

**EZRA, NEHEMIAH *and* ESTHER *for* EVERYONE**

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**EZRA, NEHEMIAH**  
*and* **ESTHER**  
*for* **EVERYONE**

JOHN GOLDINGAY



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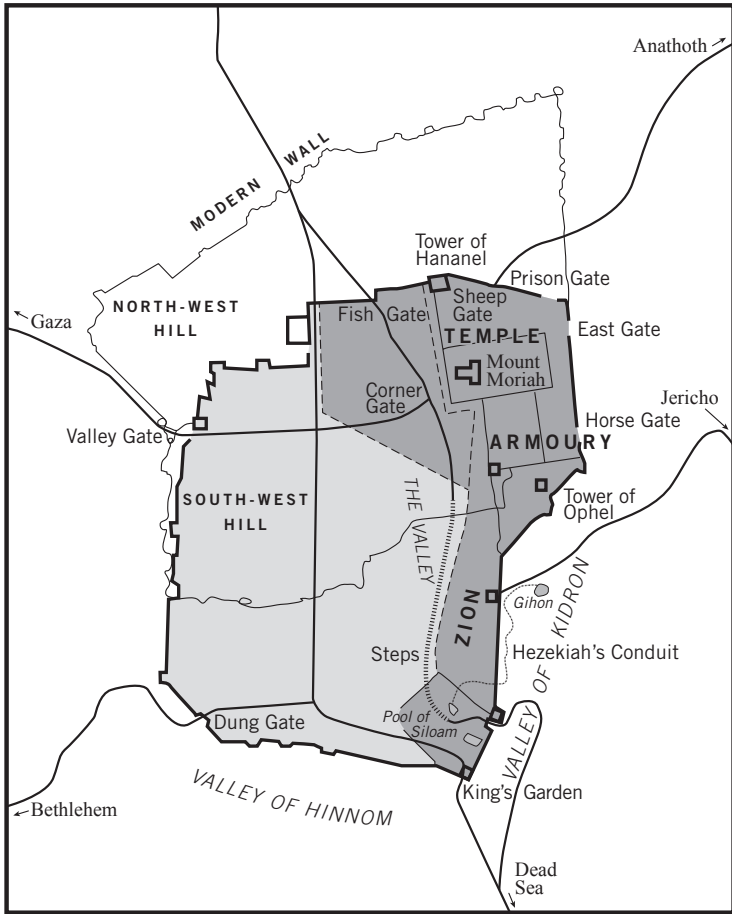
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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The translation at the beginning of each chapter (and in other biblical quotations) is my own. I have stuck closer to the Hebrew than modern translations often do when they are designed for reading in church so that you can see more precisely what the text says. Thus although I myself prefer to use gender-inclusive language, I have let the translation stay gendered if using inclusive language would make it unclear whether the text was using singular or plural—in other words, the translation often uses “he” where in my own writing I would say “they” or “he or she.” Sometimes I have added words to make the meaning clear, and I have put these words in square brackets. At the end of the book is a glossary of some terms that recur in the text (such as geographical, historical, and theological expressions). In each chapter (though not in the introduction) these terms are highlighted in **bold** the first time they occur.

The stories that follow the translation often concern my friends or my family. While none are made up, they are sometimes heavily disguised, in order to be fair to people. Sometimes I have disguised them so well that when I came to read the stories again, I was not sure at first who I was describing. My first wife, Ann, appears in a number of them. Two years before I started writing this book, she died after negotiating with multiple sclerosis for forty-three years. Our shared dealings with her illness and disability over these years contribute to everything I write, in ways you will be able to see but also in ways that are less obvious.

Just before I started writing this book, I fell in love with and married Kathleen Scott, and I am grateful for my new life with her and for her insightful comments on the manuscript, which have been so careful and illuminating that she practically deserves to be credited as coauthor. I am also grateful to Matt Sousa for reading through the manuscript and pointing out things I needed to correct or clarify and to Tom Bennett for checking the proofs.



