

JEREMIAH'S LETTER TO THE EXILES:  
GOD'S BLESSING UPON  
RESPONSIBLE ACTION

**Introduction**

Of the many blessings contained within the Old Testament, the blessing of Jer 29:11–14 is one of modern importance for the American church.<sup>1</sup>

For I know the plans that I have planned for you, declares the Lord, peaceful plans and not contentious ones; to give to you a future and hope. And you will pray to me and I will hear you. And you will seek me and you will find me. For you must search for me with all your heart, then I will appear to you...<sup>2</sup>

The importance of this blessing within the modern American church is witnessed by the plethora of Christian paraphernalia, which references Jer 29:11–14 as its inspiration. Two questions, then, stem from meditating on Jer 29:11–14 and the American church's desire to obtain it: (1) How can one receive the blessing presented in these words, and (2) what does a life devoted to these words look like? The answers to these questions seem to place the modern American church in a somewhat awkward position.

The church's position is awkward because Jer 29:11–14 is a divine blessing promised to all who will seek to live responsibly before God. Living responsibly means living in obedience to God's laws within one's culture while seeking peace or general welfare for all. This blessing

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase "American church" is intended to include all Christian denominations that hold Scripture as the final authority on matters of life and faith. The phrase is one of the "common denominators" of the American Church. J. Gordon Melton, *Nelson's Guide to Denominations* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 8.

<sup>2</sup> All translations are the author's own unless stated otherwise.

does not allow one to live in dormancy but becomes accessible to Christians who will actively shape and engage their culture. In other words, the modern American church wants the divine blessing promised in Jer 29:11–14, but the church currently is neglecting its role in cultural engagement.

The lack of modern cultural engagement within the American church is the topic of many modern works.<sup>3</sup> If cultural engagement does not become a priority for the American church, one possible result could be “a culture where the majority of Americans has an enemy view of Bible-believing Christians.”<sup>4</sup> Such a result is less than ideal for the future of the church. Though many of these works have helped to bring an awareness of the current relationship between the American church and American culture, these works have not provided a clear biblical model by which the church can obtain the divine blessing of Jer 29:11–14. In other words, since the church desires the blessing of Jer 29:11–14, helping the church gain access to this blessing will also lead the church to engage American culture responsibly.

This work will provide a model for living responsibly within one’s culture through the following process. First, a brief analysis of Jeremiah’s entire letter (Jer 29:1–15) will demonstrate that Jer 29:11–14 is a blessing tied to responsible action. Second, the book of Esther will provide the model for how one can achieve this blessing. The book of Esther and Jeremiah’s letter share many thematic connections, and thus the book of Esther serves as an illustration of how to live responsibly within one’s culture. Finally, how Jeremiah’s letter relates to Christians,

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<sup>3</sup> See the following: David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2007); Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus but Not the Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2007); Chip Ingram, *Culture Shock* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2014); David Platt, *Counter Culture* (Carol Stream, Ill: Tyndale House, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> John S. Dickerson, *The Great Evangelical Recession* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2013), 47.

as found in Peter’s first letter, will conclude this demonstration with some brief applications of how the blessing of Jeremiah’s letter applies to the modern American Church.

### **Jeremiah 29:1–15: A Letter for Exilic Jews**

Internally, Jer 29:1–15 is held together by a common letter structure, with a beginning (vv. 1–3), a body (vv. 4–7a), and a conclusion (vv. 7b–15). The beginning of Jeremiah’s letter deals with its historical setting and identifies the letter’s recipients. The letter’s body explains the author’s intention. The conclusion provides the reader with seven statements to explain why the recipients should embrace the letter’s message.

The intention of Jeremiah’s letter is to explain how exiled Israelites are to live while they are refugees. The letter states that they are to settle into the local economy of their place of deportation (v. 5–7a). They settle in this economy by living as general citizens who survive off of the local produce of the land (v. 5), giving their daughters in marriage so they might continue to have descendants (v. 6), and seeking the welfare of the people living around them (v. 7a). The background of the intention of Jer 29:5–7 is found in Deut 20:5–15.<sup>5</sup> In fact, four verbal ideas are shared between Jer 29:5–7 and Deut 20:5–10 following the same order:

*Table 1. Deuteronomic Wisdom in Jeremiah’s Letter*

Deut 20:5–10 <sup>6</sup>	Jer 29:5–7a
(v. 5) whoever has built a new house (תִּדְרֹשׁ בַּיִת בְּנֵה)...	(v. 5a) build houses... (בְּנוּ בָתִּים)
(v. 6) whoever has planted a vineyard (כָּרַם נָטַע)...	(v. 5b)...and plant gardens... (וַנְטַעוּ גִּבּוֹרִת)
(v.7) whoever has betrothed a woman and not taken her... (לְקַחָהּ וְלֹא אָשָׁה אֶרֶשׁ)	(v. 6b) take wives... (קָחוּ נָשִׁים)
(v. 10) when you draw near a city... and proclaim peace... (לְשָׁלוֹם אֲלֵיָהּ וְקָרָאתָ... עִיר אֵל תִּקְרַב בָּי)	(v.7a) and seek peace for the city... (וְדַרְשׁוּ אֶת שְׁלוֹם הָעִיר)

<sup>5</sup> See Adele Berlin, “Jeremiah 29:5–7: A Deuteronomic Allusion,” *Hebrew Annual Review* 8 (1984): 3–11.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 4. The table provided is a slight alteration of that found in Berlin’s work.

