

Old Testament Foundation 7

History Part 5 - Return to Jerusalem

God's story of how He works through human history to bring about His perfect will continues in our final lesson of the OT foundation called "*Return to Jerusalem*." In the year 538 B.C., the controlling world empire of Babylon was finally conquered by Cyrus, the first Persian king. It was he who allowed the first Jews to return to Jerusalem to begin rebuilding the Temple. However, it wasn't until the reign of Cyrus' son, king Darius (the great), that the Temple was finally finished in 516 B.C., exactly 70 years after its destruction by the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar.

- Important NT reference note: After this second temple is rebuilt, the Scriptures refer to it as either "The Second Temple" or as "The House (of the LORD)."

Under the reign of the Persian kings Cyrus, Darius and Xerxes, the Jews were free to go about re-cultivating the land of Judah and rebuilding their cities. The resettlement process was very labor intensive and it took an additional 60 years to bring the land back to the level of civilization they had reached before the destruction of Jerusalem.

During the year 483 B.C., in the third year of King Xerxes' reign, the story of Esther takes place. King Xerxes (also known by his Hebrew name Ahasuerus) was one of the most historically prominent of all the Persian kings, not because he was such a great king, but because he managed to offend the Egyptians, the Greeks and even his own people. He was known for his high taxes and his destruction of a statue of the god Marduk, the supreme God of Babylon. His religion was "Zoroastrian" a complex polytheism with an ordered hierarchy of divine beings ruled by one supreme creator god, Ahura Mazda, Wise Lord¹. How the world outside of Persia viewed Xerxes is recorded by the ancient Greek historian Herodotus, "*Xerxes was an ambitious, ruthless and intolerant ruler, administrator over a vast empire, a brilliant warrior, and a jealous lover.*"

It is not known what kind of relationship Xerxes had with Israel, but it does not appear that he had any particular animosity against the Jews. There were still many Jews living in diaspora² in Persia and although they had enemies, there did not seem to have been any official opposition.

²DIASPORA (die as' pore ah) the forced dispersion or scattering of the Jews from the land of Israel/Judah into other parts of the world. The term "dispersion" is also often used to describe this process.

Esther – God's Woman of the Hour

Following in chronology, the book of Esther is next picking up a story of one family in diaspora. This book is particularly puzzling because there is no mention of God, at all; very strange for a book of the Bible! Nevertheless, the problem can easily be solved when viewed in its time and culture. This story is among the Jews still living in diaspora who are "OUT OF GOD'S WILL". He had already made a way for them to return to the land of Israel, but most

Jews were very comfortable living in the Persian Empire. Life was easier and they were prospering. The book of Esther reveals how God still took care of His people even when they were outside of His will.

The story of Esther opens in the year 483 B.C., the third year of King Xerxes' reign. He is giving a huge banquet attended by "*all the people of Susa*," meaning his entourage, his officials and any visitors of importance. The banquet has a dual purpose, to celebrate the completion of his palace and to enlist his guests' aid to carry out a military campaign against Greece. He needed the military support and financial backing of all the provinces.

1. King Xerxes displayed his wealth for 180 days and then held a final banquet. Esther 1:8 says, "*The king instructed all the wine stewards to serve each man what he wished.*" Using Esther 1:10-12
 - How long had these banquets been going on?
 - What was king Xerxes' demeanor during this final banquet?
 - Why did he ask his seven eunuchs' to bring Queen Vashti to him?
 - When the eunuchs came back and said the queen refused, how did the king react?
2. King Xerxes consulted his wise men about what action the law required when the queen violated an order of the king. What was Memucan's answer to him? (Esther 1:19, 20)
3. The king followed the advice, but later (after the military campaign) he came home and "remembered Vashti." The attendants did not want to face the wrath of Xerxes so what suggestion did they make? (Esther 2:2-4a)
4. "The advice appealed to the king and he followed it" (2:4b). As a result, a young girl by the name of Hadassah (Hebrew) or Esther (Persian) was taken to the palace. What does the text tell us about Esther? (Esther 2:5-7)

