper names and other important words. The first time the word is introduced, the pronunciation will follow the word. At the end of each chapter, you will find a list of the words in the order in which they were introduced. Additionally, at the end of the document, all of the words and pronunciations will be listed alphabetically. For pronunciation of additional terms and their definitions, please refer to A Dictionary of the Bible & Christian Doctrine in Everyday English (Eby et al., 2004).

If a family or a few friends decide to take this study together, here are two suggestions:

- 1. Have one person read the Bible passage and another person read the Continuing Lay Training outline.
- 2. Then discuss the Scripture and outline. Ask questions of each other to help clarify the meaning of the Scripture.

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# **EZRA, NEHEMIAH, AND ESTHER**

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# CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION TO EZRA, NEHEMIAH, AND ESTHER



#### Section 1. Introduction to the Book of Ezra

#### A. TITLE

The book is named for its principal character, Ezra, an outstanding priest and scribe. He was a scholar and teacher of the Scriptures at the time of the Exile. Ezra has been credited by many authorities with the writing of a number of the later books of the Old Testament, especially 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. It is also possible that he made the first authoritative collection of Old Testament books. This may have occurred as early as 430 B.C. when he was active in the restoration, especially the religious reorganization of Israel.

#### **B. AUTHORSHIP**

In both the Hebrew and the Greek versions of the Old Testament, the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally combined into one book. The similar wording at the end of 2 Chronicles and the beginning of Ezra suggests that the Chronicles were also at one time part of the same combined history. Some have considered Ezra to have been the author of this combined historical work. Others have believed it to be the work of a later "chronicler," who used some autobiographical materials from Ezra and Nehemiah. This opinion is based upon the use of the first person in several sections of the books now bearing their names. Actually, nothing is known of the final compilation of any of the four books, 1 Chronicles to Nehemiah, other than the sections of Ezra and Nehemiah, which are written in the first person.

#### C. DATE OF COMPOSITION

The events related in the Book of Ezra apparently took place between 556 and 538 B.C. If the book was composed by Ezra, it is necessary to think of it as being written early in the fifth century B.C., or at least by about 430 B.C. If some other "chronicler" composed the work, we are free to assign a later date, e.g., 330-300 B.C.

#### Section 2. Introducing the Book of Nehemiah

#### A. TITLE AND AUTHORSHIP

The Book of Nehemiah is named for its principal character, one of the outstanding leaders of the restoration period. Originally the book was combined with Ezra in the Hebrew manuscripts (see also the introduction to the Book of Ezra). In the Septuagint [SEP-twuh-gunt], the Greek version of the Old Testament, it has the title 2 Esdras, Esdras being the Greek form of Ezra.



Little is known about the author or compiler of Nehemiah. A persistent tradition says Nehemiah was "the chronicler" who wrote 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and perhaps Esther. Much of the material apparently originated in Nehemiah's memoirs, judging from the use of the first person.

#### **B. DATE AND SOURCE OF COMPOSITION**

A clue to the date of writing is given in an official list of high priests, which ends with Jaddua [jad-OO-ah], about 330 B.C. One may assume that not long after this date some "chronicler" or "compiler" wrote the book. He probably used some authentic memoirs of Nehemiah, and, in addition, Temple records, official lists of names, and other sources available.

#### C. CONTENTS AND MESSAGE

The great theme of both Ezra and Nehemiah is the faithfulness of God in restoring Judah and Jerusalem. The character and accomplishments of Nehemiah, one of God's choicest saints in the Old Testament period, are highlighted. Nehemiah held a high position in the court of Artaxerxes [ar-tax-ERK-sees]. He was the king's cupbearer and evidently a favorite confidant, and given special privileges and authority. Nehemiah was also a devoted worshipper of Yahweh [YAH-way], and ready at any moment, like Isaiah (6:8), to respond to his call. Through his prayerfulness and capable leadership, Nehemiah succeeded in building Jerusalem into a well-fortified city, able to maintain itself until the coming of the promised Messiah some four hundred fifty years later.

#### Section 3. Introducing the Book of Esther

#### A. TITLE

The Book of Esther is named for its principal character, a Jewess by the name of Hadassah ("myrtle"), who was renamed Esther ("a star"). This new name was probably given her after she had been made queen in recognition of her beauty.

#### B. AUTHORSHIP AND DATE OF WRITING

As in the case of several other books of the Bible, there isn't definite knowledge of the authorship of the Book of Esther. Judging from the nature of the references to King Ahasuerus or Xerxes [ZERK-zees], and the care with which Persian customs are explained, it would appear that the book was written at a time considerably later than the events themselves. It was apparently directed to leaders who were unfamiliar with Persian customs.

On the other hand, the writer shows familiarity with Persian affairs, including the Palace of Xerxes at Susa. His language contains old Persian words, which would hardly have been in use later than the fourth or third century B.C. T. W. Davies (*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2, p. 1006) says,



"The royal records of Median and Persian kings are plainly in existence and accessible, which they would not have been, had the empire been overthrown." References are made to Persian records in several instances, notably 2:23; 6:1; and 10:2.

#### C. GENERAL SETTING

The story belongs chronologically to the period between the return of Zerubbabel [zuh-RUH-buh-bul] and that of Ezra, that is, between the sixth and seventh chapters of Ezra. According to a common agreement among the more conservative scholars, King Ahasuerus is to be identified with Xerxes. Ahasuerus, or *Akhashverosh*, is the Hebrew equivalent of the Persian *Khshayarsha*, called Xerxes in Greek.

The author of the story is careful to date his events. The wedding banquet, at which Esther was inaugurated as queen, occurred in the seventh year of Xerxes' reign (about 479 B.C.). This is four years after the celebration in chapter 1 which resulted in Vashti's divorce. It is generally thought that between these two events Xerxes made his ill-fated expedition to Greece, where he was defeated at the battle of Salamis (480 B.C.). From this defeat he returned to Susa and found comfort in Esther's embrace. Events referred to in the book range from the third to the twelfth years of Xerxes' reign, or from 483 to 474 B.C.

## D. AUTHENTICITY AND LITERARY CHARACTER

The authenticity of the book as it occurs in the Hebrew canon has never been questioned. In the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament, used in Jesus' day and in the apostolic age) several additions have been made to various parts of the narrative. These have been collected and placed together at the end of the book in the Catholic canon and in the Apocrypha [uh-PAHK-ruh-fuh], and have been entitled "The Rest of the Book of Esther". These additions were probably written in Greek at a period much later than the Hebrew text and for the purpose of giving the book a more genuine religious tone.

There are a number of weighty arguments in favor of the historical reliability of the narrative:

- 1. The existing Feast of Purim, the origin of which is explained in this book, constitutes a proof of the truth of the story.
- 2. The character of Ahasuerus (Xerxes), as described in this narrative, tallies closely with secular descriptions of Xerxes.
- 3. The references to Persian customs and the life at the Persian court are historically accurate.
- 4. There are clear references to the Persian records which indicate that the story is intended to be understood as literal history. The book may properly be classed as a historical romance, if by this we mean that it is *actual* history *romantically told*. In this it is comparable to the beautiful story of Ruth.



#### E. PURPOSE AND RELIGIOUS VALUE

A remarkable feature of the Book of Esther, which has been variously commented on, is the absence of the name of God. In fact, no definite reference is made to prayer in the book unless in 9:31, where, in speaking of the Jews, reference is made to "the fastings and their cry". It would seem that this omission of any definite reference to the Jewish religion is intended. The reason may well have been that the book was subject to censorship, and that any reference to God or the Jewish faith would have caused it to be destroyed. (See this with the early Christian book The Shepherd of Hermas, written about A.D. 100, where the Shepherd, Christ, is nowhere identified for a similar reason.) The book, on the other hand, is filled with the proof of a divine Providence working on behalf of the Jews. This constitutes a large part of its religious message and is certainly one of the main purposes for which it was written.

#### F. SPIRITUAL MESSAGE

The teachings of the Book of Esther may be summarized as follows:

- 1. The Jews, even though disobedient to God and wandering far from him in exile, are nevertheless the objects of his mercy and concern.
- 2. God's providence is always over his people to save them from their enemies who persecute them.
- 3. God sometimes hides himself in achieving his purposes in the world.
- 4. The power of prayer is plainly taught. It is evident that the fasting called for in 4:16 is a matter of fasting and prayer. The answer to the prayer is to be seen in the success of the queen in prevailing upon the king to aid the Jews in their distress.
- 5. Individual responsibility to do God's will is taught in 4:14: "Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" One must take the risks involved in doing God's bidding. Esther said, "If I perish, I perish" (4:16).

Septuagint [SEP-twuh-gunt]

Jaddua [jad-OO-ah]

Artaxerxes [ar-tax-ERK-sees]

Yahweh [YAH-way]

Xerxes [ZERK-zees]

Zerubbabel [zuh-RUH-buh-bul]

Apocrypha [uh-PAHK-ruh-fuh]

## CHAPTER 2. THE BOOK OF EZRA



Section 1. The First Return Under Zerubbabel (Ezra 1:1-6: 22)

#### A. THE DECREE OF CYRUS (1:1-4)

When the Persians conquered Babylon in 538 B.C., one of King Cyrus' first acts was the restoration of the captive peoples to their home countries. He aided them in rebuilding their religious shrines, and restored to them all religious objects that had been confiscated by the kings of Babylon. By this reverse of policy, he wished to foster a spirit of peace and loyalty among his subjects; but God used it, in the case of the repentant Jews, to restore them to their Promised Land and to build again their Temple, which had lain in ruins nearly half a century.

The decree of Cyrus concerning the Jews is found in quite similar wording both in Ezra (1:2-4) and in 2 Chronicles (36:22-23). The prophecy of Jeremiah mentioned in verse 1 refers to Jeremiah 29:10. The prophecy was that the Captivity would last seventy years. This is usually explained as the seventy years from the first captivity in 606 B.C. until the first return, about 536 B.C.

#### B. DESCRIPTION OF THE FIRST RETURN (1:5 - 2:67)

#### 1. Aid Given the Returning Jews (1:5-6)

A great deal of help was needed from kinsmen and neighbors to make their trip successful as well as to furnish a sufficient funds for the initial steps of the reconstruction of the Temple.

#### 2. Restoration of the Sacred Vessels (1:7-11)

King Cyrus helped the captive peoples set up anew their native religious life by restoring the sacred objects that had been confiscated in their homeland. A great number of sacred vessels had been removed from the Temple in Jerusalem, and had been kept at least fifty years at Babylon. These were delivered to a certain "Sheshbazzar" (1:8). This could be the same person as Zerubbabel (2:2), who seems to have had the Babylonian name Sheshbazzar. This prince of the royal family of David was chosen to be the leader in the first return and in the work of rebuilding the Temple.

#### 3. The Official List of Those Who Returned (2:1-67)

Nearly the entire second chapter is taken up with a list of those who returned to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel. It is interesting to note the value placed on individual persons and on family groups making up the community. God has his place of service for each person in the great work of his kingdom, and each will get one's own reward for the service rendered.