Thus, the intention of Jeremiah's letter is to convince its recipients to live seeking to avoid warfare while promoting welfare. In other words, "in addition to encouraging settlement, Jeremiah is also subtly counseling against revolt."<sup>7</sup> From here, Jeremiah spends the rest of his leader convincing his recipients to live by the confines of this deuteronomic wisdom.<sup>8</sup>

To convince his recipients to live responsibly within their land of deportation, Jeremiah uses seven statements given in the form of *ki* (כי) clauses:

- (vv. 4–7) Live seeking the welfare of the city according to deuteronomic wisdom:
  - (v. 7) because (כי) their peace will be your peace.
  - (v. 8) because (כי) you cannot be deceived by the prophets and diviners.
  - (v. 9) because (כי) the words of the prophets and diviners are false.
  - (v. 10) because (כי) it will be seventy years and then you will return.
  - (vv. 11–12) because (כי) God has good plans for you.
  - (vv. 13–14) because (כי) you must seek him with your whole hearts.
  - (v. 15) because (כי) you have said, "O Lord, rise up for us prophets in Babylon."

But before these *ki* clauses are explained, a comment on the textual variant found in v. 14 will be given.

The Masoretic text (MT) of this verse offers a different conclusion to Jeremiah's promise than that of the Septuagint (LXX):

Jer 29:14 (MT): And I will gather you from the nations and from the places where I have scattered you, declares the Lord. And I will return you to the place that I exiled you from.

Jer 29:14 (LXX): And I will appear to you...

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>8</sup> The following statement by Berlin is very convincing (ibid., 7): "If we are to speak of a deuteronomic *allusion* [italics original], as I have done, then the assumption is that the text of Deuteronomy (in oral or written form) was known and used by Jeremiah."

Within the MT, v. 14 explains that those who fulfill the requirements of Jeremiah's promise will return to the Promised Land. On the other hand, the LXX expresses that God will just appear in general. The LXX almost could be read as "and I will appear to you ... (wherever you are)." Given that the MT is expansive in at least some places in Jeremiah, the blessing's conclusion found within the MT is mostly likely not original.<sup>9</sup> The MT probably added v. 14 from other parts of the Jeremiah corpus.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the blessing of Jeremiah's letter seems to have ended initially with a hope of finding God just as if one were living in the Promised Land, even in the midst of exile. In other words, Jeremiah promised that God would be found anywhere so long as his people "sought him with their whole hearts." The opportunity would come for them to return to the land (v. 10), but returning would be pointless if God would not "appear" (v. 14). Thus, Jeremiah "assured them (vss. 10–14) that Yahweh would, in his own time, fulfill their hopes and lead them home and that, in the meantime, they could call on him and find him—and without temple or cult!—even in the land of their exile."<sup>11</sup>

To summarize this section, Jeremiah has written a letter to the deportees reminding them to live according to the wisdom of Deuteronomy. The purpose of the letter is their survival (v. 6) as well as the benefit of their exilic city (v. 7a). If these deportees want access to the blessing promised in vv. 11–14, they must demonstrate their commitment to some basic truths. First, they must remember that God has intertwined their fates with the fates of their enemies (v. 7b). Second, they must not listen to the false teaching that is being prophesied among them (vv. 8–9,

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<sup>9</sup> For a general overview see Emanuel Tov, "The Literary History of the Book of Jeremiah in Light of Its Textual History," in *The Greek and Hebrew Bible: Collected Essays on the Septuagint* (VTSup 72; Leiden, Germany: Brill, 1999), 363–84.

<sup>10</sup> See Holladay, *Jeremiah 2*, 133; J. Gerald Janzen, *Studies in the Text of Jeremiah* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 48–49.

<sup>11</sup> John Bright, *Jeremiah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 211.

15). Third, they must honor God’s word by submitting themselves to what he has said (v. 10). Fourth, they must remember that God still wants them to have a future (vv. 11–12). Finally, they must seek the Lord with their whole hearts (v. 14). If they do these five things, then “God assured his people that when they sought him wholeheartedly, he would be found by them.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, if they act in a way that benefits everyone, seeking to initiate peace and not war (Deut 20:10–15), then God will bless their actions and appear to them even in their land of exile (Jer 29:11–14).

### The Letter’s Obedient Recipients: Esther and Mordechai

The introduction to Jeremiah’s letter (vv. 1–3) creates an interesting connection with the book of Esther:

*Table 2. The Recipients of Jeremiah’s Letter*

Jer 29:1–2 (MT)
These are the words of the scroll that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the remnant of the elders of the exile, the priests, the prophets, and to all the people (that Nebuchadnezzar exiled from Jerusalem (מִירוּשָׁלַם) to Babylon after Jeconiah, the king (יְכֹנְיָהוּ-הַמֶּלֶךְ), and the queen–mother, and the eunuchs, the princes of Judah and Jerusalem, and the carpenters, and the smiths were departed from Jerusalem)...
Esth 2:5–6 (MT) <sup>13</sup>
A Jewish man was in Shushan, the capital, and his name was Mordechai, son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjamite man; who had been exiled from Jerusalem (מִירוּשָׁלַם) with the exiles that had been exiled with Jeconiah, the king of Judah (יְהוֹיָכִן) that Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon exiled (בְּבָבֶל) (אֲשֶׁר מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל נְבוּכַדְנֶצַּר הֶגְלָה).