## INTRODUCTION

As far as Jesus and the New Testament writers were concerned, the Jewish Scriptures that Christians call the “Old Testament” *were* the Scriptures. In saying that, I cut corners a bit, as the New Testament never gives us a list of these Scriptures, but the body of writings that the Jewish people accept is as near as we can get to identifying the collection that Jesus and the New Testament writers would have worked with. The church also came to accept some extra books such as Maccabees and Ecclesiasticus, that are traditionally called the “Apocrypha,” the books that were “hidden away”—a name that came to imply “spurious.” They are now often known as the “Deuterocanonical Writings,” which is more cumbersome but less pejorative; it simply indicates that these books have less authority than the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. The precise list of them varies among different churches. For the purposes of this series that seeks to expound the “Old Testament for Everyone,” by the “Old Testament” we mean the Scriptures accepted by the Jewish community, though in the Jewish Bible they come in a different order as the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings.

They were not “old” in the sense of antiquated or out-of-date; I sometimes like to refer to them as the First Testament rather than the Old Testament to make that point. For Jesus and the New Testament writers, they were a living resource for understanding God, God’s ways in the world, and God’s ways with us. They were “useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the person who belongs to God can be proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16–17). They were for everyone, in fact. So it’s strange that Christians don’t read them very much. My aim in these volumes is to help you do that.

## INTRODUCTION

My hesitation is that you may read me instead of the Scriptures. Don't do that. I like the fact that this series includes much of the biblical text. Don't skip over it. In the end, that's the bit that matters.

### An Outline of the Old Testament

The Jewish community often refers to these Scriptures as the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. While the Christian Old Testament comprises the same books, it has them in a different order:

Genesis to Kings: A story that runs from the creation of the world to the exile of Judahites to Babylon

Chronicles to Esther: A second version of this story, continuing it into the years after the exile

Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs: Some poetic books

Isaiah to Malachi: The teaching of some prophets

Here is an outline of the history that lies at the background of the books (I give no dates for events in Genesis, which involves too much guesswork).

- 1200s Moses, the exodus, Joshua
- 1100s The "judges"
- 1000s Saul, David
- 900s Solomon; the nation splits into two, Ephraim and Judah
- 800s Elijah, Elisha
- 700s Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah; Assyria the superpower; the fall of Ephraim
- 600s Jeremiah, King Josiah; Babylon the superpower
- 500s Ezekiel; the fall of Judah; Persia the superpower; Judahites free to return home
- 400s Ezra, Nehemiah
- 300s Greece the superpower
- 200s Syria and Egypt, the regional powers pulling Judah one way or the other

## INTRODUCTION

- 100s Judah's rebellion against Syrian power and gain of independence
- 000s Rome the superpower

### Ezra and Nehemiah

In Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament, Ezra and Nehemiah form one book, and there is logic in treating them together. They tell one unfolding story, and Ezra himself appears alongside Nehemiah in Nehemiah 8 and 12. Together they give the Old Testament's only account of the story of the Judahite community centered on Jerusalem when it was part of the Persian Empire. It is convenient to divide the books into four sections.

*Ezra 1–6 (the time beginning in 539).* The story begins with the transition of power in the Middle East from Babylon to Persia in 539. Fifty or sixty years previously, the Babylonians had conquered Jerusalem, devastated the temple there, and transported many Judahites from Jerusalem to Babylon. Ezra 1–6 tells of how the Persians then encourage the Judahites to go back home and how, against opposition from neighboring peoples, the Judahites rebuild the temple. Thus the period that now begins can be referred to as the Second Temple period.

While Ezra is often thought of as the great hero of the return from the exile, actually it was not until the next century that he made the journey from Babylon to Jerusalem (I often get students to repeat after me, "Ezra was nothing to do with the return from exile"). The heroes of the return from the exile are Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel as governors (in a formal or informal sense); Jeshua (or Joshua) as the priestly leader (a different Joshua from the one in the book of Joshua, seven hundred years previously); and Haggai and Zechariah as prophets. Further, it is easy to get the impression that the Babylonians transported the whole population at the beginning of the sixth century (so that the land of Judah would be unoccupied for this period), and that the whole population then returned toward the end of that century. Actually the Old Testament makes clear that the Babylonians transported only a few thousand

people—mostly the elite, such as members of the royal family and the administration, priests, and prophets—and that only some of these people then returned when they were free to do so. After all, by the time half a century had elapsed, most of the Judahite community in Babylon would have been born there, and would have no more interest in “returning” to this land they had never seen than Jews in Los Angeles or New York or London wish to do so today.

