

THE RETURN ERA **Ezra-Esther**

Introduction

In the middle 1970s, newspapers and magazines were awash with the story of Peter Jenkins, who walked across America. He was consumed with the disillusionment of his generation, and he set out to find his country and himself.

His amazing story is one of long hours, days, and weeks of solitude and drudgery punctuated with occasional life-threatening surprises. He faced danger from weather, accidents, wild animals, and people. He almost died in a snowstorm, was attacked by animals, and hunted by cruel men who might have killed him if they had caught him.

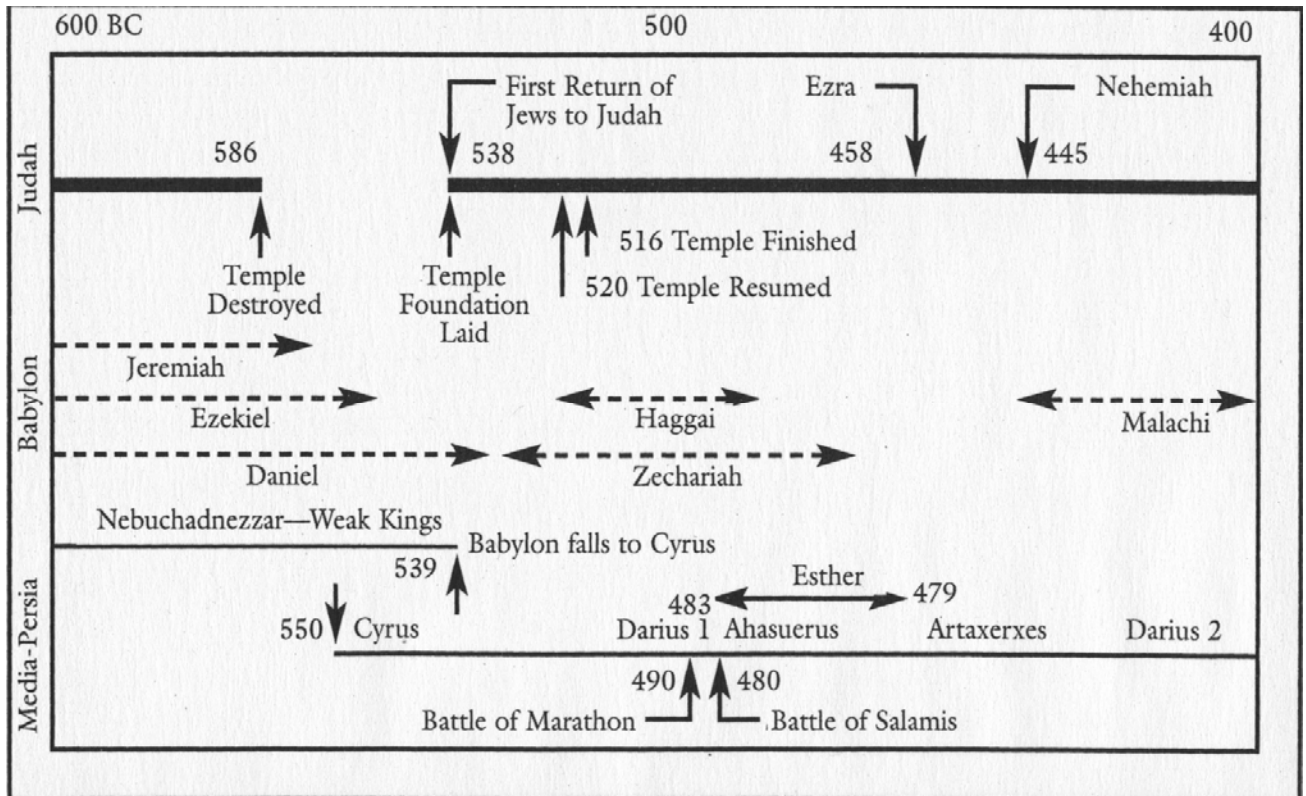
Many times he wanted to quit his search. Each time, he was befriended by people who restored his body, his soul, and his faith in America. He lost his dog but gained a wife, a new worldview, and a deep appreciation for the grandeur of his country and its people.