<sup>12</sup> F. B. Huey Jr., *Jeremiah, Lamentations* (TNAC 16; ed. E. Ray Clendenen; Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 254.

<sup>13</sup> Because the MT of Esther is viewed by many to be superior to the LXX, only the MT of Esther will be examined here. See Carey A. Moore, *Studies in the Book of Esther* (ed. Harry M. Orlinsky; New York: Ktav, 1982), LXIII.

This connection is found only within the MT of Jer 29:1–2. The LXX does not contain the phrase “that Nebuchadnezzar exiled from Jerusalem” (אֲשֶׁר הִגְלָה נְבוּכַדְנֶאֱצַר מִירוּשָׁלַם), but instead has “a letter to Babylon for the exiles” (ἐπιστολὴν εἰς Βαβυλῶνα τῆ ἀποικία).<sup>14</sup> Though the MT may have borrowed this information from elsewhere within Jeremiah, the point being made here is still the same.<sup>15</sup> The MT of Jer 29:1–2 bears witness to a text tradition that connects the themes found in Jeremiah’s letter to the characters of the book of Esther.<sup>16</sup> Regardless of which version of Jere 29 is more original, the chronological connection between the book of Esther and Jeremiah’s letter was at some point also made into a thematic connection.

This connection between Jeremiah’s letter and Esther gives precedence for a reevaluation of the purpose of the book of Esther. The assumption is that Esther’s “main concern, the very reason for its existence, is to establish Purim as a Jewish holiday for all generations.”<sup>17</sup> The only defense that the purpose of the Esther “is to establish Purim” is that the origin story of the feast is close to the ending of the book. But what is often overlooked is that the story of Purim does not actually end the book. Instead, the book’s ending contains a reference to Mordechai’s promoted status. Thus, Esther’s ending has a connection to the book’s overall meaning. As will be shown later, Esther’s ending demonstrates how two exilic Jews lived by the wisdom of Deut 20:5–15 (as found in Jeremiah’s letter) and received the blessing of Jer 29:11–14. In other words, “The book was written of Jews who are subject to gentile rulers. The author intends to show them how

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<sup>14</sup> See Louis Stulman, *The Other Text of Jeremiah* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), 74.

<sup>15</sup> See Janzen, *Studies in the Text of Jeremiah*, 74.

<sup>16</sup> “There was an awareness of the corpus of biblical literature that went into the final formation of the texts themselves.”; Shepherd, *Textuality and the Bible* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 26.

<sup>17</sup> Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary Esther* אסתר (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001), XV.

to survive in such a situation.”<sup>18</sup> The Jews survived because Esther and Mordechai lived in obedience to the requirements of Jeremiah’s letter.

Esther’s and Mordechai’s obedience to Jeremiah’s letter is an important factor for understanding the book of Esther. Three linguistic techniques are used within the book to connect Jeremiah’s letter to the book of Esther thematically. First, the author gives specific examples of how Esther and Mordechai lived as law-abiding citizens. Second, the author applies many of the thematic ideas found within Jeremiah’s letter to the lives of Esther and Mordechai. Finally, the author develops the overall structure of the book to highlight both Esther’s and Mordechai’s engagement within their foreign culture and to demonstrate how Esther and Mordechai gained access to the blessing of Jer 29:11–14.

### Law-Abiding Citizens

Both Esther and Mordechai seem to be aware of and obedient to the legislation of the land. At the beginning of the story, they both comply with Ahasuerus’s decree confirming that every man should rule his own household (Esth 1:22). This decree is one of the main reasons the author informs the reader of Esther’s submissiveness. The author states that Esther listened to Mordechai’s “word” (מְאָמַר) and did not reveal her ethnicity (2:10) because she had been “brought up by him” (2:20). In other words, Esther lived in his house where he had legal right to rule. Added to this is Esther’s submissiveness to even Hegai. Before she goes to see the king, the author states in 2:15, that “Esther, the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordechai...sought nothing but what Hegai... said” (יֵאמֶר). The author’s mention of Esther’s origins in this verse

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<sup>18</sup> Bruce William Jones, “Two Misconceptions about the Book of Esther,” reprinted in Carey A. Moore, *Studies in the Book of Esther* (ed. Harry M. Orlinsky; New York: Ktav, 1982), 437.

seems somewhat baffling.<sup>19</sup> This formal introduction of Esther may have been given to show that, in light of her submission to Mordechai's "word" (מֵאמַר), Esther now submits herself to Hegai's "word" (יֵאמֶר). In this way the author explains Esther's submissiveness as demonstrating her obedience to the law of the land; "every man should rule in *his house*" (1:22). Esther allowed Mordechai and Hegai to rule in their individual homes. Thus, both Esther and Mordechai obey the king's first piece of legislation.