5. What additional information is given in Esther 2:10 and 11?
6. How did Esther fare? (Esther 2:17)
7. As with any good story, the plot thickens when the villain comes on the scene. He is an Agagite named Haman. Using Esther 3:1-4:
 - What had the king just done for Haman?
 - What had he commanded concerning this?
 - How did the trouble begin?
 - How long did this continue?
 - Why did Mordecai say he behaved this way in spite of repeated warnings?
8. When Haman was informed about the situation, he became enraged. Then, when he found out Mordecai was a Jew, what was his reaction? (Esther 3:6)
9. As the second entity in the Empire, Haman had direct access to the king. Being very careful not to identify the Jews: (Use Esther 3:8, 9a)
 - What did Haman emphasize about “a certain people” scattered among the people of Xerxes’ kingdom?
 - In his effort to play up to the king what did he say was in the best interest of the king?
10. Haman said he would personally put 10,000 talents of silver (about 15 million dollars) into the treasury to fund such an effort. How did king Xerxes react to such a proposal? (Esther 3:10, 11)
11. One can only imagine the shock that went throughout the Persian Empire as the news quickly spread. The decree said all were to “destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews - young and old, women and little children - on a single day, the 13th day of the 12th month of Adar, and to plunder their goods” (3:13). While the couriers carried the devastating news throughout the kingdom what were the king and Haman doing? (Esther 3:15)

12. One of those hearing the news first was Mordecai. “He tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly.” Queen Esther was informed of Mordecai’s behavior so sent a servant to find out what was troubling him. After informing her of the decree, what did Mordecai urge Esther to do? (Esther 4:8 & 13-14)
13. Remember, what had Esther not done because of Mordecai’s instructions? (Esther 2:10)
14. What was Esther’s answer to Mordecai’s instruction? (Esther 4:15-16)
15. How did that go for Esther? (Esther 5:1,2)
16. The king asked what she wanted and she said if he and Haman would come to a banquet she was preparing then she would tell him. When the king informed Haman of the invitation what was Haman’s response? (Esther 5:9-13)
17. Haman decided that the best way to deal with his “Mordecai” problem was to build a gallows, then ask the king to hang Mordecai on it. The very thought put Haman in a good mood, but the result was not what Haman designed. Esther did not reveal her petition to the king at that first banquet but requested they return the next day. After the second banquet she was ready to answer the king.
 - What did the king say to Esther about her request? (Esther 7:1 & 2)
 - How did Esther answer the king? (Esther 7:3-4)
18. King Xerxes, shocked and enraged, asks, “What man would dare do such a thing?” How did Esther close the trap on Haman? (Esther 7:6a)
19. One of the eunuchs attending the king and queen volunteered the information that Haman had built a 75-foot gallows in the courtyard of his house. What did the king command? (Esther 7:9)

20. Unfortunately, the story doesn't end there. Any decree made by a Persian king cannot be revoked, even by that king himself. Therefore, Xerxes authorized Mordecai to issue a counter decree. In Mordecai's decree he gave the Jews the ability to defend themselves against anyone who attacked them on the 13th day of Adar. What does the text record happened?

- Esther 9:1-10

- Esther 9:16b

Because of the great victory given to the Jews by the Lord, Mordecai sent another decree throughout the Persian Empire declaring a holiday each year on the 14th day of Adar. "All Jews are to celebrate a day of feasting, joy and giving presents to one another and gifts to the poor" (Esther 9:22). This celebration is called "Purim" to commemorate the "pur" meaning lot or dice that Haman had used to determine the day of slaughter – but that God had turned into a day of victory.

Ezra – The Second group of Exiles return to Jerusalem

21. After the story of God's preservation of his people from annihilation, the biblical timeline takes another jump to the year 458 B.C. when Xerxes' son Artaxerxes is king of the Persian Empire. The first exiles have been back in Jerusalem for about 80 years. The cities have been rebuilt and the House of the Lord is functioning. However, most of the other buildings in Jerusalem have not been rebuilt. The text introduces the next of the Lord's servants, a priest and scribe by the name of Ezra. What had Ezra devoted his life to? (Ezra 7:10)

22. Ezra asked king Artaxerxes for authorization to return to Jerusalem and it was granted.

- Who did the king decree could go with Ezra? (Ezra 7:13)
- What was Ezra to report to the king about? (Ezra 7:14)
- What provisions did the king give to Ezra? (Ezra 7:15, 16)
- What was Ezra's specific commission from the king? (Ezra 7:25, 26)

23. The king also entrusted to Ezra any additional articles of worship which the Babylonians had taken from Jerusalem. What was Ezra's response to the king's generosity? (Ezra 7:27, 28)

Travel along the trade route from Ahava to Jerusalem was slow (walking with pack animals), dangerous (bandits and the general topography), and long (approximately 900 miles). The trip took Ezra four months because of the weight of the articles for the Temple he was transporting, approximately three and three-fourths tons of silver and gold.