A problem arose concerning the small number of Levites in the returning group. The Levites, who were not sons of Aaron, did the more menial tasks about the Temple, yet their services were important. It has been suggested that, since they filled the humbler positions, they may not have been challenged, as were the priests, to make the sacrifice necessary to endure the difficult journey to Jerusalem. A similar temptation comes to many Christians today who, because they are not given the more responsible positions, feel that their services are not very necessary. Surely, in God's eyes, faithfulness is of more account than the particular rank which we may hold in his service.

The totals given in 1:64-65 altogether amount to nearly fifty thousand persons. This number was probably small in comparison with the large number of Jewish exiles in Babylonia and the neighboring provinces of the Persian Empire.

#### C. TEMPLE RESTORATION BEGUN (2:68 - 3:13)

#### 1. Offerings Made by the Jewish Leaders (2:68-70)

Immediately upon their arrival in Palestine [PAL-us-tien], the heads of families gave a generous offering for the building operations. The offering, translated into modern terms, would represent hundreds of dollars each for the nearly fifty thousand persons who made the journey.

#### 2. Altar Rebuilt, Feast of Tabernacles Observed (3:1-6)

It is to be noted that the returning Jews, as we would expect of the faithful remnant, put first things—first. More important than the rebuilding of the Temple was the erection of an altar, where they could express gratitude to God, who had brought them safely on their long journey from the land of captivity. Since it was the middle of October when they returned, they celebrated the Feast of the Tabernacles, which is held at the end of the harvest season. More sacrifices were offered on that occasion than at any of the other festivals.

#### 3. Foundation of the Temple Laid (3:7-13)

It was at least six months after the arrival of the returning company before a beginning was made in the actual rebuilding of the Temple. In the meantime, there was much to be done. Masons and carpenters were hired; stones were quarried; and timber was secured from the Lebanon hills. Part of the expense incurred was supplied through a grant made for that purpose by Cyrus, the Persian king.

As the last stones in the foundation were laid, an elaborate ceremony was carried out. There was great rejoicing on the part of all, except a few older men. They wept when they remembered the glory of Solomon's Temple and realized how inferior the new one would be. But, their weeping was drowned in the rejoicing of the general populace.



#### D. REBUILDING INTERRUPTED BY ADVERSARIES (4:1-24)

Hearing of the progress made toward the rebuilding of the Temple, the Samaritans and other peoples of the vicinity became quite disturbed. They feared the Jews would become a threat to their own security and power. Cunningly, they offered to join in the rebuilding of the Temple, alleging that they too were worshipers of the true God. When Zerubbabel, perceiving their evil design, rejected their offer, they at once began to hinder the work in every way possible. Finally, they made a false report to the king. As a result, the work was interrupted and was not resumed for fifteen years.

#### E. REBUILDING OF THE TEMPLE COMPLETED (5:1 - 6:22)

#### 1. Haggai and Zechariah (5:1-2; see Haggai 1:4-10)

We do not know what happened from the year 535 B.C., the second year after the return under Zerubbabel, until 520 B.C., the second year of Darius' reign. But, during this time, or near the end of it, two fiery prophets appeared and some of their prophecies have been left to us. Their names were Haggai and Zechariah. They accused the people and their leaders of unfaithfulness to God in building their own houses instead of the house of the Lord. The prophets' messages had the desired effect. The people set about the work of Temple building again and the prophets worked with them.

#### 2. Information Sent to Darius by Tattenai [TAT-en-eye] (5:3 - 6:13)

At this time Tattenai, governor of the province of Syria, visited Jerusalem and secured all the information he could about the work being done and the persons who were leading in the building. He then wrote a letter to Darius, the king, in the hope of getting his authority to stop the work. Instead, his letter had the opposite effect. A search was made for the decree of Cyrus authorizing the building of the Temple. It was found at Achmetha, the summer home of the Persian monarchs. Then Darius, the king, made a second decree warning Tattenai and all others in the neighboring provinces not to molest those who were engaged in the work but to aid them in every way possible. One can see here the providence of God working on behalf of his people in response to their faith.

#### 3. Dedication of the Restored Temple (6:14-18)

The rebuilding of the Temple was completed in not more than five years. At the joyous dedication (516 B.C.), we are told that 712 animals were sacrificed. Among others, there were twelve he-goats sacrificed, "according to the number of the tribes of Israel" (6:17). While those who returned were largely of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, the leaders wished it to be understood that they represented all twelve tribes of Israel. After the Exile the name Israel was regularly assumed by the restored state.



#### 4. Celebration of the Passover (6:19-22)

Following closely upon the dedication of the Temple was the annual feast of the Passover. On this occasion, it was celebrated with unusual rejoicing. All Israelites, both those who had returned from exile and those who had remained in the land, were invited to the feast, together with all the converts who had separated themselves from their former religions to serve the true God. "The LORD had filled them with joy by changing the attitude of the king of Assyria, so he assisted them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel." (6:22)

#### Section 2. The Return Under Ezra (Ezra 7:1 - 10:44)

Between chapters 6 and 7, there is a period of at least fifty-eight years, of which no specific record is given in Scripture. Some of the prophecies of Malachi probably belong to this period. Conservative scholars generally think that all of the events described in the Book of Esther also belong to the time between the dedication of the Temple and the return of Ezra (516-458 B.C.).

#### A. EZRA SENT TO ASSIST IN THE RESTORATION (7:1 - 8:36)

#### 1. Ezra and His Mission to Jerusalem (7:1-10)

Ezra is described as "a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses" (7:6) and as one who "had devoted himself to study the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees" to his fellow Israelites (7:10). He was held in high esteem, not only among the Israelites in exile but also in the king's court. It seems likely that he may have held a position of responsibility in the court of Artaxerxes, who was at that time king of Persia. The date of Ezra's arrival at Jerusalem is in some doubt, but usually, it is given as 458-457 B.C., "the seventh year of Artaxerxes" (7:7). This is assumed to refer to Artaxerxes 1, whose dates are 464-424 B.C.

#### 2. The Letter and Decree of Artaxerxes (7:11-28)

At this point, the king wrote a letter to Ezra, perhaps in response to the latter's request. Ezra was given full authority to make a journey to Jerusalem and to act there as the king's messenger. He was to convey to those who took part in the first return a generous gift from the king's treasury to aid in the Temple services and to restore to their place the remainder of the sacred vessels which had been taken to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. Other gifts were enjoined upon "the treasurers of the Trans-Euphrates" (river) (7:21), and a special invitation was extended to all Jews who might choose to go with Ezra on this mission.



#### 3. The Official List of Those Who Returned Under Ezra (8:1-14)

As in the case of the first return under Zerubbabel, the list of those joining in the enterprise is carefully recorded. According to this list, about fifteen hundred men were included. When their families and attendants are added, the entire group would amount to about five thousand persons.

#### 4. Final Preparations for the Journey (8:15-30)

An assembly of those who were to take the journey was called at the river Ahava near Babylon. Here it was found that there were no Levites in the company, although there was a considerable number of priests. Messengers were sent to summon Levites and *Nethinims* (Temple servants) to go with them, that there might be those who could assist in the Temple services when they arrived in Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, Ezra proclaimed a fast and led the company in earnest prayer that God would protect them on the perilous journey. Since he was making the journey under the special authorization of the king, Ezra could have asked for a guard to accompany them, as apparently both Zerubbabel and Nehemiah did. Since he was desirous of proving to the king that his God would furnish protection for them, he asked for no guard. This was a fine demonstration of faith on Ezra's part, and we note that his faith was duly rewarded, for in the long journey of four months, no harm came to them (8:31).

A final act on Ezra's part in preparation for the journey was to place twelve priests in charge of the valuable gifts being sent with them to Jerusalem to aid in the services of the Temple. The value of the silver, the silver vessels, the gold, and the 20 golden bowls was millions of dollars (8:26-27).

#### 5. The Journey and Arrival at Jerusalem (8:31-36)

The 900-mile journey took nearly four months, but at last, the company arrived at Jerusalem. After three days of rest they gave the rich treasure they had brought with them to those who had charge of the Temple. They sacrificed many animals in the court of the Temple as an expression of their thanksgiving to God and of their dedication to his will in the coming days. Orders were conveyed by the king to the nearby Persian governors to assist the Jews with anything they might need and to protect them in their service in the Temple.

#### B. THE REFORMS OF EZRA (9:1 - 10:44)

Ezra had taken the journey to Jerusalem to teach the people the law of Moses. Although the law existed from the time of Moses, few copies were possessed. There was perhaps only one during a great part of the time. That one copy was, of course, jealously guarded by the priests.



During the Exile, the scribes, such as Ezra, gave much time to the study and interpretation of the law. This was enhanced by their separation from the Temple at Jerusalem. He spent much time with this both before and after his journey to Jerusalem.

#### 1. Ezra's Grief at the Moral Laxity of the People (9:1-4)

Knowing Ezra's zeal for the law and his desire to see it obeyed among his people, some of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem brought his attention to a matter which had caused them great concern. The people had not kept themselves separate from their non-Israelite neighbors, as they were admonished to do in the law. Many of them had intermarried with the families of neighboring nations. Among those who were guilty of this sin were some who were looked upon as leaders in the Jewish community.

Upon hearing this news, Ezra, following a well-known oriental custom, tore his garments to show his great grief and even "plucked off the hair" from his head and beard (9:3). Many of the Jews gathered around him, some out of curiosity and some to share in his grief. He remained in this state of mind until the time of the evening sacrifice.

#### 2. Ezra's Prayer (9:5-15)

In the evening, Ezra ceased his grieving. With torn garments, he dropped to his knees before God to pray for his sinful fellow countrymen. This prayer of humble confession and ardent intercession on behalf of those who had sinned is one of the notable prayers of Scripture.

#### 3. The Proposal of Shechaniah [shek-en-EYE-uh] (10:1-5)

While Ezra was praying, a large group of people came together to share his grief with him. One of their number, Shechaniah by name, acting as spokesman for the group, suggested to Ezra that a covenant be made requiring the foreign wives to be put away, together with the children born of such unions. In accordance with this suggestion, Ezra immediately called to him the leading priests and Levites. He required them to swear, on the part of all Israel, that this would be done.

#### 4. Final Measures Taken (10:6-17)

Ezra's proposed action in the matter of mixed marriages was apparently quite unanimously accepted, for there are only four mentioned as opposing it. Ezra himself was anxious not to do anything hastily or contrary to the will of God. He retired to the quarters of a certain Johanan, and there he fasted and doubtless spent many hours in prayer to God for specific direction. On the following day, an order was sent out to all the Jews in the province of Judah to assemble at Jerusalem within three days, on penalty of loss of their property and excommunication from the Jewish congregation.



This was a stern measure but seemingly quite successful in spite of heavy rains at that particular season of the year (December).

When the group had assembled, Ezra appealed to them to confess their sin and to separate themselves from any further unlawful relation with the non-Israelite peoples. In response, they replied, as with one voice, "You are right! We must do as you say" (10:12). The practice of mixed marriages was not eradicated; however, we learn from the fact that Nehemiah had to deal with the same matter during his governorship some twenty or thirty years later.