Finally, after more than five long and gruelling years of walking, he stepped into the Pacific Ocean. His journey was done. When Peter Jenkins walked into the Oregon waters, he was quite a different person from the one who left his home in Alfred, New York. The trials, the time, the solitude, the people, and the physical and mental challenge had transformed him. On his departure, he was little more than a confused boy. On his return, he was a man.

The return of the nation of Israel from seventy years of captivity in Babylonia in many ways parallels the story of Peter Jenkins. The Israelites went into exile a drifting and confused people. They spent agonizing years in solitude, and in physical and mental torment. They were ministered to unexpectedly by people sent from God. They returned to Israel a sobered people. They were home, refocused in their purpose as a nation, ready to begin again the worship of Jehovah: the God of creation, and the God of Israel.

(Taken from 30 Days to Understanding the Bible by Max Anders)

- There are four major subjects in the Return Era:
 - i) Disrepair
 - ii) Temple
 - iii) People
 - iv) Walls



TIMELINE OF THE CAPTIVITY AND RETURN OF THE JEWS

(taken from The Bible: The Smart Guide to the Bible Series by Larry Richards)

1. Disrepair: Destruction from war and neglect (Nehemiah 1:1-3)

During the seventy years of captivity, the leadership of Judah has been taken into exile, and the city of Jerusalem falls into disrepair. Not only has the city suffered the ravages of the military campaign during the initial conquest, but it has also fallen victim to the erosion of neglect. The destruction from war and neglect leaves Jerusalem in a state of abject ruin.

2. Temple: Rebuilding the temple (Ezra 1-6))

God prompts Cyrus, king of Persia, to initiate the financing and rebuilding of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. Under the direction of Zerubbabel, a notable Jewish figure in Persia, the rebuilding of the temple is begun. Considerable opposition from Gentiles around Jerusalem is encountered. At the urging of Haggai and Zechariah, two Jewish prophets living in Jerusalem, the restoration of the temple is completed.

(Taken from 30 Days to Understanding the Bible by Max Anders)

What's special in Ezra?

- Cyrus' decree allowing the return—Ezra 1
- Local opposition---Ezra 4-6
- Ezra's reforms in Judah—Ezra 7-10

What's special about Nehemiah?

- Nehemiah's moral courage—Nehemiah 5-6
- Leaders influence the whole society—Nehemiah 10
- Nehemiah's final reforms—Nehemiah 13

Prophetic Voices

Three prophets ministered to the little group of Jews who had come back to their homeland. Two of them were influential in moving the people to complete the temple, which had been left unfinished for eighteen years. The third prophet ministered after the time of Nehemiah, and provides a gloomy picture of a people who have again lost an interest in worshiping and obeying God.

Haggai

- preached four sermons to the people in Judah in 520 BC urging them to complete the rebuilding of the temple and expect the appearance of the promised Messiah

Zechariah

- prophesied to the settlers in Judah at the same time as Haggai to encourage them to rebuild the temple

(taken from *The Bible: The Smart Guide to the Bible Series* by Larry Richards)