The next two pieces of legislation appear in chapter 3. At some point or another, Ahasuerus commanded that Haman, the Agagite, should receive "reverence from all the king's servants" but Mordechai refused to do this (3:2). Somehow the type of "reverence" required of Haman would violate Mordechai's devotion to being Jewish (3:4). After being made aware of Mordechai's defiance, Haman goes to the king to get approval to destroy a "certain people" living within the kingdom (3:8–15). That Haman asks the king to destroy a "certain people" not specifically "the Jews" and does not explain the exact events as they happened in 3:1–4, seems to imply that Mordechai's decision to not "reverence" Haman was not in direct violation of the king's command. If such was the case, why would Haman need another decree to punish the Jews? Thus, Mordechai does not break the king's decree as much as he chooses to stand his legal ground. This becomes even clearer when examining Haman's actual decree. Haman does not write that a "certain people" should be killed, but that "the Jews" should be (3:13). Mordechai's response to Haman's decree, sealed by the king's ring (3:12), is not to protest as he did before, but to mourn (4:1). And even while Mordechai is in the midst of mourning, the author clearly points out that Mordechai did not break the law concerning mourning within the king's gate

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<sup>19</sup> As Berlin (*Esther*, 28) states: "I take it as Esther's formal introduction when she is presented to the king. It follows directly after 'summoned by name' and illustrates what it means to be summoned by name."

(4:2). Thus, once again Mordechai complies with the local legal code. He could not deter Haman's decree against the Jews because it was sealed with the king's ring, but he also did not break the known laws as a result of this. Even though both laws were not in Mordechai's best interest, he chose to obey them anyways.

After these events, the author explains that standing between the Jews and their possible demise is another known piece of legislation. Anyone who comes before the king uninvited and is not given the king's stamp of approval is put to death (4:11). Esther's response to Mordechai is to remind him of this legal code. "She explains that she would have no excuse of ignorance, since 'all the king's servants ...know'" this law.<sup>20</sup> Mordechai's response at first might suggest that Mordechai saw Esther's response as a refusal to go before the king.<sup>21</sup> But Mordechai's response could also be one that supplies Esther with wisdom for how to live within her legal rights.<sup>22</sup> Esther's actions, after Mordechai's response, seem to suggest that Esther was seeking wisdom for what she must do. Having gained this wisdom, Esther determines to go to the king not according to the "letter of the law" (כְּדַת לֹא), but in accordance with the wisdom or the "exception" (לְבַד) found within the law (4:16). Thus, Esther is not persuaded by Mordechai to break the law, but to live within its legal loophole ("except [לְבַד] for the one whom the king holds out the golden scepter," 4:11). The use of this wisdom proves to work for her benefit on more than one occasion (5:2; 8:4).

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<sup>20</sup> Cohen, *The Five Megilloth*, 159.

<sup>21</sup> Berlin, *Esther*, 49.

<sup>22</sup> The Targum explains Mordechai's response to be that of angelic origin and states that Esther's placement in the palace should be examined through wisdom. Bernard Grossfeld, *The First Targum to Esther* (New York: Sepher-Hermon, 1983), 57.

In conclusion, not only do Esther and Mordechai live by the legal requirements of the culture where they were exiled, they do this even against their best interest. Their submission to the legal system from the beginning of the story allows them to use that system to their advantage later in the story (eg., chapters 8–9). Thus, they chose to “build houses and settle, to plant gardens and eat of its fruit” (Jer 29:5) instead of revolting against legislation that they found unfavorable.

#### Jeremiah’s Letter: A Resource for the Book of Esther

The author’s second linguistic technique begins in Esth 2:8. After giving the reader the historical circumstances (Esth 1:1–2:4), the author explains that Esther was taken (לקח). The text does not clarify the nature of how she was taken.<sup>23</sup> Was she taken willingly or by force? Jeremiah 29:6b states that the exiles are to “give” (נתן) their daughters to men, while Esther has the opposite happen to her; she is taken (לקח). Given how vocal Mordechai is later over one of the king’s decrees (Esth 3–4), his silence with this decree seems to imply that he, at least to some degree, willingly gave (נתן) Esther over to the king. This fact becomes even more probable in light of an addition found in the Second Targum of Esther, which contains a story of how Mordechai hid Esther before she was taken.<sup>24</sup>

After Esther was taken, Mordechai goes daily to the court where Esther was being kept to gain an awareness of her “welfare” (שלוּם; 2:11). Mordechai’s determination to look after Esther leads to not only the salvation of the Jew’s but “peace” (שלוּם) for the entire city (see 9:30; 10:3).

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<sup>23</sup> The Targum states that this taking was by “force” (ibid., 46).

<sup>24</sup> See A. J. Rosenberg, *The Five Megilloth* (The Soncino Books of the Bible; ed. A. Cohen; New York: Soncino, 1984), 147. Why would the Targum contain an additional story of Mordechai’s resistance, if this is implied in the context?

Because Mordechai looks after Esther, he is able to save the king's life (2:21–23) and notify Esther of Haman's wicked plan (4:7–9). The author has mixed into the narrative of these events the emotions of the people of the city in their learning of Haman's plan to kill the Jews. The author states that when the king decreed the Jews' demise, the city was "confused" (3:15), but when the king decreed in favor of the Jews, the city "rejoiced" (8:15). Thus, in some way or another, the Jews were important to the city. The author also states, in 8:17, that many of the people of the land *mityahādīm* (מִתְיַהֲדִים), which could mean that they either "became Jews" or "took the part of the Jews."<sup>25</sup> Regardless of the meaning, the overall point is clear. More Jews, in one way or another, came into existence within the city of Shushan. In other words, the Jews "increased *there* (אש) and did not diminish" (Jer 29:6c). Thus, the author intended to show that the "peace" of Esther and Mordechai is intertwined with the "peace" of the city (Jer 29:7).

