

of course, but it all became more and more a matter of religious duty than of passionate devotion.

Yahweh couched His messages as He did, knowing that His people would grow fickle through disappointment. What if He had told them back in 520 BC, "Build this temple now, even though you're going to live in poverty and oppression for five and a half centuries until the King comes, and even then he won't be the military general you wanted, you'll sell him for a slave-price, and you'll have another couple thousand years to struggle through"? Surely the Jews would have thrown up their hands right then and said, "This is too much. What's in it for us?" So instead, Yahweh told them just enough to encourage them, just enough to give them a chance to respond *if* they trusted Him. He could have burst in right then, ousted Persia, and dropped the Jews into the lap of luxury. But that would have been just what Satan had said about Job: Yahweh buys love. He didn't want the kind of love that had to be bought; He wanted the Abrahams who would hang on in the dark.

This generation of Jews were not Abrahams. After Zechariah's final prophecies the Bible falls silent on that generation, and we hear nothing more of the restored community for sixty years. By that time, rot and complacency had settled in, and while Yahweh was not finished with the nation, there was no more hinting that glory was just around the corner.

What would have happened if that generation had held faith through the years of hard work and waiting under foreign oppression?

Looking Toward the Future

*Ezra 4:6-23, 7:1-10:44;
Nehemiah; Esther; Malachi*

Esther

Meanwhile, the scene shifts back to the Persian capital, where Yahweh was beginning to deal with a quiet threat to His people's existence.

Darius was a superb leader. He solidified the Persian Empire from India to northern Sudan, improved the bureaucracy, instituted the use of coins, standardized weights and measures, introduced a new law code, and took a strong interest in his subjects' welfare. But he also imposed burdensome taxes to support his administration and building projects, such as his lavish palace at Susa, his new capital.

Darius's son Xerxes (pronounced "Zerk-seez") succeeded him on his death in 486 BC. The new king was bold, ambitious, handsome, stately, and thoroughly self-indulgent. The empire was crumbling under Darius's taxes, but Xerxes did not have his father's diplomatic skill. He burned Athens, took sacred treasures from Egypt, destroyed temples in Babylon after a revolt, and denied a Jewish request to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. He seduced his niece, abandoned his sister-in-law to death for rebuffing his advances, and wiped out his brother's whole

family. When a bridge he commissioned collapsed in a tempest, he ordered the sea flogged and had the builders beheaded.

It took Xerxes a couple of years to quell revolts in Egypt and Babylon after his father's death. Then he spent a while finishing his fabulous citadel at Susa. But by 483 he was ready to tackle empire building. He invited all the prominent men of his domain to spend six months in Susa, to admire his wealth and power and to help him plan a campaign against Greece. The culmination of that session was a seven-day debauch before the launch of the war.

On the seventh day Xerxes summoned his loveliest possession, his queen, to display herself for his guests. She refused to come, possibly because she objected to the manner in which she was to be displayed. At any rate, the Persian nobles agreed that such conduct would undermine wifely submission, so Xerxes deposed his wife and declared that he would choose a new queen upon his return from Greece.

The Greek venture was catastrophic; Xerxes gave the Greeks two of their most glorious historic victories. When his army limped home in 479 BC, Xerxes was ready for the distraction of a new batch of girls for his harem. So his attendants planned a beauty contest in which the prettiest girls from across the empire would be commandeered, given beauty treatments, and allowed to spend one night with the king. When Xerxes found one that suited him, she would be queen. The rest would spend the remainder of their days locked in the hot, cramped harem, living like nuns.

One of the unlucky ladies was Esther, a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin. She quickly found favor with the eunuch in charge of the harem, who coached her on how to win the king's notice. Sure enough, she became queen in January of 478 BC.

An orphan, Esther had been raised by her uncle Mordecai. Upon becoming queen she had him appointed as a judge, and while sitting among the other officials one day, Mordecai overheard a plot to assassinate Xerxes. He told Esther, and she told Xerxes, who duly executed the plotters and recorded Mordecai's service in his record book.

Sometime later, Mordecai irritated one of Xerxes' officials

by refusing to bow to him. This Haman was a descendant of the king of Amalek whom Mordecai's ancestor Saul was supposed to have executed six centuries earlier (1 Samuel 15). Haman was also an insufferable boor, and Mordecai saw their rivalry as a symbol of the war between the sons of the Snake and the sons of God.

Haman saw it that way, too. He wheedled Xerxes into issuing an irrevocable edict authorizing pogroms against a certain unnamed race. The Jews mourned when they heard of the edict issued on April 17, 474. Mordecai urged his niece to intercede with the king. But Esther knew her husband's volatile moods. Initiating contact with him could mean instant death, and she hadn't seen him in a month.

Mordecai's response was curt:

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 royal position for such a time as this?
(Esther 4:14)

A Mind with a plan lay behind the destiny of every Jew; Esther's choice was simply whether to accept the risks of her assignment or fail in the purpose for her existence. She accepted.