#### 5. The Official List of the Offenders (10:18-44)

A long list is now appended of those who had transgressed in marrying foreign wives - 114 in all. Many of these were priests, Levites, singers, and doorkeepers of the Temple, showing that many of the religious leaders had been guilty of this violation of the law.

The reformation effected in this manner was seemingly necessary to prepare for the real work that Ezra came to accomplish. It is assumed that this work was carried on effectively during the thirteen or more years that elapsed between this time and the coming of Nehemiah. Ezra's continued work in cooperation with Nehemiah is described in Nehemiah chapters 9-10.

Palestine [PAL-us-tien]
Tattenai [TAT-en-eye]
Shechaniah [shek-en-EYE-uh]

## CHAPTER 3. THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

NOTES

#### Section 1. Rebuilding the Wall of Jerusalem (1:1 - 6:19)

#### A. NEHEMIAH'S COMMISSION (1:1 - 2:8)

According to chronological data given in the books themselves, some thirteen to fifteen years had elapsed between the last events described in Ezra and the beginning of the story of Nehemiah. Nothing is known of the previous history of Nehemiah, but it may be assumed that he belonged to an important family of Judahites transported to Babylon in the early sixth century B.C. He was a layman in contrast to Ezra, who was both a priest and a scribe, and Zerubbabel, who was of the princely line of David. His position as cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, however, put him in a very influential position. This can be seen as part of the providence of God in bringing to pass the needed fortification of the city of Jerusalem, which at that time was in very great danger.

#### 1. Sad News from Jerusalem (1:1-3)

In spite of Nehemiah's devotion to the cause of God and to his countrymen in Judah, it is possible that he knew little about the condition of the Holy City or of the Jews in Palestine. But, one day a group of pilgrims from Jerusalem, led, it would seem, by his own brother, Hanani, brought him sad news of the condition of the city. This brought great sorrow to Nehemiah's heart and an ever-deepening sense of his own responsibility to find a way in which he might help his afflicted countrymen.

#### 2. Nehemiah's Prayer (1:4-11)

Under these circumstances, Nehemiah prayed a beautiful prayer of confession and intercession. During the three or four months after the news from Jerusalem, he was increasingly impressed that God would have him go to the rescue of his people and that the city of Jerusalem might be restored and properly protected against its enemies.

#### 3. A Commission Received to Fortify Jerusalem (2:1-8)

One day, as King Artaxerxes noticed the unusual sadness of Nehemiah's countenance, the king inquired what was troubling him. Nehemiah, as we may expect, explained to him the sad news he had heard from his countrymen at Jerusalem. Then, at the bidding of the king to make any request he desired, he first breathed a momentary prayer to God, after which he revealed to the king his desire to go help the Jews. The king was surprisingly favorable to this request. He not only allowed Nehemiah to make the trip, but he appointed him as governor of Judah.



#### B. PLANS LAID FOR BUILDING THE WALL (2:9-20)

#### 1. Anival in Jerusalem (2:9-11)

Nehemiah and his companions made the long journey from Susa to Jerusalem in perhaps five months. They found themselves surrounded by such powerful enemies as Sanballat [san-BAL-at], the governor of Samaria; Tobiah [tob-EYE-uh], the Ammonite [A-muh-nyt]; and Geshem, the Arabian. These enemies continued to harass him throughout his thirteen or more years of governorship in Judah. Although many discouragements and crises developed, Nehemiah never yielded to his circumstances nor suggested the possibility of defeat.

#### 2. A Preliminary Survey (2:12-16)

Three days after his arrival, Nehemiah decided to make a secret tour of the walls. What he found was even worse than he anticipated. Everywhere were the marks of destruction and utter devastation. Nehemiah concluded there were plenty of materials for restoring the walls, including those which the king had promised. If only manpower could be furnished and the work duly organized, the walls could be restored and the city fortified. For this important work, the cooperation of the entire Jewish population must be secured.

#### 3. Cooperation of the Leaders Received (2:17-20)

They were told how God had called Nehemiah to undertake the restoration of the city's fortifications. They were also told that God had moved the king to assist him by giving him authority as governor and making available to him whatever materials were necessary to complete the work.

Impressed by Nehemiah's zeal and by the evident favor of God and the king, the Jewish leaders answered immediately, "Let us start building." (2:18) With this assurance of cooperation, everything appeared to be in readiness for Nehemiah to accomplish the great task to which he felt God had called him.

Sanballat and his henchmen laughed at the builders to scorn when they heard of the plans. Nehemiah let his enemies know, as Zerubbabel had done (Ezra 4:2-3), that the Jews purposed to carry out God's plan without calling on their neighbors or entering into any entangling alliances with the other nations.

#### C. The Work Completed (3:1 - 6:19)

#### 1. A Detailed List of the Builders (3:1-32)

At first, one is inclined to pass over this genealogical section as unimportant, but upon more careful examination, we find several interesting things:



- a. the value of careful organization in a community project;
- b. the emphasis placed on beginning at home with the builder repairing the section near his residence:
- c. the democratic way in which all classes worked together in God's work, from the high priest to the lowliest countryman.

Cooperation and a proper recognition of the contribution of each person or family were seen as highly important.

2. Obstacles without and within (4:1 - 6:14)

There are at least four ways in which the builders were confronted as they moved forward:

- a. mockery and opposition from enemies,
- b. threats and attacks,
- c. disunity and social injustices, and
- d. attempts to entrap Nehemiah.

These could have been fatal unless there was a spiritual giant through whom God could work to weld the disunified elements by presenting a common program that all would be willing to accept. Nehemiah was such a giant. Nehemiah faced similar difficulties which are related in chapters 4-5 and 6:1-14.

- a. Mockery and opposition from enemies (4:1-6). When Sanballat heard that Nehemiah was actually building the walls, he and his army appeared. Not daring as yet to make a direct attack, they resorted to mockery. Nehemiah responded by praying. He left the real answer to God, for he was sure the Lord would not fail him in this critical hour. In verse 6, we see that the work continued without interruption, so that by now half of it had been joined together: "for the people worked with all their heart."
- b. Attacks planned and precautions taken (4:7-23). The Samaritans now sought the help of several surrounding nations and planned, perhaps secretly, a concerted attack against the Jews. They hoped to frighten them into giving up their building operations. It was necessary for Nehemiah to take every precaution against them. He resorted first to earnest prayer. Then he organized a band of watchmen to guard the walls by day and night (4:9). Finally, he encouraged the people with an outstanding declaration of God's power and challenged them to fight for their brethren, their sons, their daughters, their wives, and their homes (4:14).

The builders continued their work with diligence and precaution under Nehemiah's skilled leadership. Special leaders were stationed behind the builders, both to encourage them and to keep them informed if danger threatened. That there might be an adequate guard, day and night, the Jewish workmen and leaders from the surrounding towns were ordered to stay in Jerusalem and aid in the defense of the city. Nehemiah tells us that he and his servants did not even take their clothes off except for washing (4:23).



c. Social injustices among the Jews (5:1-19). Besides contending with threatened attacks of the enemy, Nehemiah had to deal with gross injustices among the Israelites, which had caused much unrest. The wealthier Jews were taking advantage of the distress of their poorer brethren caused by crop failures and the necessity of working on the walls. Many were forced to give up their property to pay loans, occasioned in part by these circumstances and in part by the high taxes they had to pay to the Persian governors. In many cases, children were being enslaved to dissolve their indebtedness. The wealthy required high interest of their brethren in direct violation of the Mosaic Law.

Nehemiah, after careful consideration of these social problems, decided to call another general assembly of the people. In the presence of the whole populace of Judah, he rebuked the men of nobility and wealth for charging their poorer brethren unlawful interest and enslaving their children to satisfy a debt. He then, like Paul, in 1 Corinthians 11:1 and 2 Thessalonians 3:7-9, reminded them of the example he had set before them. Although he was commissioned as governor of Judah, he did not require the usual support from the people for his services. He had actually fed at his own table and at his own expense, as many as 150 daily. Besides this, he had set many Jews free from bondage and had loaned his money without interest. His plea for fairer dealing among the Jews was well received by the nobles. They promised to restore what they had taken and to treat their brethren with consideration.

Such authority as Nehemiah was able to exert in this matter does not come by accident. It is the result of careful self-discipline and the practice of the presence of God in one's life. Nehemiah was a man of prayer and disciplined himself to do what he believed God would have him do. The power enabling one to live victoriously, in accordance with God's will, is made available through prayer and faith.

d. Attempts to entrap Nehemiah (6:1-14). After their failure to halt Nehemiah's work by direct attack, the leaders of the opposition made a strenuous effort to entrap him by more subtle means. With a show of friendship, they sent messengers to him four times, inviting him to a personal conference in the plain of Ono, about twenty miles north of Jerusalem. Nehemiah's only answer was, "I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down." (6:3). He, of course, suspected their attempt and did not allow himself to fall into their trap. Finally, they sent him an open letter in which they accused him of planning a rebellion and warned him that it would be reported to the king unless he consented to meet them and discuss the matter.

When threats brought no results, they attempted to seduce him through a false prophet, who advised him he was about to be slain by his enemies and urged him to take refuge in the Temple. "Should a man like me run away?" Nehemiah asked, "Or should one like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!" (6:11) Surely, we have here an excellent example of holy boldness on the part of one of God's saints, who would not stoop to any compromise with the enemy.



#### 3. The Wall Completed in Fifty-two Days (6:15-19)

In spite of all the difficulties encountered, the wall was completed in fifty-two days. This was a hard blow to Judah's enemies. They had, however, one more method of attack. There were many among the Jews who, by mixed marriages, had become relatives of the Samaritans and others of the peoples surrounding them. The friends of Tobiah, the Ammonite, some of whom were connected with him by marriage, were carrying on a constant correspondence with him. These letters were shared with Nehemiah as an attempt to make him fearful of Tobiah. Although they accomplished nothing by this for the time being, it is noted that Tobiah was later admitted into the city during Nehemiah's absence and was given a room in the Temple (13:4-7). How stealthily the enemy of the soul lurks nearby, awaiting an opportunity to take up residence in one's heart when one is off guard!

#### Section 2. Reforms and Religious Instruction (7:1 - 13:31)

The Book of Nehemiah, like the Book of Ezra, is divided into two distinct parts. The first six chapters deal chiefly with the building of the walls, while the last seven chapters summarize the various religious, civic, and social reforms in which both Ezra and Nehemiah had a part. However, since an early phase of the reforms was narrated in the fifth chapter, and the story of the dedication of the wall is told in chapter twelve, it must be said that these two are closely interlaced. Chapters 7, 11, and 12 deal with the more physical and civic aspects of the reforms, while chapters 8, 10, and 13 deal with the moral and religious aspects.