#### Esther's Composition: From Paganism to Deuteronomic Wisdom

So far only Esther's and Mordechai's application of Jer 29:5–7 has been demonstrated. The author of Esther has chosen to demonstrate how the characters Esther and Mordechai lived out the deuteronomic wisdom of Jer 20:5–7 within the sections of his overall work. How did Esther and Mordechai achieve the blessing of Jer 29:11–14? The answer to this question is found in the overall structure of the book of Esther.<sup>26</sup> The author of Esther has structured the book into three

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<sup>25</sup> The meaning of the word מִתְיַהֲדִים is highly debated. See the following for a discussion of the word: Rosenberg, *The Five Megilloth*, 177; Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 105.

<sup>26</sup> Though scholars have suggested many structural outlines for Esther, none of these outlines have highlighted the importance of how Esther and Mordecai lived within a foreign culture, nor have they highlighted the importance of the book's ending. For an overview of various structural outlines, see Gordon H. Johnston, "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Gallows! Irony, Humor, and Other Literary Features of the Book of Esther," in *Giving the Sense: Understanding and Using Old Testament Historical Texts* (eds. David M. Howard Jr. and Michael A. Grisanti; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003), 380–406.

different units. These three units follow a similar pattern while also building off of one another.

The following table will be helpful here:

*Table 3. Esther's Compositional Framework*

Unit 1	Unit 2	Unit 3
(1:1–12) Ahasuerus's cultural situation	(3:1–6) Haman's cultural situation	
(1:13–22) Memucan advising Ahasuerus on cultural issues	(3:7–14) Haman advising Ahasuerus on cultural issues	(8:3–8) Esther advising Ahasuerus on cultural issues
(2:1–23) Cultural consequences of Memucan's wisdom	(3:15–8:2) Cultural consequences of Haman's wisdom	(8:9–9:32) Cultural consequences of Esther's wisdom
		(10:1–3) Ahasuerus's exultation of Mordechai

The above outline divides Esther into three distinct parts. Each part follows the same basic progression. The author presents the reader with a cultural issue from a character's perspective. Then Ahasuerus, the king, is given wisdom for how to deal with the cultural issue. And finally, after Ahasuerus has applied the advice he has been given, the reader is given a narration of the results of Ahasuerus's decision. The only unit that does not follow this pattern is unit three. In unit three, no cultural issue is given and there is an additional unit. The cultural issue from unit two also serves as the issue of unit three; this issue has not been resolved in unit two. The addition found in unit three clarifies Mordechai's providence that resulted from his commitment to fulfill the requirements of Jeremiah's letter. These units read together, in light of Jeremiah's letter, leave the reader with an eschatological hope, awaiting God's appearance, as Jeremiah promised (Jer 29:14 LXX).<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> "...and I will appear to you...(wherever you are)": Jer 29:14 (LXX).

The book of Esther begins with providing the reader with enough background information to understand Ahasuerus's first cultural problem. Ahasuerus has given a feast and called for his queen, Vashti, to come demonstrate her beauty before his guests (1:1–11). Because Vashti refused to comply with the Ahasuerus's request (1:12), Ahasuerus is now faced with a cultural problem. Thus, he seeks advice for how to deal with this problem (1:13–15). Memucan, one of the princes, provides Ahasuerus with advice that he finds favorable. Thus, Ahasuerus enacts a decree (1:16–22).

Then, the results of Ahasuerus's decision are given. Numerous virgins are taken from their homes, Esther being one of them (2:1–8). Esther becomes the queen and Mordechai is given the chance to save the king (2:9–22).

Sometime later the promotion of Haman places Haman above all the princes (including Memucan) and Ahasuerus allows Haman the authority to demand "reverence" from "all the king's servants" (3:1–2a). Mordechai does not give reverence to Haman because of his Jewish culture, creating a cultural problem for Haman (3:2b–6). But, Haman does not seek to help Ahasuerus with important cultural issues as Memucan did. Instead, he seeks to promote his own cultural agenda through deception, concealment, and bribery (3:7–9). For Haman, the culture would be better without Jews. Unaware of the situation, Ahasuerus agrees (3:10–14) and the consequences are given (3:15–8:2).

The city becomes perplexed (3:15). Mordechai provides Esther with wisdom for how to deal with the situation within their legal rights (4:1–14). Esther responds to this wisdom (4:15–7:6). Haman dies (7:7–10) and all of his property is given to Mordechai (8:1–2).

But even so, the full consequences of Haman's advice have not yet been reversed. Thus, Esther provides Ahasuerus with advice on how to deal with the current cultural crisis (8:3–7).

Esther's actions benefit Ahasuerus just as Memucan actions did. Ahasuerus agrees with Esther's advice (8:8). Mordechai then enacts Ahasuerus's decree (8:9–17), which results in an increase of "Jews" (8:17; Jer 29:6c). Mordechai then declares a day of feasting, the first Purim (8:9–9:32).