*Ezra 7–10 (the time beginning in 458).* So Ezra’s grandfather might have been born at about the time the return from the exile happened, but his family did not join the returners. The reign of several Persian kings followed before Ezra was born in Babylon. In the reign of King Artaxerxes, *Ezra 7–10* recounts, Ezra makes the journey to Jerusalem in 458, eighty years after the first return that led to the temple building. He brings with him a copy of the Torah of Moses and finds the Judahite community not living in accordance with the Torah in their willingness to marry people from the neighboring peoples who are not committed to the God of Israel, and he leads them in an act of repentance concerning that practice.

*Nehemiah 1–7 (the time beginning in 445).* Thirteen years after Ezra’s journey, back at the center of the Persian Empire in Susa, another loyal Judahite is serving at the imperial court and hears about the sad bricks-and-mortar state of the community in Judah. Nehemiah determines to do something about the city’s broken-down defenses. When he gets to Jerusalem, he also takes action to deal with social and economic problems in the community caused by poor harvests and the demands of imperial taxation.

*Nehemiah 8–13.* In the last part of the two books, Ezra and Nehemiah appear together in Jerusalem, teaching from the Torah, leading the community in a renewal of its covenant commitment to Yahweh, taking measures to build up the population of Jerusalem, and taking further action in connection with men who have married women from other communities who were not committed to Yahweh.

The books give dates for both Ezra and Nehemiah in terms of the reign of King Artaxerxes, and it is easiest to assume that the dates refer to the same Artaxerxes and that this is Artaxerxes

I. But there were a number of kings with that name, and it is just possible that Ezra lived in the time of Artaxerxes II, not Artaxerxes I.

As is the case with the other narrative books in the Old Testament, we have no idea who wrote Ezra and Nehemiah. The names of the books do not imply that they are the authors; both men are referred to in the third person, though the book of Nehemiah additionally incorporates prayers and other material in which Nehemiah speaks in the first person. The two books also include lists of people from the Second Temple period, such as people who made the journey to Judah from Babylon, and quotations from documents such as imperial decrees concerning the affairs of the community. So it looks as if someone in the period that followed Ezra and Nehemiah has compiled the book by bringing together such materials and composing accounts of incidents that took place during the century or so after 539, so as to provide the community with an account of its renewal over that century.

It was a renewal with many facets. These included rebuilding the temple and restoring its worship, implementing the expectations of the Torah in connection with the community maintaining its distinctive identity as the people of Yahweh over against other ethnic groups, rebuilding the city's defenses and providing it with a proper population, and taking action to see that its people were characterized by mutual support and generosity rather than each family living for itself. Yet the books do not come to a triumphant end or reach closure; in their last chapter, Nehemiah is undertaking further reforms designed to reach the same ends as Ezra had been concerned with when he first arrived in Jerusalem. The books would thus give their readers both reason to praise God for what had been achieved during the century they cover, and reminders of issues to which they might need to continue to give attention.

In the English Bible, Ezra–Nehemiah follows Chronicles and the opening verses actually repeat the closing verses of Chronicles. The concern with the temple in Ezra 1–6 corresponds to the agenda of Chronicles and the lists of members of the community, priests and Levites, and so on. On the other hand, the two books have concerns that are not addressed in

## INTRODUCTION

Chronicles, such as the emphasis on keeping the people of God pure in relation to people who acknowledged other deities and the emphasis on mutual support within the community. This suggests that we should not see the books as simply continuing Chronicles. Indeed, in the Hebrew Bible, Ezra–Nehemiah precedes Chronicles, and this supports the idea that Ezra–Nehemiah did not originally follow Chronicles; if anything, they followed 1 and 2 Kings. This would mean that Chronicles was written later, as a new prequel to Ezra–Nehemiah.

### Esther

The English Bible then has the book of Esther following Ezra–Nehemiah, again with some logic because it belongs to the same period of time. It concerns a particular incident in the period when the Persians rule the Middle East, when the emperor is a king whom both the book of Ezra and the book of Esther call Ahasuerus. It is usually assumed that Ahasuerus is the king known in English as Xerxes I, who reigned from 486 to 465. The events in Esther thus belong between the events in Ezra 1–6 and those involving Ezra and Nehemiah. One big difference in Esther is that it concerns people who stayed in Susa rather than those who left to join the community in Jerusalem. Consequently, they are not exactly people who are now in exile, because (in theory at least) there is nothing to stop them leaving Susa. They are people living in dispersion rather than in exile, as most of the Jewish community has done ever since. The book thus deals with issues that arise for such people, and specifically deals with the pressure to abandon distinctive Jewish commitments and with the persecution that may come for refusing to do so. It tells of the Jewish community's extraordinary escape from extermination as a result of the boldness of a young girl.