As it turned out, her shrewd tactics and some "coincidences" won the execution of Haman and a second edict that the Jews could protect themselves against anyone who tried to carry out the previous irrevocable edict. March 7, 473, was a bloodbath, but the Jewish people survived.

The book of Esther was probably written sometime between Xerxes' death in 464 BC and the end of the Persian Empire in 331, most likely by a Jew living in one of the Persian cities. The hairbreadth deliverance is celebrated annually as the Feast of Purim, when the book is read. But the most notable feature of the book is that not once is Yahweh named or even alluded to. Fasting is mentioned, but not the prayer that certainly accompanied it. The coincidences—that it was Esther whom the harem officer and the king favored, that Mordecai happened to overhear

a conversation, and on and on — are simply left to dangle as “well, that’s what happened.” Nothing is attributed to Yahweh’s intervention. It’s as if the writer is saying, “That’s how life looks from down here. We see only what happens; we can only guess where Yahweh’s hand is touching.” The God who dealt with Pharaoh through technicolor plagues could deal with an even worse tyrant like Xerxes by placing a gutsy woman in the right place at the right time.

Ezra

Xerxes’ successor, Artaxerxes, again had to deal with revolts in Egypt. To maintain order and loyalty in Palestine, he authorized a priest named Ezra to lead a second party of Jews back to Judah in 458 BC, and then to enforce the Jewish law on all Jews there. Artaxerxes also made a grant to pay for sacrifices in return for the goodwill of the Jewish God and people.

Ezra was an impassioned student, practitioner, and teacher of Moses’ Law. He soon whipped temple worship into shipshape condition and began teaching Moses’ instructions. The people were shocked to find out how many things they were doing that directly contradicted Yahweh’s laws. Some of the leaders admitted to Ezra that many Jewish men had married nonJewish women, who were now leading their husbands and children to practice the mixed local religions. It may have been (as happened a generation later) that the men were even divorcing their Jewish wives in order to marry into the families of influential local landowners. But at the very least they were endangering the existence of a nation devoted to Yahweh.

In response Ezra did not rebuke the men; he was consumed with the horror of how this disregard must make Yahweh feel. He tore his clothes and hair as signs of mourning and sat in silence for hours, appalled. Then he went to the temple in his torn robes, fell to his knees, and sobbed a prayer of confession. He knew Yahweh had every right to wash His hands of this mob and bring in another batch of exiles through whom He could fulfill His plan. His grief cut the people’s hearts deeper than any accusation; they came to him weeping and promising to divorce their foreign wives.

A committee of the leading Jews sat for three months reviewing each family’s case and found 110 men guilty of marrying wives who had not converted to worship Yahweh exclusively. The committee decided these persistent idolaters had to be divorced; it was a human tragedy of mammoth proportions, but spiritual purity (not ethnic purity) was the reason for this community’s existence.

Nehemiah

For twelve years Ezra strove to keep the unruly Jews in line. By 446 he had made enough progress that they were ready to try rebuilding Jerusalem as a proper national capital. But three local nonJews informed Artaxerxes that if this city were restored, the Jews would almost certainly revolt and try to set up an independent state. Since he had had to quell a Palestinian rebellion in 454 BC, Artaxerxes took the warning seriously and ordered the work halted until further notice. The Jews’ enemies went a step further and demolished and burned what had already been done.

The Jews were mortified, but Yahweh had an ace up His sleeve. Back in Persia, one of Artaxerxes’ trusted officials happened to be a Jew of faith and nerve called Nehemiah. When Nehemiah heard that the reconstruction had been wrecked, he spent four months fasting and praying for Yahweh to do something. By April of 445, he knew *he* was that “something.” Through prayer and natural shrewdness he worked his whole strategy out before approaching Artaxerxes with it. Miraculously, the king agreed to send Nehemiah as the new governor of Judah with a royal escort, letters to the local Persian officials, and even a requisition for timber from the royal forests.

Upon his arrival in Jerusalem, he inspected the demolished walls and again had a plan entirely mapped out before presenting it to the Jewish leaders. Their new governor’s take-charge confidence impressed them, and they summoned their people from around Judah to help build the city wall.

The governors of Samaria and Ammon, however, were not pleased. They were used to running the region, and this new Jewish governor would be a pest once he had a defensible city. But Nehemiah dismissed both their ridicule and their threats:

"The God of Heaven will give us success."

The Jews flocked from their villages and set to work. When scorn failed to daunt the builders, their enemies tried raids. Nehemiah countered with his typical spiritual-practical approach: "We prayed to our God and posted a guard." The work halted temporarily for a total call to arms, but thereafter the builders were able to make progress as long as their weapons were at hand. It was a grueling two months in which not even Nehemiah got much sleep or even changed his clothes.