#### A. REORGANIZATION OF THE CITY BEGUN (7:1-73; see also chapters 11 and 12)

#### 1. City Officials Named (7:1-4)

The content of chapter 7 is closely related to that of chapter 11. Probably, as a matter of fact, the religious revival of chapters 8-10 occurred before the civic arrangements described in chapters 7 and 11 were completed, just as the social reform of chapter 5 became necessary and was dealt with before the walls were finished.

It would appear that two men with similar names, Hanani [ha-NAH-nee] and Hananiah [han-an-EYE-uh], were placed in general charge of the city of Jerusalem. The former was the brother of Nehemiah, who was referred to in chapter 1 as informing Nehemiah of the terrible distress of the city. The latter is described as "a man of integrity" and one who "feared God more than most men do" (7:2). We see how careful Nehemiah was in choosing his personnel.

The immediate task was to ensure the safety of the city and to make it habitable again, as it had been before the Exile. This, in some respects, was more difficult than the building of the wall, but just as necessary. In 536 B.C., which was 70 to 80 years before Nehemiah's reforms, 50,000 or more exiles returned with Zerubbabel. They settled largely in the outlying towns of Judah rather than Jerusalem because the walls were still in ruins.



Now, the situation was different. With the walls completed, Nehemiah could hope to interest people in taking up residence in the city. This was important, that there might be the necessary strength and morale to furnish a sufficient and effective guard to ensure the city's continued safety.

#### 2. A Census Planned (7:5-73)

It was important that the repopulation of the city be done in a manner to ensure that the families brought in would truly be people of Israel, and would consequently have a proper interest in the security, religious unity, and future growth of the city. To this end, Nehemiah informs us that God put it into his heart (7:5) to take a census of the Jewish community so that he might have a basis on which to select families for the enlarged population of the city.

An official list of the returnees under Zerubbabel greatly aided this purpose. The rest of the chapter is devoted to this list, although it substantially repeats a similar list in Ezra 2.

#### B. A RELIGIOUS REVIVAL LED BY EZRA (8:1 - 10:39)

Chapters 8-10 describe what is often referred to as the Great Revival. Certainly, they are, in many respects, the most challenging chapters in the book and have all the elements of a true spiritual awakening. Those elements included:

- 1. sincere attention to the exposition of God's Word;
- 2. conviction of sin under the impact of the Word;
- 3. fasting, prayer, confession of sin, and recognition of God's justice and mercy;
- 4. commitment to follow the path God has designed and
- 5. the joy of salvation.

Nehemiah exclaimed, "The joy of the Lord is your strength." (8:10)

#### 1. The Law of Moses Read and Expounded (8:1-12)

Ezra now comes on the scene, and at the beginning of the seventh month (*Tishri*, part of our September and October, the most significant month of the year religiously), he is requested by the leaders of the Jews to read from the book of the law. Meanwhile, a large congregation, both men and women, assembled in a prominent area of Jerusalem to listen to Ezra. After the appropriate ceremony, Ezra, accompanied by a number of Levites, stood before the people and read to them the law "from daybreak till noon" (8:3).

The "book" (8:5) that Ezra opened was, of course, a large leather scroll written in Hebrew. It was probably an old copy and highly revered, not only because it was accepted as the Word of God but also because of its relation to the Temple and its sacred objects. It would appear that the reading and the interpretation were done by several scribes.

NOTES

At least it is stated in verse 8 that "They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear, and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read."

At this point, it must be remembered that Hebrew had become a sacred language that only the priests and the Levites were expected to know. The people spoke Chaldaic or Aramaic (the language of Jesus), which they had learned in Babylon from their overlords during the seventy years of exile. In this case, it was probably Ezra who read the Hebrew, while the Levites were assigned to paraphrase or translate it into Chaldaic (Aramaic), adding whatever seemed necessary to make the meaning clear.

The people repented and wept when they realized how far they had deviated from the path of true obedience. Seeing this, Nehemiah and Ezra told them to stop weeping. They said the people should rejoice that God had been gracious to forgive sins, "for the joy of the Lord is your strength" (8:10). This may seem an oversimplification of the process by which a soul burdened by sorrow for sin comes to realize God's willingness to forgive and suddenly exchanges his sorrow for joy. However, there need not be a great deal of time involved where there is utter sincerity. Beyond this initial experience of forgiveness, there is a subsequent requirement of obedience and soul searching. This is indicated by the continued seeking after God, described in the remainder of this chapter and in the next two chapters until there is a final, definite commitment to do the whole will of God. This final commitment is represented, symbolically at least, in the commemorative observance of the Feast of Tabernacles (8:13-18); in the fasting, confession of sin, and recognition of God's goodness in chapter 9; and, finally, in the sealing of the covenant in chapter 10.

#### 2. The Feast of Tabernacles Observed (8:13-18)

In the remainder of chapter 8, there is an account of the observance of the Feast of Tabernacles. The sincerity of the people, who had wept and then rejoiced at the reading of the law, was now being proven. They were obediently following in the light, and God was being glorified. In verse 18, it is recorded that the law was read daily. This suggests the importance and value of Bible reading, especially in the case of persons newly converted or newly restored after a period of unfaithfulness, as was true of the Jews at this time.

### 3. The People Confess (9:1-38)

After the conclusion of the Feast of Tabernacles, the people, under the leadership of Ezra, gave even more serious attention to the admonitions they had received in the reading of the law. An assembly was called for the twenty-fourth of the month. On this occasion, with the help of the Levites, they rehearsed at length the many times, throughout the history of their nation, that God had providentially cared for them. In humility, they pledged themselves to enter into a covenant of loyalty, promising obedience with God's help in the time to come.



Again, note that the events of chapters 9-10 (as well as the observance of the Feast of Tabernacles in chapter 8) symbolize growth after conversion toward a deeper religious experience. Here we have:

- a. conviction of a deep-seated tendency toward sinfulness and disobedience,
- b. a godly sorrow for and confession of sin (not only sins committed but the sin of the heart),
- c. a recognition of the holiness of God, manifested in the righteousness and mercy of all his dealings and
- d. a total commitment or consecration of oneself to God in faith, trusting that with his help, it is possible to live a life free from sin.
- 4. The Sealing of the Covenant (10:1-39)

The covenant of loyalty, promised at the conclusion of the prayer in chapter 9, is now put into effect. It covers at least five specific areas:

- a. intermarriage with the heathen,
- b. desecration of the Sabbath,
- c. payment of the Temple tax,
- d. supplying fuel for the altar, and
- e. supplying the needs of those who ministered before the Lord.

An emphasis is laid here on paying tithes and bringing to the Temple all the first fruits of their produce and the firstborn of their sons and animals. If this were done, the needs of the Temple and of those who served in it would be amply supplied. It is important that Christians today support the work of the Kingdom by bringing their tithes into the storehouse.

#### C. PLANS TO REPOPULATE JERUSALEM (11:1 - 12:26)

1. Lots Cast to Bring Jews into Jerusalem (11:1-2)

Chapter 11 continues the story of the civic reforms begun in chapter 7. "Leaders of the people settled in Jerusalem" (11:1), but most of the other people lived in the other towns or villages of the province of Judah. Lots were cast to require one-tenth of the people to take up residence in Jerusalem. Others volunteered to join them, so that Nehemiah now had the promise of a considerable number of inhabitants to strengthen the defense of the city.

#### 2. An Official List of the Jewish Families (11:3 - 12:26)

The larger part of chapter 11 consists of a list of those who lived in Jerusalem and in the outlying towns after the repopulating of Jerusalem had taken effect. The inhabitants of Jerusalem are listed principally by heads of families, while the inhabitants of the outlying countryside are merely listed by villages. In 12:1-26 another list is given which traces the priestly and Levitical families from the time of Zerubbabel to that of Nehemiah.



#### D. DEDICATION OF THE WALL (12:27-43)

It is noticeable that the record of the dedication of the wall is not given in connection with the account of its completion, as one might expect. Instead, it is given a climactic position near the end of the book. This tends to make the story of the building and dedication of the wall stand out as the principal story in the book, as indeed it is. This may be thought of as a rededication of the city itself since Nehemiah's original assignment was to rebuild the city of Jerusalem (2:5). The spiritual dedication of the people came in the revival under Ezra, and this represented the first restoration of Jerusalem and the "remnant" of Israel (Isaiah 1: 9) to the full favor of God since the days of Hezekiah and Isaiah. There really was much cause for rejoicing.

In the ceremony described in 12:27-43, two great processions were organized, including Levites, singers, and "princes of Judah" from the entire province. They marched around the city upon the newly constructed wall. One was led by Ezra and took its circuit around the wall to the right, while the other, accompanied by Nehemiah, proceeded around the city in the opposite direction. The two companies met in the vicinity of the Temple, and there, a great service of thanksgiving and praise was held.

#### E. FURTHER REFORMS INSTITUTED (12:44 - 13:31)

In the last two chapters of the book, the reforms instituted during the later years of Nehemiah's governorship are summarized. Most of them were begun following his return from a visit to the Persian capital at Susa, which he made after completing twelve years as governor of Judah (5:14; 13:6). His conduct in these reforms characterizes him as a man of stern loyalty. He was ready to take severe means, if necessary, to preserve the integrity of Jerusalem and prevent the people of Judah from violating the law of God and the covenant which they had made with God.

#### 1. Provisions Made for Religious Leaders (12:44-47)

Apparently as an aftermath of the joyous occasion of dedication, attention was given to the needs of those who ministered in the Temple and took an important part in such celebrations. A check was made on the arrangements for tithes and other contributions to be made by the Jews throughout the province. Much laxness in these matters had doubtless developed in the seventy or eighty years since the time of Zerubbabel, under whom the Temple was rebuilt and the Temple services restored.

It should be noted in this connection that religion, in that day as well as ours, made demands on the worshipper's pocketbook. The true child of God will be generous toward the needs and interests of those who are involved in the business of Kingdom building. A tithe of his income will be considered due to God's cause, and much more than this will be given from a sense of devotion and love as needs arise.



Paul encouraged the Corinthian church to be generous in its support of the cause of Christ. He said, "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly; and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." (2 Corinthians 9:6-7).

#### 2. The Temple Cleansed by the Removal of an Intruder (13:1-9)

The reforms described in this last chapter of Nehemiah are achieved in a spirit that suggests Jesus' manner in cleansing the Temple (Matthew 21:12-13). It is also seen in Christ's dealing with the

Pharisees who transgressed the law of Moses while professing to follow it (Matthew 23:13-36).

Sin must have a radical cure. It is not to be condoned, especially when it manifests itself in the life of a professed child of God. This explains the rigorous action Nehemiah took when, after returning from the Persian capital, he found the people of Judah openly transgressing the covenant they had so recently made with God.

A careful reading of the chapter will reveal, however, that the actions that Nehemiah took were directed not toward the whole Jewish community but toward certain individuals who were guilty of transgression. It was not, therefore, an indication that the covenant and spiritual victory of the people had all been for nothing. There will always be those who fail to measure up to God's standard of holiness. This may be either because they have never actually entered into a full experience of grace or because, through carelessness toward spiritual things, they allow themselves to deviate from the way God has marked out for them. Nehemiah's stern rebuke, given to the individuals who were responsible for these transgressions, should serve as a warning to everyone to maintain his integrity.