Like Ezra–Nehemiah, Esther appears in a different context in the English Bible from its position in the Jewish Bible. There, it is one of the Five Scrolls. These may seem rather a random collection of books, but they have in common that the Jewish community came to connect each of them with one of its

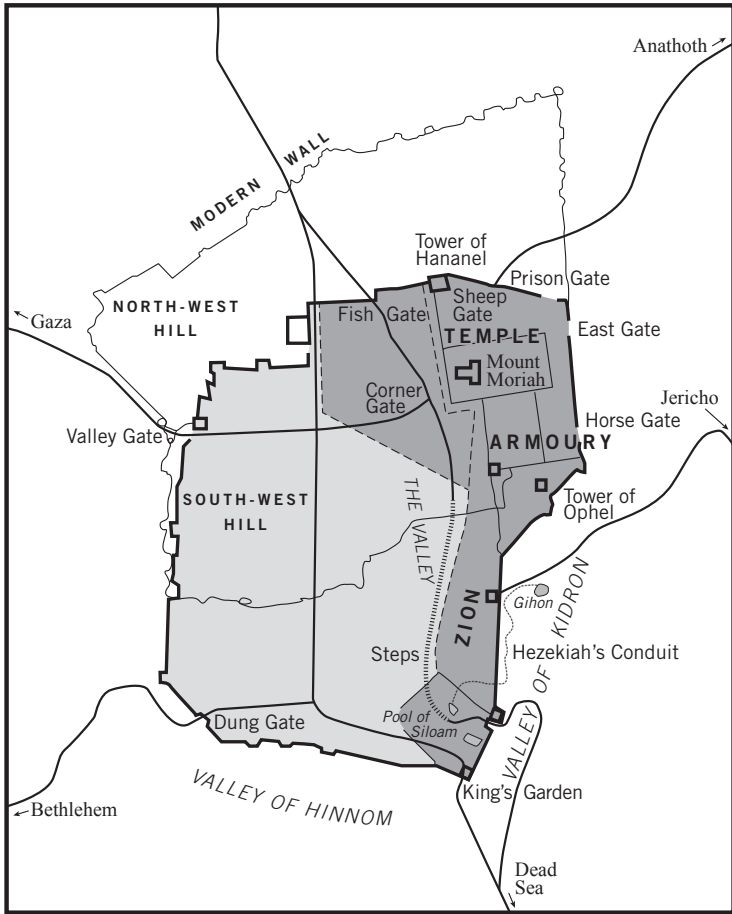
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annual festivals, which is the occasion when the book is especially read:

Song of Songs	Pesach or Passover (March/April)
Ruth	Shavuot or Pentecost (May/June)
Lamentations	Tisha B'av, the Anniversary of the Fall of Jerusalem (July/August)
Ecclesiastes	Sukkot or Booths (September/October)
Esther	Purim (February/March)

Esther alone makes explicit its link with a festival. The name Purim (meaning *Lots*) derives from the reference to drawing lots in Esther 9. As is the case with Ezra–Nehemiah, we do not know who wrote the book or when it was written, though the author was evidently well-acquainted with many aspects of life in the Persian Empire.

Whereas the books of Ezra and Nehemiah read like basically historical books, the evidence with Esther is more ambiguous. There are many indications that the story is told larger than life; for instance, the gallows intended for the hanging of Mordecai are the height of a six-story building. Further, there is no reference outside the Old Testament to a queen called Vashti. Such considerations suggest that Esther is a divinely inspired short story. It does seem likely to me that it is based on something that happened rather than simply being made up from scratch. But I can't prove that this is so. The story illustrates some truths about God, about the preservation of the Jewish people, about human sinfulness and stupidity, and about the role of coincidence and bravery, which are true whether or not this is a historical story or more like a short story. The question whether it is more factual or more fictional thus does not affect its message, as is so with Jesus' parables (most of which are short stories rather than historical stories, and are often also larger than life).



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