The next problem was internal. Nehemiah had diverted the people from farming to building, and many of them were already in economic trouble. They'd had to mortgage their land to feed their families during a bad crop year, and if their harvests failed this year, their creditors would take everything. Some farmers had even sold daughters to support the rest of their children, and the Jewish buyers were selling the girls to pagans. These peasants were dedicated to Nehemiah's cause, but "you can't eat walls."¹

Nehemiah was shocked that Jews were willing buy the lands and even the children out from under their countrymen with the attitude that business is business. The governor had himself been lending money, but he was now convinced that even fair lending was improper when a brother's life was at stake. He made his fellow rich men swear that everything foreclosed or bought from a debtor would be returned, that interest would no longer be charged on loans, and that anything a fellow Jew could not pay back would be treated as a gift. To set an example, Nehemiah went so far as to refuse to take a salary from taxes on his people; for the next twelve years he lived off what he had earned in Persia. (That included supporting a household of 150 people plus guests.) To him, sacrificial concern for his people was a leader's sign of love for God.

Nehemiah endured plot after plot from his enemies — murder attempts, false rumors that he was conspiring to become king, efforts to disgrace him before the people. His blunt prayers for justice and protection punctuate his memoirs (which form most of the book of Nehemiah).

Once the city had a wall with gates and guards, Nehemiah

addressed himself to populating it so that it would not just be a shell, easily cracked when his back was turned. He was also concerned to help Ezra in his ongoing campaign to keep the people focused on Yahweh. So the two of them summoned the whole community to Jerusalem for the autumn festivals. For a solid six hours on the first day, Ezra read from the books of Moses while the Levites interpreted the teaching so that the people could grasp it clearly. The people wept as they saw how far short they fell of this standard, but Nehemiah told them to go home and celebrate: the strength to move toward this holiness would come not from self-punishment, but from joy in Yahweh.

For a week they lived in tents on city roofs, celebrated their ancestors' desert wandering, feasted, and listened to Moses' teaching. Toward the end of the month they gathered again for a day of hearing the teaching, confessing their offenses, and worshiping. Then they cast lots for the one family out of ten who would move into the new city. Nehemiah's book carefully records the name of each of those families as a sign that this was an ordered people, a network of men and women with a past and a future. Finally, the community held an elaborate festival to dedicate the wall — and hence the whole city — to Yahweh as His holy place. It was not the vast complex envisioned by Ezekiel, but it was the city of God for now.

Nehemiah governed Judah until 433 BC, at which time he returned to Artaxerxes' court. Sometime thereafter he got himself commissioned to another term as governor and showed up back in Jerusalem to find that things had gone to seed. One of his archenemies had secured family connections with the high priest and had made an apartment out of one of the temple storehouses! One of Nehemiah's first official acts was to throw Tobiah's belongings out of the room. Then he ordered it purified and refilled with the incense and grain that belonged there.

Next he found that the people had broken their pledge to finance the temple services; the Levites had had to go back to farming to make ends meet. He dealt with that in short order. After that he disciplined the Jewish leaders for permitting commerce on the Sabbath in the Holy City — he locked the gates and posted guards until the merchants got the message that this day

belonged to Yahweh. Finally, when he found that once again Jewish men were preferring pagan wives, and that many of their children couldn't even speak the Jewish language, he handled the men in Nehemiah fashion: he exploded and even slapped some of them around. Haven't you idiots gotten the message yet? Yahweh wiped us out once for degenerating into just another idolatrous nation, and He won't hesitate to do it again. We exist to be a light to the nations, not to imitate their madness.

Malachi

The last prophet of the Old Testament may have been at work during the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, or just after. He addressed the same issues they faced: the Jews, disappointed that none of the great things Haggai and Zechariah promised had happened, were settling into lukewarmness. They doubted Yahweh's love for them, since He had not come to His temple in power, nor liberated His people from their overlords. They doubted His justice, since the wicked were still prospering more than the good. So they continued to go through the motions of worship, but they cut corners, offering to Yahweh only what they didn't want. The priests set scandalous examples, and the people followed them in divorcing their first wives in order to make more socially advantageous marriages with pagans.

To this community who said it didn't matter what they did because Yahweh had gone on vacation, Malachi declared that Yahweh was going to send a messenger in the spirit of Elijah to prepare for His own coming to His people. Then they would find out that God showing up was not as pleasant as they thought. For He would come like a blazing sun—purifying and healing to those who were willing to bear the heat of holiness, but a consuming fire to those who were only casually interested in religion.

The Silent Years

Most of the Jews completely ignored Malachi. So after his death, the prophetic voice fell silent in Judah, and the land held its breath, awaiting the Elijah-messenger. Yet a handful of people here and there retained the fire in their hearts and continued to

seek Yahweh's presence, not just His gifts. They fulfilled one of Yahweh's promises through the prophet Isaiah:

I have posted watchmen on your walls, O Jerusalem;
they will never be silent day or night.
You who call on [Yahweh],
give yourselves no rest,
and give him no rest till he establishes Jerusalem
and makes her the praise of the earth. (Isaiah 62:6-7)

For four hundred years the hidden watchmen prayed.

NOTE

1. Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), page 95.