The conclusion of the book contains a declaration of Ahasuerus's increase because of Mordechai's greatness (10:1–2). Mordechai's concern for the "welfare" of Esther (2:11) is extended to the entire city (9:30; 10:3). Thus, the book's ending leaves the reader with an understanding of three main things. First, Ahasuerus has moved from listening to his princes, Memucan and Haman, to listening to the Jews, Esther and Mordechai. Since Esther and Mordechai are living according to deuteronomic wisdom, Ahasuerus has moved from listening to pagan wisdom to listening to deuteronomic (biblical) wisdom. Second, Esther's conclusion explains that Mordechai led his family (Esther) to live out the deuteronomic wisdom of Jeremiah's letter (Jer 29:5–7). The book's last statement about Mordechai parallels Jeremiah's words:

Jer 29:7 and seek (וְדַרְשׁוּ) the peace (שְׁלוֹם) of the city (הָעִיר).

Esth 10:3 seeking (דָּרַשׁ) the good of his people and speaking peace (שְׁלוֹם) to all his seed.

This last statement would include even gentiles within the city. Mordechai's people would now include many of the Gentiles (Esth 8:17) and Mordechai's "seed" or descendants would include the children of Esther's marriage to Ahasuerus (also gentiles). Thus, Mordechai has led the story to end with a "hopeful ending" (Jer 29:11) for both ethnic Jews and Gentiles.

As the LXX of Jer 29:14 explains, if Mordechai has fulfilled all Jeremiah's requirements and has gained access to God's "peaceful plans," the only thing left is for God to "appear" (ἐπιφανοῦμαι). But where is God? The book seems to end by leaving this expectation open to the

future. Reading the book of Esther in light of the next book in the order of the Leningrad codex (the book of Daniel) makes the timing of God's appearance more apparent.<sup>28</sup> After a reading of Jer 29,<sup>29</sup> Daniel prays that God would cause his face to "appear" (επιφανων) on his desolate sanctuary (Dan 9:17 LXX). Gabriel then comes and explains to Daniel that, according to the LXX of Jer 29:14, the messiah is the one who will soon appear (Dan 9:20–25). Thus, the answer to when God will appear at the end of Esther is found within the book of Daniel.

### **1 Peter: A Letter for Exilic Christians**

How does all of this apply to the modern American church? Can all of this be applied to it? Historically, many scholars have believed that the book of Esther has no relationship to the Christian faith.<sup>30</sup> In contrast to the belief of some scholar's about Esther's relationship to Christians, historically Jer 29:11 has been viewed as applicable to Christians.<sup>31</sup> From a textual standpoint, neither Esther nor Jer 29:11 were quoted by the New Testament (NT) authors. The NT contains similar themes to those found in Esther and Jeremiah's letter, but this is not enough to determine if Esther and Jeremiah's letter influenced the NT. Thus, an argument is made for an isomorphic relationship between Jeremiah's letter and 1 Peter. In other words, even though 1 Peter does not quote from Jeremiah's letter, he does structure his letter after it. The letter of 1 Peter is structured in a way that follows the same content order as that found in Jeremiah's letter,

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<sup>28</sup> See Timothy Stone, *The Compilational History of the Megilloth: Canon, Contoured Intertextuality, and Meaning in the Writings* (eds., Konrad Schmid, Mark S. Smith, and Hermann Spieckermann; Mohr Siebeck, Forschungen zum Alten Testament 2. Reihe 59; Germany: Lapp & Gobel, 2013), 153–59.

<sup>29</sup> For a defense that Daniel is reading Jer 29 see Michael B. Shepherd, *Daniel and the Context of the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 96.

<sup>30</sup> Jo Carruthers, *Esther through the Centuries* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2008), 7–8. Carruthers's comments reference others who came to this same conclusion.

<sup>31</sup> Dean O. Wenhe, ed., *Jeremiah, Lamentations* (ACCS 12; DownersGrove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2009), 198–201.

but 1 Peter applies this content to an exilic Christian audience instead of Jeremiah's exilic

Israelite audience:

*Table 4. The Structure of Peter's Letter*

Jer 29:1–15 (LXX)	Esther	1 Peter
A letter to exiles (v. 1–3)	A story about exiles (2:5–6)	A letter to exiles (1:1–2:10)
Live a common life among Gentiles (vv. 4–5)	Example of living among Gentiles (2:7–10:3)	How to live a common life among Gentiles (2:11–25)
Engage in marriage (v. 6)	Example of marriage with Gentiles (2:7–10:3)	How to live in marriage, even with Gentiles (3:1–7)
Seek the welfare of all people (v. 7)	Example of seeking welfare of all (2:11; 9:30; 10:3)	How to live seeking the welfare of all people (3:8–22)
Don't believe falsehood (vv. 8–9)	Example of how to negate falsehood (4:1–7:10)	Don't return to false lifestyles (4:1–6)
Await God's timing (v. 10)	Example of waiting for God's timing (5:7–10:3)	Await God's timing (4:7–19)
God's plans will happen, his people will seek him, and he will appear (vv. 11–14)	Example of God's plans happening and people awaiting God's appearance (2:7–10:3)	God's plan will happen, continue to seek him, he will appear (5:1–14).