Nehemiah pointed out and punished the first violations of the covenant: improper relations with foreign neighbors and failure to preserve the sanctity of God's house. The high priest, Eliashib, had allowed Tobiah, the Ammonite—to whom he was related by a marriage, contrary to the law—to occupy certain of the Temple chambers. These were kept sacred for the use of the priests and Levites or for the storage of Temple treasures and other sacred objects used in the Temple services!

When Nehemiah discovered this situation upon his return from Susa, he promptly cast out Tobiah with all of his household effects. He commanded the chambers to be cleansed and "the equipment of the house of God, with the grain offerings and the incense" to be returned to their place (13:9). The reader is not told how the high priest took this sharp rebuke and reversal of his authority, but he must have been painfully conscious of the sin he had committed. The courage of Nehemiah, on the other hand, in thus overruling the authority of the high priest and standing firmly for what he believed to be the will of God is certainly commendable.



#### 3. Temple Service Abuses Corrected (13:10-14)

Another violation of the covenant that Nehemiah discovered after he returned from Susa concerned the proper maintenance of the Temple services and the offerings for the Levites and other Temple officials. "Why is the house of God neglected?" cried Nehemiah when he observed the neglect of the Temple services (13:11). At his insistence, the abuses were quickly remedied. The people again brought in their tithes and offerings, trustworthy men were placed in charge of the Temple treasury, and provision was made for supplying the needs of those who took part in the services.

#### 4. Reform of Sabbath Observance (13:15-22)

Another serious abuse that Nehemiah found when he returned from the Persian capital was a general neglect of Sabbath observance. In spite of the clear commandment which they had so recently covenanted to obey, many were carrying on their regular work on the Sabbath. Others were buying and selling on the Sabbath. Phoenician merchants were allowed to sell their products even in the city of Jerusalem. Nehemiah, observing this, contended with the nobles of Judah and said unto them, "What is this wicked thing that you are doing – desecrating the sabbath day?" (13:17)

In response to his command, the city gates were closed at sundown on Friday and kept closed until the end of the Sabbath. When the merchants attempted to carry on their business outside the city gates on the Sabbath, he immediately brought a personal charge against them. "Why do you spend the night by the wall?" (13:21) he asked. "If you do this again, I will lay hands on you." (13:21). At this forceful reprimand, we are told, they went away and returned no more on the Sabbath.

#### 5. Mixed Marriages Dealt with (13:23-31)

The last reform recorded in the Book of Nehemiah concerns the matter of mixed marriages or marriage with foreign wives. Nehemiah found, on his return from Susa, that many in the Jewish community had fallen again into the practice of intermarriage with non-Israelites. As a result, children were being reared in Jewish homes who could not so much as speak their fathers' language.

Nehemiah, faced with this situation, took very drastic means (13:25, 27). He expressed his abhorrence of their moral laxity in this regard and made it clear that they were not to condone further disobedience of the Law in this matter. "You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons," he insisted, "nor are you to take their daughters in marriage to your sons, or for yourselves." (13:25). There was to be no compromise when God's will or the kingdom of God was at stake. More of this kind of uncompromising fidelity to that which is clearly required in the Word of God is needed today.



As one looks back on the life and work of Nehemiah, he is impressed with the unflinching loyalty of the man in every situation he faces. No sacrifice was too great, and no task too difficult for him if he was certain it was God's will.

The Book of Nehemiah closes with a brief summary of the reforms that had been achieved. There is a brief prayer, which is characteristic of Nehemiah, in which he commits himself and his work to God as one who has done the very best he knew to carry out the responsibility God had put upon his heart.

Sanballat [san-BAL-at]
Tobiah [tob-EYE-uh]
Ammonite [A-muh-nyt]
Hanani [ha-NAH-nee]
Hananiah [han-an-EYE-uh]

### CHAPTER 4. THE BOOK OF ESTHER



Section 1. The Elevation of Esther (1:1 - 2:23)

#### A. THE REJECTION OF VASHTI (1:1-22)

#### 1. The Feast of Ahasuerus (1:1-9)

In the year 484 B.C., Ahasuerus (Xerxes, king of Persia, 486-465 B.C.) held a great convocation of the rulers and the nobles of his vast empire at Susa (Shushan), the Persian capital. This convocation was to last six months, during which the wealth, splendor, and excellence of the king's world domain were to be systematically reviewed. All "the officers of the Persian and Median army" (1:3) were to be present.

There was probably a great feast for the visiting nobles and officers at the beginning of this period. There was a similar feast for the citizens of Susa, together with their noble guests to conclude the convocation (1:5). Each feast was to last seven days.

The description of the luxurious appointments at these feasts tallies closely with information that has come from other historical sources concerning Persian customs in the time of Xerxes. "There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and other costly stones" (1:6). Herodotus, the Greek historian, tells of couches of gold and silver that the Greeks captured from the Persians. Sections of the marble pillars and mosaic pavement of the royal palace of this period have been discovered by archaeologists.

There was drinking at the feast, but no one was compelled to drink (1:8). The women, according to Oriental customs, were separate from the men on such occasions. But, they had their feast also, given by Queen Vashti (1:9).

#### 2. The Refusal of Vashti to Come When Invited (1:10-12)

On the last day of the feast, while the king was intoxicated with wine, he sent his royal courtiers to bring the queen to him. He wanted to display her beauty, doubtless in an immodest manner, to his assembled guests. But, Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command (1:12).

This prompt refusal on the part of Vashti has occasioned much favorable comment on the part of commentators. They feel some might be inclined to glorify the character and courage of Esther to the discredit of Vashti. And, in some respects, Vashti may be considered to have shown greater courage than Esther. If Esther came "to royal position for such a time" (4:14), surely, we can say that Vashti's noble example of womanly modesty will not easily be forgotten.



Perhaps the fact that no Persian law or custom forbade wives from attending banquets with their husbands enhances the quality of Vashti's choice. It would seem that Vashti refused to comply with the king's request on very personal grounds. She probably realized that because of her choice, she might forfeit her position or even her life.

#### 3. Vashti Deposed (1:13-22)

The refusal of Vashti to obey the king's request threw the drunken monarch into a fury. He left the queen's fate in the hands of the court astrologers, who were his most trusted advisors on such occasions. They knew the king's temper, and that he would probably repent of the action when he had recovered from his drunken stupor. However, these clever men took advantage of the opportunity to have a decree published in the interests of domestic discipline. "The Persian and Median women of nobility," they said, "have heard about the queen's conduct and will respond to all the king's nobles in the same way" (1:18). Vashti was "never again to enter the presence of King Xerxes" and "her royal position" was to be given to another who was better than she (1:19). Wives everywhere were to honor their husbands (1:20) and every man was to rule "over his own household" (1:22).

#### B. THE CHOICE OF ESTHER AS QUEEN OF PERSIA (2:1-23)

#### 1. A Plan Suggested (2:1-4)

Some three or four years after Vashti was deposed, according to the date indicated in 2:16, a plan was begun to choose a new queen. According to the plan of the king's advisors, fair young maidens were sought throughout the empire and placed under the care of the eunuch, Hegai [heg-EYE] (2:3). Hegai was one of the king's courtiers in the palace at Susa. Here, they were to submit to stringent preparation for twelve months. The best of beauty care and cosmetics were used as they waited in anticipation of the royal inspection.

#### 2. Esther Brought to the Palace of Ahasuerus/ Xerxes (2:5-11)

Among the many maidens brought to the palace in this manner was a certain Jewess by the name of Hadassah, or Esther (2:7). She had been reared in the household of her older cousin Mordecai [MOR-dek-eye], a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin. Mordecai's great-grandfather, Kish, was one of those who were taken into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 597 B.C. Esther is described as a fair and beautiful maiden who, from the first, "won the favor of everyone who saw her" (2:15).

Hegai, the chief eunuch, preferred her above all the other maidens in his care and assigned her the choicest position in "the best place in the harem" (2:9). At the suggestion of Mordecai, she did not reveal her race or lineage, since Jews were not in favor among the Persians. The fact that she was a Jewess, if it were known, might keep her from being chosen queen. Every day, Mordecai "walked back and forth near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her" (2:11).



#### 3. Esther Chosen as Queen (2:12-20)

At the end of a full year of preparation, the candidates for queen were introduced to the king one by one. In making ready for this introduction, they were allowed to choose the particular attire that they should wear. But, when it came Esther's turn to go into the king, she wisely depended on the judgment of Hegai, the king's courtier, in all of these matters (2:15). Esther knew that he was not only an expert in such things, but also knew well the taste of the king. This indicates something of the character of Esther, who, in all her acts, exercised the same care, discretion, and respect for the judgment of others.

Esther's introduction to the king resulted in her being immediately chosen as queen. The king loved Esther more than all the other women (2:17). A great feast was held in her honor. To win the people's affection for the new queen, a special reduction in tribute was announced to all the realm (1:18). He "proclaimed a holiday throughout the providences and distributed gifts with royal liberality" (2:18).

A Jewess had become queen of the most powerful kingdom of that day! Through her, God was to bring about a remarkable deliverance of his people from the evil designs of their enemies. Esther's disciplined character is revealed as she continues to obey the instructions of Mordecai after she becomes queen (2: 20).

#### 4. A Plot Discovered by Mordecai (2:21-23)

At this point an incident is told that interrupts momentarily the flow of the narrative. It is important because it prepares for the occasion when Mordecai would be exalted to a place of influence in the court. Two of Xerxes' courtiers were plotting the king's assassination. Mordecai had accidentally learned of this plot and communicated the matter to Esther. He had daily contact with her, although her relationship to him had not been made known. Esther, in turn, informed the king of the plot against his life (2:22). After an investigation, the guilty persons were detected and executed. Mordecai's services in revealing the plot were duly recorded in the king's chronicle. However, as was revealed later (6:3), no immediate reward was given to him for the information. According to the Greek historian Herodotus, Xerxes was eventually assassinated as the result of a similar plot.

#### Section 2. The Deliverance of the Jews (3:1 - 10:3)

#### A. HAMAN'S PLOT (3:1 - 4:3)

#### 1. Haman, the Agagite [EH-gag-ight], Honored by the King (3:1-2)

Several years after Esther's elevation to queenship, a man named Haman was promoted to the position of prime minister. He is described as "the Agagite" (3:1). Perhaps this designation was given because he was a descendant of the notorious king of the Amalekites, Agag (1 Samuel 15:8, 33).



This position gave him the highest rank among the princes of the Persian court, and second only to the king in power. At the request of the king, and according to traditional custom in ancient oriental kingdoms, all the princes, nobles, and the common people honored Haman as he went about the palace and through the streets of Susa.