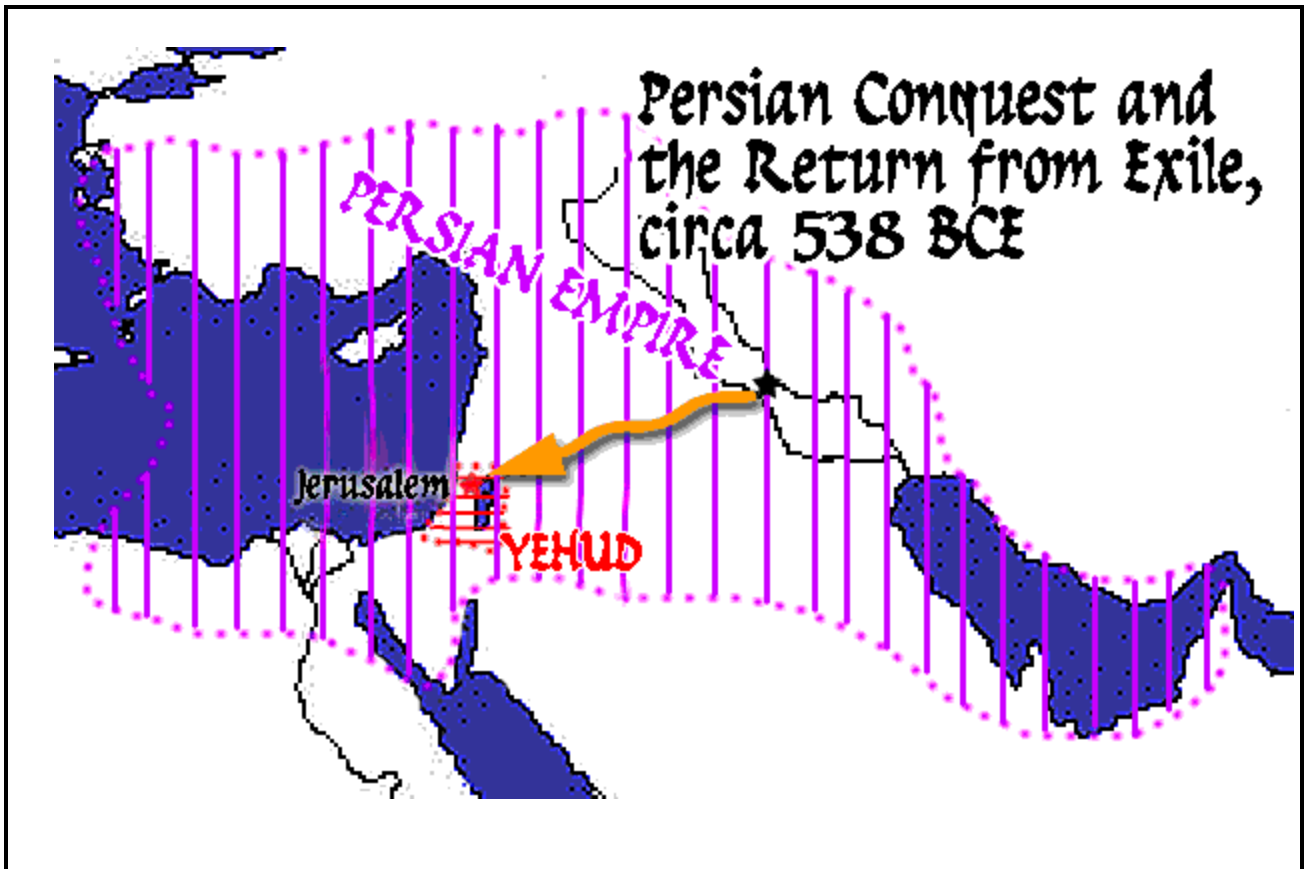
3. People: Spiritual rebuilding (Ezra 7-10)

Rebuilding the temple is a direct parallel to the spiritual rebuilding of the Jewish people. Temple worship has been discontinued seventy years. Most of the Jews have never seen or heard the Law of Moses. They have to be instructed in a national re-education program. Ezra sets his heart to study the Law of the Lord, to practice it, and to teach God's statutes and ordinances in Israel to rebuild the people as they return from exile.

4. Walls: Restoration complete (Nehemiah)

Even though not all Jews returned when they could have (see the Book of Esther, whose events take place during this Era) many Jews are now back home in Jerusalem. The temple stands restored as the dominant structure in the city, but the walls of the city are still broken down. This is a security threat as well as a source of national humiliation. Nehemiah, another Jewish notable serving Artaxerxes, king of Persia, is burdened to rebuild the walls. He is given permission and financing by the king of Persia to do so. A short time later, the walls frame the noble city of Jerusalem, home of the temple of God. Restoration is complete as the temple is rebuilt, the people are rebuilt, and walls rebuilt.