The word “beloved” (αγαπητοί) in 1 Pet 2:11 signifies the beginning of a new unit.<sup>32</sup> In light of this, 1 Pet 1:1–2:10 serves as a general introduction to Peter's letter. First Peter 2:11 also connects back to the beginning of the letter (1:1) by repeating the word “exile” (παρεπιδήμους). A similar structure is found at the beginning of Jeremiah's letter. Jeremiah uses the word “exile” (הַגָּלוּת [MT]/ ἀποικίας [LXX]) in the introduction to his letter (Jer 29:1) while also using the word “exile” again at the beginning of the body of his letter (29:4):

*Table 5. Comparison of Each Letter's Introduction*

1 Peter	Jer 29
(1:1) Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the exiles (παρεπιδήμους)...	(v. 1) These are the words of the scroll that Jeremiah sent... to the remnant of the elders of the exiles (הַגָּלוּת)...
(2:11) Beloved, I urge you as foreigners and exiles (παρεπιδήμους)...	(v. 4) Thus says the Lord of Host, God of Israel, to all the exiles (הַגָּלוּת)...

<sup>32</sup> See Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, Mich.; Eerdmans, 1990), 94; J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter* (WBC 49; Waco, TX.: Word Books, 1988), 115.

From here, the author's primary concern in 1 Pet 2:11–25 is to challenge his readers to live a common life among those who do not believe (Gentiles). They must strive to allow the Gentiles to see their good works in everyday life (v. 12). They must respect all authority; in both civil (vv. 13–17) and domestic (vv. 18–25) affairs. Thus, this section of 1 Peter encourages its readers to live just as Esther and Mordechai did in obedience to Jeremiah's words: "build homes and settle, plant vineyards and eat of its fruit" (Jer 29:5). "In other words, ordinary life was meant to be the proving ground of faithfulness."<sup>33</sup>

Next, 1 Pet 3:1–7 addresses the issue of marriage. Interestingly a provision is given stating that wives be obedient to their husbands, even if they are "disobedient to the word" (v. 1). Wives found in such a situation can win their husbands over by their good conduct (vv. 2–6). Esther found herself in a similar situation as the one 1 Peter describes. Esther found favor in the "eyes of all who saw her" not solely because of her beauty, but primarily because of her submissive actions (Esth 2:14-18). Thus, 1 Peter's provision for wives might have been influenced by the story of Esther's life; Esther could be seen as one of the "holy wives" mentioned in 1 Pet 3:5.

The next section within Peter's letter (3:8–22) begins with an emphasis on "peace" (שָׁלוֹם/εἰρήνην). In order to emphasize this concept, 1 Peter quotes from Ps 34. The quote from Ps 34 encourages "peace" in light of being insulted because the one who chooses to return peace for insult will have a good life (1 Pet 3:10; Ps 34:13).<sup>34</sup> Here the author of 1 Peter mimics

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<sup>33</sup> Douglas D. Webster, *Jeremiah: A Parable of Jesus* (Birmingham: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2009), 94.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

Jeremiah's statement about the "peace" of the city being equivalent to the people's own "peace" (Jer 29:7), and Mordechai's provision of "peace" for the city of Shushan (Esth 10:3).

The next two sections of 1 Peter (1 Pet 4:1–6, 7–19) focus on explaining why his readers should not seek to return to their old lives of sinfulness but should await God's timing. In both 1 Peter and Jeremiah's letter, a list of vices from unbelievers is given; 1 Peter lists of the vices of the Gentiles (v. 3), just as Jeremiah lists the faults of the deceivers to his recipients (Jer 29:8–9). Also, both 1 Peter and Jeremiah seek to motivate their readers to avoiding falsehood by awaiting God's timing. For 1 Peter, the reader must remember that "the end is near" (1 Pet 4:7). The point of this phrase in 1 Peter is to explain that since "the end is right around the corner, one should live accordingly."<sup>35</sup> For Jeremiah, the end is some seventy years away (Jer 29:10), but since the phrase "seventy years" symbolically represents a fulfilled amount of time, 1 Peter and Jeremiah are saying the same thing with different phrases.<sup>36</sup> Whether Christian or Israelite, one must strive to live righteously in exile because the exile will end; one must seek to make the most of the time they have because God will appear soon.

Both 1 Peter and the LXX of Jeremiah's letter end with a call for the reader to await God's appearance. 1 Peter states that the elders should seek to live righteously because when the chief shepherd "appears" (φανερωθέντος) their reward will be an "unfading crown of glory" (1 Pet 5:4). Jeremiah 29:14 states that God will "appear" (ἐπιφανοῦμαι) to his people even in the midst of exile. Thus, 1 Peter's readers are left awaiting God's appearance just as Jeremiah's readers (Esther, Mordechai, and Daniel) were.

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<sup>35</sup> Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, 156.

<sup>36</sup> See Walter Bruggeman, *The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah* (Old Testament Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 180–82; Shepherd, *Daniel and the Context of the Hebrew Bible*, 97.

In conclusion, though 1 Peter does not make any specific quotations of Jeremiah's letter, an implicit or thematic connection exists between the two. Given the similarities, Jeremiah's letter did influence 1 Peter's at least in some way. More so, if an implicit connection between the two letters does exist, the author of 1 Peter saw no problem with relating the blessing that Jeremiah made to Jews directly to his Christian audience. 1 Peter applied this promise to Christians in his day, and the modern American church ought to do the same. But the American church needs to heed the restrictions surrounding this blessing in both Jeremiah's letter and 1 Peter. Both authors use their letters to provide their recipients with a divine blessing that only comes with responsible civil action. The modern American church cannot have one without the other. The church must first choose to act responsibly before they will experience the blessing of walking in God's "peaceful plans" (Jer 29:11).