24. Using Ezra 8:31-34:

- How does Ezra say they were protected from bandits?
- After the long trip, they rested for three days, and then on the fourth day, they presented the gold and silver articles in the "House of our God." What did Ezra say about that delivery?

Ezra immediately began teaching God's Word to the returned exiles. Within a few months, the people confessed they had not been obedient to God's Laws. During those 80 years they had been back, they had intermarried with the mixed population of the land and idolatry was now in their homes. The people began weeping, fasting, mourning and praying until one of them stood up and said there was still hope for Israel. If they would turn back to the Lord from their idolatry, He would hear them and forgive them. This would not be easy because they decided any family which would not give up idolatry would require divorce. The families would only worship the one true God of Israel. The people did follow through on their plan, they did return with their whole heart and the relationship between God and Israel was restored.

The time line fast forwards 13 years to the 20th year of King Artaxerxes reign (445 B.C.) with the story of Nehemiah.

Nehemiah – The Third Return of Exiles

25. The story opens in the king's palace in Susa. A Jewish man named Nehemiah was serving in the trusted position of cupbearer to the king (food and wine taster, especially for poison). His brother Hanani had just returned from a visit to Jerusalem and Nehemiah was anxious for news about his homeland. What was the news Hanani brought? (Neh. 1:3)

26. By now it had been 140 years since the destruction of Jerusalem and 71 years since the House of the Lord had been rebuilt. Devastated by the news, Nehemiah sat down and wept, mourned and fasted for days as he prayed to God (Neh. 1:4). The Lord answered his prayer by giving Nehemiah an intense desire to personally go to Jerusalem and

rebuild the walls. The concern weighed heavily on Nehemiah preoccupying his thoughts. How was the Lord able to use that? (Neh. 2:2 & 3)

27. Note that Nehemiah was careful not to name Jerusalem which had been a rival national capital. When Artaxerxes asked Nehemiah what he wanted, what was the first thing Nehemiah did? (Neh. 2:4)
28. Then he answered the king by requesting permission to return to “the city in which my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it.” What does Nehemiah say happened next? (Neh. 2:8b)
 - And in Nehemiah 2:9?
29. This book is Nehemiah’s memoirs and he assumes his readers know the facts. He finally mentions in chapter 5 how he was given the needed authority to rebuild. What position did the king give to him? (Neh. 5:14)
30. Throughout the Old Testament we’ve discovered that anything undertaken for the Lord always faces opposition. Using Nehemiah 2:10:
 - Who were Nehemiah’s main enemies?
 - What was their problem?
31. After inspecting the walls at night, so as not to draw any attention to his plans, he called together all the people. What did he say? (Neh. 2:17, 18a)

32. Nehemiah spoke to the people using “we” and “us” even though he had just arrived. In doing so, he let them know this was his city and these were his people, and this project was directed by God and approved by the king. How did the people respond? (Neh. 2:18b)
33. Nehemiah had quite a construction crew to do this very difficult job. From the following verses what type of people made up his crew? (Do not give names, just titles.)
- 3:1
 - 3:2 & 3
 - 3:5
 - 3:8
 - 3:12
 - 3:17
 - 3:26
 - 3:31
34. As soon as the crew got to work, Sanballat and Tobiah also got busy. What was their first tactic? (Neh. 4:1b)
- How did Nehemiah respond to this? (Neh. 4:4, 5)
 - How did this affect the work? (Neh. 4:6)
35. When that failed, what was their second attempt? (Neh. 4:8)
36. How did Nehemiah deal with this very serious new threat?
- 4:9
 - 4:15-18
 - 4:20