(Taken from *30 Days to Understanding the Bible* by Max Anders)



The Babylonian Empire eventually fell to the Persian Empire, which managed to extend its boundaries east into the Mediterranean. The Persians allowed the leaders of Judah to go home and organize a much smaller, semi-autonomous province of Persia (now called *Yehud*). They rebuilt the Temple and city of Jerusalem, and survived under Persian rule for almost two centuries.

(taken from www.faculty.ucr.edu/~andrew/bible/map9a.gif)

THE SILENT YEARS ERA

Introduction

- From the time of Malachi until the annunciation concerning John the Baptist
- Pharisees and others entomb the Israelites in legalism for the next 400 years

Writings of the Apocrypha

The historical record of the Old Testament, as presently divided, is composed of 39 separate writings....The events span the period from creation to approximately 425 BC. Not until approximately 5 BC will any further events be recorded in any scriptural writings. These accounts will be contained in the New Testament, which is itself a collection of 27 different writings.

Over the next four to six centuries, many other historical and religious documents pertaining to the Jews will be written. Therefore, it cannot be said that there are no historical records of the Jews arising out of this period when emphasis is being placed on the word *Scripture*. The so-called apocryphal or “hidden” writings of the period are not accepted as Scripture by all believers.

Jumping several centuries ahead, the inclusion of these writings will begin with the Greek version of the Old Testament—the Septuagint—which will be widely used in the first century. The Apocrypha will then be adopted as part of the Latin Vulgate, edited by Jerome in about AD 400. In more modern times, all English versions of the Bible from AD 1382 down to and including the original King James Version of AD 1611 will contain the apocryphal writings. In the earlier Greek and Latin versions, the apocryphal writings are interspersed with the other Old Testament writings. In his German Bible of 1534, Luther will collect them into a unified supplement and present them at the end of the Old Testament. The Catholic English version retains the more scattered format even until now, but most Protestant versions will drop the Apocrypha altogether, beginning about AD 1629.

In the view of those who reject their inclusion in scriptural canon, the apocryphal writings do not meet the test of having originated from divine inspiration. The Apocrypha are never included in the Hebrew Old Testament, and the Jews do not accept these writings as part of their approved Scriptures. In fact, Hebrew manuscripts of most of the apocryphal writings are not even to be found. It is perhaps significant that several of the writings reflect notions of mysticism and demonology apparently traceable to Persian influences during the Jewish dispersion and arguably inconsistent with either Jewish or later Christian beliefs.

(taken from *The Daily Bible: In Chronological Order*, Harvest House Publishers)

The Apocryphal books are as follows:

- 1 & 2 Esdras
- The Book of Tobit
- The Book of Judith
- The Additions to the Book of Esther
- The Wisdom of Solomon
- Ecclesiasticus
- The Book of Baruch
- The Story of Susanna
- The Song of the Three Children
- The Story of Bel and the Dragon
- The Prayer of Manasses
- 1 & 2 Maccabees

1. The Changing of the Guard: The march of nations

At the close of the Old Testament, Jerusalem is ruled by Persia. Alexander the Great defeats the Persians in 333 BC and establishes Greek culture and Greek language as a unifying force for that part of the world. When Alexander dies, his kingdom is quartered, but Hellenistic (Greek) culture is still advanced and remains the dominant influence. When Rome conquers that part of the world, Roman influences are introduced but for now the Greek influence is still strong. The march of nations passes from Persia to Greece to Rome.

2. Political Sects: The Maccabees and Zealots

Throughout the four hundred Silent Years, there are militant Jews who attempt to revolt against foreign rule and make Jerusalem and the surrounding area of Judea an independent country. These include the Maccabeans and the Zealots.

3. Religious Sects: Pharisees and Sadducees

There are two primary religious “parties” in Jerusalem during this time. Unfortunately, neither offers much guidance in true spirituality, as they are caught up in promoting a religious “legalism” of external adherence to rules while overlooking inner motivations and attitudes. The Pharisees are orthodox and conservative and they foster separation between themselves and “secular” society. The Sadducees are more liberal. They are the party of the Jerusalem aristocracy, and they use their wealth and influence to keep the political waters clam. A ruling board, called the Sanhedrin, is made up of representatives from both the Pharisees and Sadducees, but the two groups have little in common except their desire for religious freedom and, later, their antagonism for Jesus of Nazareth.