### **So How Can American Churches Engage American Culture?**

The following quote provides a reference point from which to begin this section:

There is a salutary recognition abroad today that the church does not speak only in its sermons. ... It also speaks in the manner of its being. ... Indeed, it is surely in its practice that the church speaks most effectively since most human beings have a limited tolerance for elaborate words and arguments and are moved first and foremost by the beauty of the truth that they see embodied in the goodness of flesh-and-blood human beings, which commands their admiring attention.<sup>37</sup>

If "most human beings" are "moved first and foremost by" what they see "embodied in the goodness of flesh-and-blood human beings," the American church has no better reason to move beyond the walls of its buildings and to start living within its communities. Living within the

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<sup>37</sup> Nigel Biggar, *Behaving in Public: How to Do Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2011), 80.

community does not mean that church buildings should be abandoned or that Christians should not fellowship with one another. But, as long as the American church divides itself from the rest of American culture, it is somewhat limited in the blessings it can receive. The church's blessings should not be limited, but the church's blessings are categorized. In other words, certain blessings are acquired through specific actions. Some things are for Christians to experience within their own individual study of God's word (e.g., spiritual encouragement). Some things are for Christians to experience in church fellowshiping with other believers (e.g., the Lord's Supper). The blessing of Jer 29:11–14 is found in a different category of experience. This blessing is given to the one who seeks to engage in the lives of the people around him, bringing peace to their local and global environment by their responsible actions.

Seeking to obtain this blessing should drive the church to embed itself within American culture, not to avoid it. This type of embedment will involve the church in many different situations. For example, this might include working among people who are hostile to Christians. Though this type of situation will prove to be difficult, the book of Esther provides a model for the church to follow as the book describes how Mordechai and Esther found themselves in a hostile situation. When Mordechai's Jewishness was brought under assault by Haman, Mordechai chose to stand his legal ground (Esth 3:1–6) while continuing to obey the rest of the legal code (3:7–4:3). Thus, Mordechai takes pains to make sure that if he was to suffer it would be for living within his legal right (1 Pet 2:13–17). Then when Esther confronted Haman, she did not degrade him publicly before the people. Instead, she used the proper legal channels to combat her enemy. While Esther called Haman by his official name within the king's court (Esth 5:4), she called him "wicked" before the king at the proper time (7:6). Thus, Mordechai and Esther's example also provides a model for the modern American church to place the universal

goodwill (or peace) of their local communities before their own position and social status.

Another example is found in Esther's actions when she seeks to persuade Ahasuerus to listen to her plea to save her people:

Esther 7:4

For we have been sold, myself and my people, to be destroyed, murdered and erased. And if we had been sold to be bondmen and bondwomen, I would have remained silent because the enemy would not have damaged the king.<sup>38</sup>

In other words, Esther is making it clear that she would have allowed her people (herself included) to have been sold into slavery because such an action would have benefited the nation in which they were exiled. Esther was not asking for her people to become slaves but she realized that even as slaves, her people could “seek the welfare of the city” in which they had been exiled (Jer 29:7; 1 Pet 2:18–25). Thus, though many applications of this Esther model could be further explored, these brief examples should suffice in demonstrating the usefulness of this biblical model for the modern church. Further applications of this model will be left to the American church as it continues seeking to obtain Jeremiah's divine blessing.

### Conclusion

An analysis of the following quotes will conclude this work in hope of encouraging the church's pursue of Jeremiah's blessing:

Society desperately seeks the answers you have. The world needs your salt. The world needs your light.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> The ending of this verse (הַמְלִיכָה בְּנִיחַן שְׁנֵה הַצָּר אֵין כִּי) is very difficult to translate. See Rosenberg's (*The Five Megilloth*, 170) commentary on this verse.

<sup>39</sup> Tom Minnery, *Why You Can't Stay Silent* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 2001), 138.

We are called to be people of the truth, even when the truth is not popular and even when the truth is denied by the culture around us. Christians have found themselves in the position before, and we will again. God's truth has not changed.<sup>40</sup>

Interestingly, the same call is made by both authors even though they stand more than a decade apart. Minnery's work (entitled *Why You Can't Stay Silent*) seeks to provide the church with reasons to act. Mohler's work (entitled *We Cannot Be Silent*) seeks to demand that the church finally act. In other words, Minnery's plea for the church to act has become Mohler's command. This change in title signifies the desperation of the changing times. While once a time for conversation and persuasion did exist, such a time seems to have passed. As Mohler stated, "Christians cannot be silent—not because we are morally superior, but because we know that God has a better plan for humanity than we would ever devise for ourselves."<sup>41</sup> In the end, the church must keep in mind that, according to Jer 29:11–14, as one seeks to show the world "God's better plan for humanity," one also gains deeper access to this better plan.

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<sup>40</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr., *We Cannot Be Silent* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2015), 183.

<sup>41</sup> Mohler, *We Cannot Be Silent*, XVI.