#### 2. Haman Angered at Mordecai (3:2-6)

Only one person was able to hold out against the powerful Haman. Mordecai, the Jew, "would not kneel down or pay him honor" (3:2). This may have been because he recognized him as a descendant of the Jews' enemies, the Amalekites. Or, it might have been because he considered this kind of respect a form of idolatry in which he, as a loyal Jew, could not participate. In any case, the obstinate refusal of Mordecai to bow to him as the king's prime minister enraged Haman. He determined, if possible, not merely to do away with this disrespectful Jew, but to destroy all other Jews. By this time, the Jews were scattered throughout the huge empire of the Persians, which stretched from India to Greece and from Media (Armenia, or the area of the Caspian Sea) to Egypt.

#### 3. The King Persuaded to Decree the Destruction of the Jews (3:7-15)

To obtain the cooperation of Ahasuerus/ Xerxes in making a decree against the Jews, Haman reported to him that there was "a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces" that had different laws from the Persians, and hence did not obey the king's laws (3:8). It would, therefore, be to the king's interest if they were destroyed. Haman promised to pay into the royal treasury "ten thousand talents of silver" (about 375 tons worth millions of dollars) if the order for their destruction was given.

The prime minister probably anticipated that much more than this sum could be realized from the confiscation of the Jews' properties. It was true then, as now, that the Jews were gifted with a talent for making and saving great sums of money.

Meanwhile, by casting lots, he planned to determine the favorable time for the massacre to be perpetrated (3:7). From "pur" was derived the name Purim of the modern Jewish festival held in March, as described in the section on 9:17-32. It happened that the lot fell on the twelfth month of the Jewish year, Adar (March), approximately eleven months after the plan was first made.

The king, all too willingly, entrusted the matter wholly to his prime minister. He took the signet ring, which was used for stamping the wax seals on documents and private messages from the king, and gave it to Haman. "Keep the money," he said, referring to the silver Haman had promised to pay into the treasury, and "do with the people as you please" (3:11). It is probable that, in thus entrusting the decree to Haman, the king was unaware that the Jews were concerned. And, probably, neither the king nor Haman knew, at this time, that Esther was a Jewess.



"Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces, with the order to destroy, kill, and annihilate, all Jews - young and old, women and little children - on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar [March], and to plunder all their goods." (3:13). The *Amplified Bible* renders that last phrase, "Seize all their belongings." One is not surprised that, upon receiving such an order, "the city Susa was bewildered" – in confusion (3:15).

#### 4. The Grief of the Jews (4:1-3)

When the decree for the destruction of the Jews became known, there was great mourning and anxiety among those of Jewish lineage throughout the Persian realm. Mordecai tore his outer garments from him, clothed himself in "sackcloth" (burlap), and sprinkled himself with ashes to express his great grief. Thus attired, he went out into the streets of the city, wailing and uttering loud and bitter cries. The fortunes of the Jews had reached their lowest point. It remained to be seen whether the God they served could provide for them a way of escape.

#### B. ESTHER'S SUCCESSFUL INTERVENTION (4:4 - 8:2)

#### 1. Esther Persuaded by Mordecai to Intervene (4:4-17)

At this point, the action changes in favor of the Jews. Queen Esther heard of the grief of Mordecai. In answer to her inquiry as to the meaning of his grief, he informed her of the decree which had been made against the Jews and urged her to intervene on their behalf. He told her that the lives of all Jews were at stake, including the queen, for she was a Jewess. "Do not think that because you are in the king's house; you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to a royal position for such a time as this?" (4:13-14)

As a result of her cousin's urgent persuasion, Esther determined to risk her life, to approach the king on behalf of her people. "If I perish, I perish," she said in her reply to Mordecai (4:16). But she requested her Jewish friends to fast with her three days before she attempted to appear before the king.

As it was mentioned in the Introduction, God is nowhere specifically referred to in the Book of Esther. However, in verse 14, there is a clear reference to the providence of God as a source from which deliverance will come, even if Esther does not choose to intervene. Also, in Esther's request that her people should fast with her (4:16), she implies that prayer is a means of aiding her in dealing with the king. In the events that rapidly followed, one realizes that God had heard their prayers and was working in the heart of the king on their behalf.



#### 2. The King and Haman Invited to a Banquet (5:1-8)

After three days of prayer and fasting, Esther, true to her promise, made her appearance in the inner court of the palace in full view of the king, who was on his royal throne. No invitation had been given her, and she was, in fact, taking her life in her hands. But, her trust was that God would not fail her at this critical moment. When the king "saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the golden scepter that was in his hand. So, Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter." (5:2)

The king immediately opened the way for her to make her request known, assuring her that it would be granted her, "even up to half of the kingdom" (5:3). Esther's immediate request of the king was only that he and his prime minister should come to a banquet that she had prepared for them. This invitation was gratefully accepted, and the opportunity was given to her again to make known her desire. She merely repeated the invitation, promising that, at that time, she would make her desire known.

Apparently, neither Haman nor the king suspected the queen had any connection with the Jews nor that her request was related to the decree for their extermination. How cleverly the queen had hidden these matters from them and kept them in suspense!

#### 3. Haman's Wife Urges Him to Hang Mordecai (5:9-14)

Haman's pride was greatly inflated at being specially invited with the king to Esther's banquet, and even more so when the invitation was repeated (5:12). But, his exultation was turned to bitterness and anger when on his way home, he ran across Mordecai, who paid him no respect. In almost the same breath he bragged to his wife, Zeresh, of his own successes and honors. Then, he accused Mordecai of taking away all the pleasure of his accomplishments. His wife suggested, "Have gallows built seventy-five feet high, and ask the king in the morning to have Mordecai hanged on it. Then go with the king to the dinner and be happy." (5:14).

All too readily, Haman followed the advice of his wife and friends. He was still confident that the king, who had agreed to the destruction of the Jews throughout the empire, would allow him to make an example of this impertinent Jew. The gallows were ordered to be set up immediately, and Haman planned to make his request to the king early the next morning.



#### 4. Haman Forced to Honor Mordecai Instead (6:1-14)

The hand of Providence is clearly seen in the turn of events recorded in chapter 6. Whatever may have been the natural causes for the sleeplessness of the king that night, one can see that God used this circumstance to bring about a change in the fortunes of the Jews. To occupy the hours for the sleepless king, the royal chronicles, or records, were read to him. Eventually, the record of Mordecai's giving information, which led to the arrest and execution of the king's would-be assassins, was read. Immediately the king asked what honor or reward had been given Mordecai for so great a service. When informed that nothing had been done for him, he asked, "Who is in the court?" for he heard footsteps outside (6:4). When he learned that Haman, his prime minister, was there, he ordered him to be brought in.

Now Haman had, of course, come early to get the king's permission to hang Mordecai on the gallows. But, before he was able to make his request known, the king asked, "What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?" (6:6)

Though somewhat surprised, Haman was not caught off guard by this sudden approach. Assuming that it was he who was to be honored, he described the kind of honor that would please him most. He desired for himself the royal apparel, the horse that the king had ridden, and the royal crest (6:8). Then he should have "one of the king's most noble princes" proclaim before him, "This what is done for the man the king delights to honor." (6:9)

But now came the shock. "Go at once," the king said, and "Get the robe and the horse and do just what you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Do not neglect anything you have recommended." (6:10). Haman, humiliated though he was, carried out the order of the king in detail. He clothed Mordecai in royal attire and mounted him on the king's horse. Then, he led him through the streets of the city, proclaiming before him the words he himself had prescribed.

Perhaps the old refrain in 1 Samuel 2:8 rang through Mordecai's heart: "He raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor. For the foundations of the earth are the Lord's." How clearly God was working for his child! The gallows, indeed, were being prepared, but they would be used for Haman, while the triumph that Haman thought to be preparing for himself was to be used for Mordecai.



After his experience of exaltation, Mordecai went back in humility to his accustomed station at the king's gate (6:12). He did not assume for himself any different relation to the king or to his subjects. He did not, like Haman, demand that everyone who passed him bow. In contrast, Haman went home with his head covered as a sign of great personal grief. His wife and his friends were poor comforters. He was warned that he could not win against Mordecai if he were a typical Jew. With this warning ringing in his ears, Haman was informed that the banquet with Queen Esther was ready. The king's message was that he should come with haste.

#### 5. Esther Reveals Haman's Plot against the Jews (7:1-6)

At the second banquet to which Esther invited the king and Haman, another opportunity was given to her to reveal her important request. This she did in words that brought amazement and then anger to the king and terror to the heart of Haman. In her response, she identified herself for the first time as one of the condemned Jews and asked that her life and the lives of her people be spared. She declared, "I and my people, have been sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation." (7:4). If they had been sold into bondage merely, as was commonly done with subject nations in ancient times, they would have retained their lives. They could have hoped to fall into the hands of generous masters, under whom life would have at least been tolerable. In that case, Esther told the king, she would have lodged no complaint but would have accepted her lot in silence. As it was, they were being sold for destruction. This was a clear reference to the "ten thousand talents of silver" which Haman offered to the king for permission to make a decree for the annihilation of the Jews (see 3:9).

The plea of Esther made it clear to the king that a crime had been committed. It was a crime involving bribery and a threat to the life of his beloved queen.

But, as yet, the criminal and her people were not identified. "Who is he? Where is the man who has dared to do such a thing?" inquired the angry king 7:5). Now the moment had arrived for which Esther had carefully planned. Haman was before her in the presence of the king and apparently had not guessed thus far the queen's connection with the Jews. Esther was the most important person in the world to Xerxes. Next to the king, she was the most important person in the Persian realm. But, it soon dawned on both Haman and the king that she was at the same time a member of the hated race of Jews. She was liable, with all her kindred, to be involved in the massacre which had been decreed by Haman, with the king's authority. As she pointed at Haman, Esther said, "The adversary and enemy is this vile Haman." (7:6) "Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen." (7:6) It was now clear to him that his action against the Jews was actually directed, though unknowingly, against the queen, and would jeopardize his own life.



#### 6. Haman Hanged and Mordecai Exalted (7:7 - 8:2)

The king was suddenly aware that Haman had treacherously led him into an action that brought his beloved queen into immediate danger. He "got up in a rage" from the banquet and went out into the palace garden" (7:7). But, this act had more significance than appears on the surface. Some commentators say that when an oriental king rises from the table in a fit of anger, there is no mercy for the one who caused it. Haman saw that his doom was fixed and availed himself of the only possibility left to him. He pleaded for his life before Queen Esther (7:7). A few minutes later, the king returned from the palace gardens, where he had been considering what action to take against Haman. He found Haman falling prostrate, in oriental fashion, before the banquet couch where the queen was sitting. Taking this act for an immoral attack upon the queen or at least using this excuse to vent his rage upon him, the king had him arrested (7:8). The face of Haman was covered as a sign of his official arrest. Information was received from one of the king's courtiers concerning the seventy-five-foot gallows that Haman had made for Mordecai. A command was issued by the king to hang Haman on his own gallows!

The ancient oriental peoples took a certain delight in vast areas and huge dimensions. It was not surprising, then, that the gallows prepared for Mordecai, and on which Haman was eventually executed, was at least three times as high as one would normally expect. Perhaps, as one commentator has observed, this was so "that he might suffer the greater ignominy and be a more public spectacle" (*Clarke's Commentary*, Vol. II, p. 819).