4. Messianic Hope: Expectation of a saviour

The “Messiah,” or “Saviour,” is one who is prophesied throughout the Old Testament to come save the Jews. Some feel they need spiritual salvation, and others are looking only for political salvation. For both reasons, the expectation and hope for the coming of the Messiah is strong during the four hundred Silent Years. Events of the Silence Era seem to especially prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah:

- i) This part of the world has a common language and a common culture, which facilitates the spread of a Messianic message.
- ii) The Roman Empire has brought this region military peace, and extensive system of roads and sea travel, and a common government so that people can travel extensively without interference.
- iii) The Jews are suffering such religious persecution and political humiliation that widespread hope and expectation of a saviour exists.

These facts make the coming of Jesus of Nazareth, claiming to be the Messiah, an event that captures the attention of the entire Jewish world.

(Taken from 30 Days to Understanding the Bible by Max Anders)

Influences on a Dispersed People

One of the most disastrous influences of Persian origin is the belief that God is an aloof, impersonal god. It does not take long for any Jew, or non-Jew for that matter, who accepts this notion to have difficulty with Isaiah’s prophecy that the Messiah would be called Immanuel—that is, God with us.

With these and other cultural threats becoming increasingly apparent, the more orthodox Jews take steps to combat the pagan influences. And yet, ironically, the steps they take are not particularly in the direction of the very law they are trying to preserve. They too are victims of their strange environment. Under the law, the temple is to be the center of their sacrificial form of worship, and priests have the responsibility of teaching the law to each

generation. Yet during the exile, and even after its end in areas other than Palestine, there is no temple, and sacrificing is often politically impossible. Substituting as best they can, the faithful begin to emphasize prayer and the inward sacrifice of the heart. The temple is replaced by an institution known as the synagogue, where the people gather for singing, prayer, and discussion of God's laws. Ezekiel's house in Tel Abib of Babylonia may have been a prototype, and Ezra's assembly for the reading of the law may have given impetus to the synagogue movement even in the shadow of the reconstructed temple. And the further away from Jerusalem one might go at this time, the more synagogues he would find.

The synagogues themselves foster changes in the Jewish religion. First to be noticed is the declining role of the priest, and his replacement by those known as rabbis. The rabbis are men whose superior knowledge of the law has set them in positions of great respect as the teachers in the synagogues. The fact that they gain such respect, oddly enough, leads to a second, and most significant, link in the evolution of Judaism. That link is the rise of sectarianism. The synagogues lend themselves readily to both special-interest groups and different schools of thought which are no longer under the direct influence of the priestly line of authority.

(taken from *The Daily Bible: In Chronological Order*, Harvest House Publishers)

Hellenism and the Jews

- during this time Alexander sweeps through Syria, Palestine and Egypt
- the city of Tyre is completely destroyed fulfilling Ezekiel's prophecy
- Alexander establishes a new city on the Nile named Alexandria
- this city becomes a significant centre of Greek influence

- because a great number of Jews will eventually live in Alexandria the Greek Hellenistic culture will have a profound effect on the Jewish people and their religion for centuries to come
- after defeating the Persians, Alexander pushes as far as the Ganges River in India linking for the first time the cultures of both East and West
- along with Alexander's military dominance goes the Hellenistic culture and the Greek language
- the universality of the Greek language will be of inestimable value in spreading to the known world the good news of the Messiah's coming
- when Alexander dies in 323 BC there is a power struggle and land grab among his generals
- the Ptolemies control Egypt and the Seleucids control Syria with the Jews in Palestine caught in the middle
- Ptolemy I captures Jerusalem and takes a number of Jews to colonize Alexandria
- He encourages full citizenship and encourages Jewish scholarship
- for the first time Jewish intellectuals are influenced by Greek philosophy with its logic and abstract concepts
- several of the Apocryphal books are written in Alexandria
- the most significant outgrowth from this community comes during the reign of Ptolemy II
- He commissions a Greek translation of the Old Testament for the great library in Alexandria which would be come known as the Septuagint
- over the next 300 years it will virtually replace the use of the Hebrew manuscripts
- while the Ptolemies and their Hellenism are proving to be in many ways advantageous to the Jews this was not so with the Seleucids
- throughout the second century BC there is a tug-of-war over Palestine which gives the Seleucids on-again, off-again control of the Jews
- In 190 BC the Seleucid king, Antiochus III is defeated by a new world power—Rome