- 4:22

37. What was the result of Nehemiah's leadership? (Neh. 6:15)
38. How did that affect the enemies Sanballat and Tobiah? (Neh. 6:16)
39. A great dedication celebration was held following the completion of the walls. In preparation for the celebration, what does Nehemiah 8:13 & 15 say:
- Ezra was doing?
 - About the people?
 - Was discovered?
40. Because of Ezra's teaching the people God's Word, they recognized they had sinned and broken God's covenant. What did they do about this? (Neh. 9:1-3)
41. Ezra offered a prayer of confession and praise acknowledging that Yahweh is an "awesome God who keeps his covenant of love." He also acknowledged that Judah was ruled by the Persian Empire and that the people were slaves to them "because of our sin." What did Ezra tell the Lord that this generation of returned exiles wanted to do? (Neh. 9:38)
42. Using Nehemiah 10:28 – 29:
- Who participated?
 - How did they make this binding?
 - What did they promise to do?

- What else did they add? (Neh. 10:39b)

Some time later, Nehemiah left Jerusalem after serving as governor for 12 years. Then, word got back to Nehemiah who was in Susa that there was big trouble in Jerusalem, so he returned for a second term as governor.

43. When he arrived, how did he handle this new situation? (Neh. 13:8 & 9)

44. What else was happening? (Neh. 13:10)

Nehemiah called the Levites back reinstated them and made sure they were provided for so that worship could continue. Nehemiah 13:15 said the people were also working on the Sabbath so Nehemiah ordered the gates closed at sundown prior to the Sabbath so merchants could not bring goods in to sell. But the final straw to Nehemiah's patience was discovering that the high priest's grandson was married to Sanballat's daughter, so Nehemiah "*drove him away*" (Neh. 13:28).

Malachi – God's final Prophet

45. Toward the end of the same time as Ezra and Nehemiah, the Lord sent one last prophet to present His view of what was going on and to add His voice in calling the people to repentance. Keep in mind that by now even the high priest was not obeying God's Law (Neh. 13:7). What word from the Lord did Malachi deliver to the priests? (Mal. 2:7)

46. He said, "But you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble" (Mal. 2:8a). He also said they weary the Lord with their words because they say evil is viewed as good and question "where is the God of justice?" It was into this setting that God sent Malachi with words of hope. Many of the faithful remnant like Ezra, Nehemiah and many others were waiting for the Lord to come and fill this second temple with His glory as He had done in the Tabernacle (Ex. 40:34, 35) during their wilderness days and in Solomon's Temple (1 Kings 8:10-13). Why was He waiting so long? Maybe with the walls rebuilt He would come. But when He does come, that day will not be what they are expecting. Using Malachi 4:1 & 2:

- How is that day described?

- What can the arrogant and evildoers expect?
- How about those who revere God's name by obeying him?

47. What final piece of information is given? (Mal. 4:5)

With the final words of Malachi, the Old Testament ends unfulfilled and incomplete, but with the faith of God's people firmly anchored in the Laws given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. They knew they were a chosen people, holy to the Lord and, according to the covenant promise made to Abraham; it was through them that all the world would be blessed. They had come to realize that God was not locked in the past; there was a future and a hope. The Jewish faith, beginning right here in the post-exilic period, became forward looking, and as time went by, anticipation increased.

It is out of this frustration that the messianic hope eventually was born. Following the time of Malachi it was widely believed that God would once again intervene in history. Kings and priests had continually let the Jews down, but God had made a covenant promise with the royal family of David. He had promised that a descendant of David would sit on the throne forever. The anointed one would come! Malachi said his messenger would precede him and they would watch and wait for his arrival. Was the promised Messiah (anointed one), the son of David near?

They also anticipated a time of physical renewal of the world itself. They expected God to do new things. They began to take a close look at the writings of the prophets and came to anticipate that the Messiah would be an all-powerful conquering king.

Application

Although the last verses of the Old Testament show that history is incomplete, they are words filled with hope. Regardless of how life looks, God controls the future and everything will be made right. We who have loved and served God also look forward to that joyful celebration. This hope for the future becomes ours when we trust God with our lives.

Bibliography

¹ Neusner, Jacob *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, pg 692, Hendrickson Publishers 1999

² *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, CD-ROM, Keter Publishing House Ltd., Jerusalem, Israel, 1997