Now that Haman was dead, Esther revealed her relationship to Mordecai, who had recently been honored for saving the king's life. As was customary in the case of the execution of criminals, the estate of Haman was confiscated and given by the king to Esther. Esther, in turn, gave it to Mordecai and thus indicated her desire to see him elevated to the place that Haman had occupied. The king then "took off his signet ring, which he had reclaimed from Haman, and presented it to Mordecai" (8:2). This was a sign that he was appointing him prime minister in place of Haman.

#### C. A WAY FOUND TO DELIVER THE JEWS (8:3 - 10:3)

#### 1. The Jews Permitted to Defend Themselves (8:3-17)

The death of Haman, the great enemy of the Jews, did not nullify the decree which had been made against them. "No document which is written in the king's name and sealed with his ring can be revoked" (8:8; also 1:19; Daniel 6:8, 12, 15).

The clear implication is that even the king himself could not reverse the decree that was made in the king's name by the wicked Haman. But, there was a way by which the effect of the decree could be nullified.



In response to the earnest request of Esther to save her people, the king gave Mordecai the power, as his new prime minister, to make a decree in favor of the Jews. This proclamation allowed them to use any means necessary to protect themselves against their enemies, should they be attacked, as allowed in the previous decree. Accordingly, a letter was written to the officials in all 127 provinces of the Persian Empire. This was done in the month "Sivan" (June), eight months before the scheduled attack on the Jews. In this new decree, the Jews were granted the privilege, on the day set apart for their destruction, "to assemble and protect themselves; to destroy, kill, and annihilate any armed force of any nationality or province that might attack them" (8:11).

The new decree was prepared and dispatched to the far corners of the empire with great speed. The joy it brought to the Jews is graphically described in verses 14-17:

The couriers, riding royal horses, raced out, spurred by the king's command. And the edict was also issued in the citadel of Susa. Mordecai left the king's presence wearing royal garments of blue and white, a large crown of gold, and a purple robe of fine linen. And the city of Susa held a joyous celebration. For the Jews it was a time of happiness and joy, gladness and honor. In every province and in every city, wherever the edict of the king went, there was joy and gladness among the Jews, with feasting and celebrating. And many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them.

#### 2. The Jews' Vengeance on Their Enemies (9:1-16)

On the thirteenth of "the month Adar" (March), the fateful day designated for the slaughter of the Jews (3:7, 13), fighting broke out between the Jews and the bolder factions among their enemies. It is to be assumed that the great majority of Persians and other subject peoples feared to attack them because of the decree of Mordecai. Even the governors and other high officials in the provinces supported the Jews because they feared them (9:3). Therefore, it is not surprising that the Jews easily prevailed over their foes, slaying a total of 800 persons in Susa and 75,000 in the provinces (9:6, 10, 15-16). Further vengeance was heaped upon the immediate family of Haman. The bodies of his ten sons, who were killed the day before, were hanged on the gallows the second day (9:13-14).

The cruelty of such a slaughter, if judged by Christian standards, is indefensible. This is especially true of the request of Esther that the Jews in Susa should be allowed a second day to make a clean sweep of their enemies (9:12-15). But, there are three considerations that at least help to explain the actions of the Jews and of the queen on this tragic occasion.

- a. It was clearly a case of self-defense. The Jews were put into a position of having to fight for their very lives and the lives of their families.
- b. The Jews in the Old Testament period did not have the light that Christians have on moral issues. We must judge them against the background of their times.



c. Some commentators have suggested that the enemies of the Jews were receiving just retribution for their acts of cruelty and violence against God's chosen people. George Knight, in the Torch Bible Commentary on Esther, says: "The primary emphasis of this chapter is not upon the vengeance exacted by the Jews but upon the overruling act of a just Providence. It is mine to avenge; I will repay.' (Deuteronomy 32:35, 41, 43; also Rom. 12:19). Thus, the Jew constantly waited for such a truth to manifest itself. Such a doctrine is to be found, e.g., in Psalm 7:15: 'He who digs a hole and scoops it out falls into the pit he himself made.'"

#### 3. The Feast of Purim Instituted (9:17-32)

Out in the provinces, the struggle lasted only one day, the thirteenth. But, in Susa (Shushan), the Jews mustered for battle on both the thirteenth and the fourteenth (9:18). In commemoration of the rest which the Jews enjoyed, and in celebration of the victory they had won, Mordecai sent out another decree. This established the fourteenth and the fifteenth of the month Adar (March) as an annual occasion "of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor" (9:22). Therefore, they called this celebration the Feast of Purim (the plural of the Hebrew and Chaldaic word Pur, meaning "lot," or "casting of lots;" 9:26; also 3: 7).

#### 4. Continued Advancement of Mordecai (10:1-3)

The growing power and influence of Mordecai are described along with the mention of Xerxes' imperial wealth and power. The contribution that Mordecai was making to his Jewish brethren is especially emphasized (10:3). He did not let his personal advancement get in the way of his sincere effort to promote the peace and welfare of his people. His example, along with that of Esther, was such as to win their love and esteem through all the future generations. As a witness of this we have the great popularity of the Book of Esther among Jews even to the present day. Orthodox Jews still observe the Feast of Purim with a fast and synagogue services, during which the Book of Esther is read. For a fuller discussion of the feast, see any Bible dictionary or encyclopedia.

At this point, the reader is urged to reread carefully the section in the "Introduction to the Book of Esther" regarding the "Spiritual Message" of Esther. This is the interesting and romantic story of God's providence over the Jews of the "Dispersion." Also, the reader is urged to read the book in one of the more recent versions (such as New Living Translation, see https://tecartabible.com/bible or https://www.biblegateway.com/). It will enhance the beauty and spiritual application of the story. God, as so often in the life of a Christian, used the evil designs of Satan to bring his people into a closer relation to himself and into a deeper experience of peace and joy.

Hegai [heg-EYE] Mordecai [MOR-dek-eye] Agagite [EH-gag-ight]

### EZRA, NEHEMIAH AND ESTHER STUDY QUESTIONS



#### Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION TO EZRA, NEHEMIAH, AND ESTHER

#### Section 1. Introducing The Book of Ezra

- 1. The Book of Ezra is named for its principal character.
- A. true
- B. false
- 2. What is true of Ezra?
- A. He was an outstanding priest and scribe.
- B. He was a scholar and teacher of the Scriptures at the time of the Exile.
- C. He has been credited with the writing of other later books of the Old Testament.
- D. all of these are true
- 3. What is not true of Ezra?
- A. He may have written 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah.
- B. He may have made the first authoritative collection of Old Testament books.
- C. He wrote about 234 B.C.
- D. He was active in the restoration of Jerusalem.
- 4. In both the Hebrew and the Greek versions of the Old Testament, the Books of Ezra and Esther were originally combined in one book.
- A. true
- B. false
- 5. The similar wording at the end of 2 Chronicles and the beginning of Ezra suggests that the Chronicles were also once part of the same combined history.
- A. true
- B. false

#### Section 2. Introducing The Book of Nehemiah

- 6. The Book of Nehemiah is named for its principal character.
- A. true
- B. false
- 7. In the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament, it has the title 2 Nehemiah.
- A. true
- B. false

- 8. Much of the Book of Nehemiah apparently originated in Nehemiah's memoirs.
- A. true
- B. false
- 9. What is true of the date and source of composition of the Book of Nehemiah?
- A. A clue to the date of writing is given in an official list of high priests.
- B. It was probably written about 330 B.C.
- C. It includes Nehemiah's memoirs, Temple records, and official lists of names.
- D. all of these are true
- 10. What is true of the contents and message of the Book of Nehemiah?
- A. The great theme is the faithfulness of God in restoring Judah and Jerusalem.
- B. Through his prayerfulness and capable leadership, Nehemiah succeeded in building Jerusalem into a well-fortified city.
- C. The character and accomplishments of Nehemiah, one of God's choicest saints in the Old Testament period, are highlighted.
- D. all of these are true

#### Section 3. Introducing The Book of Esther

- 11. The Book of Esther is named for its principal character.
- A. true
- B. false
- 12. What is not true of the authorship and date of the writing of the Book of Esther?
- A. There isn't definite knowledge of the authorship of the Book of Esther.
- B. It would appear that the book was written at a time considerably later than the events themselves.
- C. It was apparently directed to leaders who were very familiar with Persian customs.
- D. References are made to Persian records in several instances.
- 13. The story in the Book of Esther belongs chronologically to the period between Zerubbabel's return and Ezra's.
- A. true
- B. false
- 14. What is not true about the authenticity and literary character of the Book of Esther?
- A. The authenticity of the book as it occurs in the Hebrew canon has never been seriously questioned.
- B. In the Septuagint, several additions have been made to various parts of the narrative.
- C. The Catholic canon and the Apocrypha provide additional content to the Book of Esther, entitled "The Full Account of Queen Esther."
- D. The additions to the Book of Esther aim to give the book a more genuine religious tone.



- 15. What is true about the purpose and religious value of the Book of Esther?
- A. A remarkable feature of the Book of Esther is the absence of the name of God.
- B. No definite reference is made to prayer in the Book of Esther except in 9:31, where reference is made to "the fastings and their cry."
- C. It would seem that this omission of any definite reference to the Jewish religion is intended.
- D. all of these are true
- 16. What is not true of the spiritual message of the Book of Esther?
- A. The Jews, even though disobedient to God and wandering far from him in exile, are nevertheless the objects of his mercy and concern.
- B. God's providence is always over his people to save them from their enemies who persecute them.
- C. The power of prayer is forgotten.
- D. God sometimes hides himself in achieving his purposes in the world.