- Rome makes a pact with Antiochus IV and allows him to rule Syria and Palestine
- the Seleucid rule, Epiphanes, is one of the cruellest men to ever hold public office
- He sells the office of high priest, confiscates property, loots the temple and sacrifices a pig on a pagan altar he has erected there
- under the leadership of Mattathias a group of Jews called Maccabeans begin running guerrilla warfare from 163-143 BC
- with the help of the pious Hasidim sect the Maccabeans finally achieve a Jewish dynasty under John Hyrcanus in 135 BC
- for the next 75 years there is a refreshing break in the action of this nation of Jews
- it is now clear that if the Jews want a politically strong kingdom they need a strong political and military leader
- it is only a matter of time before Rome turns their attention to Palestine
- even the brave Maccabeans will be no match for the Roman
- what better time than now for the arrival of the conquering king the Jews have been promised
- it may be this very thinking which, in just over 100 years, will be a significant factor in how the Jews of that day react to an unassuming man of peace who claims to be their king
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Judaism Under Roman rule

- in 63 BC under General Pompey, the Romans invade Palestine and capture Jerusalem
- after the defeat of Pompey by Julius Caesar, Antipater is appointed as procurator over all Judea, as Palestine is now called
- Antipater himself is assassinated in 44 BC
- Herod, Antipater's son, is appointed tetrarch of Galilee by Antony, Caesar's friend
- the Hasmoneans briefly revolt and force Herod to his fortress at Masada, near the Dead Sea
- when Herod arrives in Rome, Antony names him king of Judea and re-subdues Judea so that Herod can rule
- 37-30 BC saw political intrigue and more wars
- it was the time of Antony and Cleopatra and both lose their lives to Caesar's nephew and adopted son, Octavian
- Judea is not really affected by these infightings and Herod retains his control of Judea under Octavian
- Octavian is given the title of Augustus in 27 BC and it is this Augustus Caesar who gets credit for founding the Roman Peace
- for the next 200 years the civilized world will enjoy peace, prosperity and, for the most part, good civil government under Roman rule
- Herod, meanwhile, garners Jewish favour by restoring the temple in Jerusalem, which had been destroyed by Epiphanes
- despite this Herod is so obsessed with the security of his throne that he eliminates any possible contenders
- Herod will prove to not be the friend of the Jews he portrays himself to be
- during this time the sectarianism among the Jews which began after the exile has increased
- they are as much political and cultural as religious
- the Pharisees are masters of oral traditions which were handed down from the rabbis over the last 400 years
- although they would not acknowledge this it seems tradition is on par with the law itself
- this was coupled with the belief that one earns merit with God by scrupulously observing every technicality of law and tradition
- the Pharisees have broad support among the common people because they hold to a belief in life after death, which some sects were denying

- because of this support, many Pharisees were chosen for high government positions including the Sanhedrin, which is the highest tribunal of the Jews
- the second major sect is the Sadducees
- they are associated with the Greek intellectual movement arising earlier out of the Alexandrian community
- they have adopted the Epicurean belief that the soul dies with the body
- they do not believe in a resurrection
- the Sadducees reject oral tradition and accept only written law
- they apply the Hellenistic logic to the understanding of the Torah
- other sects come into being and include the radical pious, Essenes, the rebellious Zealots, the politically active Herodians, and the Samaritans whose hybrid religion continues from centuries past
- throughout several of the sects are traces of Persian mysticism, Greek humanism, patriotic Judaism and ritualistic traditions.

(taken from *The Daily Bible: In Chronological Order*, Harvest House Publishers)