#### Chapter 2. THE BOOK OF EZRA

#### Section 1. The First Return Under Zerubbabel (Ezra 1:1-6: 22)

- 17. When the Persians conquered Babylon in 538 B.C., one of King Cyrus' first acts was the restoration of the captive peoples to their home countries.
- A. true
- B. false
- 18. King Cyrus helped the captive peoples reestablish their native religious life by restoring the sacred objects that had been confiscated in their homeland.
- A. true
- B. false
- 19. About Jews took part in the first return.
- A. 1000
- B. 10,000
- C. 50.000
- D. 100,000
- 20. Immediately upon their arrival in Palestine, the heads of families gave a generous offering for the building operations.
- A. true
- B. false
- 21. Immediately upon the arrival of the returning company, the actual rebuilding of the Temple started.
- A. true
- B. false

22. Work on the Temple was disrupted for 50 years due to the opposition of adversaries, such
as the Samaritans.

- A. true
- B. false
- 23. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah urged the people to continue building the Temple.
- A. true
- B. false
- 24. Work on the Temple received the support of King Darius, who made a decree warning the neighboring provinces not to molest those who were engaged in the Temple work.
- A. true
- B. false
- 25. After the Exile, what name was regularly assumed by the restored state?
- A. Judah
- B. Judah and Benjamin
- C. Israel
- D. Palestine
- 26. Some of the prophecies of Malachi probably belong to the period between what 2 chapters of the Book of Ezra.
- A. 1 and 2
- B. 3 and 4
- C. 6 and 7
- D. 8 and 9
- 27. How is the date of Ezra's arrival in Jerusalem determined?
- A. The year Zerubbabel died.
- B. Five years before Nehemiah arrived.
- C. "the seventh year of Artaxerxes" (7:7)
- D. When Ezra was 50 years old.
- 28. About how many people returned to Jerusalem with Ezra.
- A. 500
- B. 3000
- C. 5000
- D. 10,000
- 29. Ezra's 900-mile journey took nearly ¬¬¬\_\_\_\_ months?
- A. 2
- B. 3
- C. 4



- 30. What is true of Ezra's purpose for going to Jerusalem?
- A. visiting his family
- B. becoming its governor
- C. teaching the people the law of Moses
- D. registering for the census
- 31. What is not true of Ezra's response to learning that many Jews had intermarried with families of neighboring nations?
- A. He tore his garments.
- B. He prayed for his sinful fellow countrymen.
- C. He shaved his head.
- D. He agreed with a suggestion requiring the foreign wives to be "put away."
- 32. Ezra's reformations took place about 30 years prior to Nehemiah's coming.
- A. true
- B. false

#### Chapter 3. THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

#### Section 1. Rebuilding The Wall of Jerusalem (1:1 - 6:19)

- 33. What is true of Nehemiah's background prior to going to Jerusalem?
- A. It is assumed that he belonged to an important family of Judahites transported to Babylon in the early sixth century B.C.
- B. He was a layman.
- C. He served as cupbearer to King Artaxerxes.
- D. all of these
- 34. King Artaxerxes not only allowed Nehemiah to make the trip to Jerusalem, but he also appointed him as governor of Judah.
- A. true
- B. false
- 35. Nehemiah and his companions made the long journey from Susa to Jerusalem in perhaps \_\_\_\_ months.
- A. 2
- B. 3
- C. 4
- D. 5

- 36. Which of the following was not one of the powerful enemies surrounding Nehemiah in Jerusalem?
- A. Sanballat, the governor of Samaria
- B. Tobiah, the Ammonite
- C. Ezra, the Jew
- D. Geshem, the Arabian
- 37. Three days after his arrival, Nehemiah took a secret tour of the walls and learned that the situation was much better than he anticipated.
- A. True
- B. False
- 38. The Jews were happy to carry out God's plan by calling on their neighbors and entering into alliances with the other nations.
- A. True
- B. False
- 39. What is not true of the obstacles the builders were confronted with as they moved forward?
- A. mockery and opposition from enemies
- B. threats and attacks
- C. unity and social justice
- D. attempts to entrap Nehemiah
- 40. What is not an interesting truth about the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem?
- A. the value of careful organization in a community project
- B. the emphasis placed on beginning at home with the builder repairing the section near his residence
- C. Nehemiah's autocratic leadership style
- D. the democratic way in which all classes worked together in God's work, from the high priest to the lowest countryman
- 41. In spite of all the difficulties encountered, the wall was completed in \_\_\_\_ days.
- A. 32
- B. 42
- C. 52
- D. 62
- 42. Chapters 8, 10, and 13 deal with the more physical and civic aspects of the reforms.
- A. True
- B. False
- 43. Chapters 7, 11, and 12 deal with the moral and religious aspects.
- A. True
- B. False

- 44. What is true of the census planned in Chapter 7?
- A. It was important for the repopulation of the city of Jerusalem.
- B. It was done in a manner ensuring that the families brought into Jerusalem would truly be people of Israel.
- C. It was a basis on which to select families for the enlarged population of the city.
- D. all of these
- 45. What is true of the religious revival led by Ezra?
- A. Sincere attention was given to the exposition of God's Word.
- B. There was conviction of sin under the impact of the Word.
- C. There was fasting, prayer, and confession of sin.
- D. all of these
- 46. What is not true of the religious revival led by Ezra?
- A. There was recognition of God's justice and mercy.
- B. There was a commitment to follow the path God had designed.
- C. The Jewish community was strongly urged to give full allegiance to the Persian king.
- D. There was the joy of salvation.
- 47. What is true of the covenant of loyalty in chapter 10?
- A. It forbid intermarriage with non-Jews.
- B. It forbid desecration of the Sabbath.
- C. It required payment of the Temple tax.
- D. all of these
- 48. It is noticeable that the record of the dedication of the wall is not given in connection with the account of its completion.
- A. true
- B. false
- 49. The last two chapters of the book, summarize the reforms instituted during the later years of Nehemiah's governorship.
- A. true
- B. false
- 50. As one looks back on the life and work of Nehemiah, one is not impressed with his lack of loyalty in situations he faced.
- A. True
- B. False
- 51. The Book of Nehemiah closes with an overview of the reforms that Ezra had achieved prior to Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem.
- A. True
- B. False

#### Chapter 4. THE BOOK OF ESTHER

#### Section 1. The Elevation of Esther (1:1 - 2:23)

- 52. What is true of the great convocation King Xerxes held?
- A. It was in the 484 B.C.
- B. He entertained the rulers and the nobles of his vast empire.
- C. It was held in Susa.
- D. all of these
- 53. What is not true of the great convocation King Xerxes held?
- A. There was a similar feast for the citizens of Susa
- B. The feast lasted seven days.
- C. Men and women got drunk together.
- D. Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command.
- 54. What is not true about the circumstances of Vashti being deposed?
- A. King Xerxes was furious that Vashti refused to come to his party.
- B. King Xerxes left the queen's fate in the hands of the court advisors.
- C. All the Persian women were encouraged to disregard their husbands.
- D. Vashti was "never again to enter the presence of King Xerxes."
- 55. Some three or four years after Vashti was deposed (2:16), a plan was begun to choose a new queen.
- A. True
- B. False
- 56. Among the many maidens brought to the palace was a certain Jewess by the name of Hadassah, or Esther.
- A. True
- B. False
- 57. What is true about Esther's background?
- A. She had been reared in the household of her older cousin Mordecai.
- B. She was a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin.
- C. She was a fair and beautiful maiden.
- D. all of these
- 58. What is not true of Esther's background?
- A. Her relative Kish was one of those who were taken into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar.
- B. She won the favor of everyone who saw her.
- C. She was the widow of Mordecai's brother.
- D. At the suggestion of Mordecai she did not reveal her race or lineage.

- 59. What is true of Esther's selection?
- A. At the end of a full year of preparation, she was introduced along with others to the king one by one.
- B. Hegai, the chief eunuch, preferred her above all the other maidens in his care.
- C. Hegai had assigned her the choicest position in the best place in the harem.
- D. all of these
- 60. What is not true of Esther's selection?
- A. She was allowed to choose the particular attire that she would wear.
- B. When Esther's turn came to go in to the king she wisely depended on the judgment of Hegai.
- C. She dressed like Vashti.
- D. In all her acts, she exercised the care, discretion, and respect for the judgment of others.
- 61. Esther's introduction to the king resulted in her being immediately chosen as queen.
- A. True
- B. False
- 62. What is true of Esther's acceptance as Queen?
- A. The king loved Esther more than all the other women.
- B. A great feast was held in her honor.
- C. To win the affection of the people for the new queen, a special reduction in tribute was announced to all the realm.
- D. all of these
- 63. What is true of Mordecai's discovery of a plot against the king?
- A. Two of Xerxes' courtiers were plotting the king's assassination.
- B. Edom and Libnah revolted.
- C. Mordecai had accidentally learned of this plot and reported it.
- D. all of these
- 64. Several years after Esther's elevation to queenship, a man named Haman was promoted to the position of joint emperor.
- A. True
- B. False
- 65. What is true of Haman's opinion of the Jews?
- A. He hated Mordecai because he would not bow to him.
- B. He hated all Jews because he hated Mordecai.
- C. He plotted to destroy all Jews.
- D. all of these
- 66. Haman was aware that Esther was a Jewess.
- A. True
- B. False



- 67. What is true of Haman's plot against the Jews?
- A. He sought the cooperation of Ahasuerus/ Xerxes in making a decree against the Jews.
- B. He reported that there was "a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces" who did not obey the king's laws.
- C. He offered to pay into the royal treasury "ten thousand talents of silver" if the order for their destruction was given.
- D. all of these
- 68. King Xerxes willingly permitted Haman to annihilate the Jews.
- A. True
- B. False
- 69. By casting lots (pur), Haman determined the time for the massacre of the Jews to be perpetrated.
- A. True
- B. False
- 70. What is true of Mordecai's response to the plot to kill all the Jews?
- A. He tore his outer garments from him and clothed himself in sackcloth.
- B. He sprinkled himself with ashes to express his great grief.
- C. He went out into the streets of the city, wailing and uttering loud and bitter cries.
- D. all of these
- 71. What is true of Esther's response to the plot to kill all the Jews?
- A. She seemed not to know of the plot against the Jews until Mordecai informed her.
- B. She promised not to remain silent about it.
- C. She promised to seek the king's help to resolve the problem.
- D. all of these
- 72. After three days of fasting, Esther made her appearance in the inner court of the palace in full view of the king.
- A. True
- B. False
- 73. Haman plotted to hang Mordecai before the massacre of the other Jews.
- A. True
- B. False
- 74. Haman was punished for his plot against Mordecai and the Jews.
- A. True
- B. False

75. Mordecai became the prime minister of Persia and helped enact a law to save the Jews.

A. True

B. False

#### Methods of Study

Have you enjoyed this study of the Books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther? Do you wish to study further? If so, here are a few more suggestions.

- 1. Compare the authorship of the Books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther.
- 2. Compare the authorship of the Books of 1 and 2 Chronicles to the authorship of Ezra and Nehemiah.
- 3. Consider the relationship of the Books of 1 and 2 Chronicles to Ezra and Nehemiah.
- 4. Consider the relationship of the Book of Ezra to the Book of Haggai.
- 5. Contrast the relationship of the Book of Ezra to the Book of Zechariah.
- 6. Compare Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther as leaders.

Allow God, our Leader, to even more fully guide your life as you study the Books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther!

#### **Pronunciation Guide**

Agagite [EH-gag-ight]

Ammonite [A-muh-nyt]

Apocrypha [uh-PAHK-ruh-fuh]

Artaxerxes [ar-tax-ERK-sees]

Hanani [ha-NAH-nee]

Hananiah [han-an-EYE-uh]

Hegai [heg-EYE]

Jaddua [jad-OO-ah]

Mordecai [MOR-dek-eye]

Palestine [PAL-us-tien]

Sanballat [san-BAL-at]

Septuagint [SEP-twuh-gunt]

Shechaniah [shek-en-EYE-uh]

Tattenai [TAT-en-eye]

Tobiah [tob-EYE-uh]

Xerxes [ZERK-zees]

Yahweh [YAH-way]

Zerubbabel [zuh-RUH-buh-bul]