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Persian Kings in the Bible

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In 539 B.C. the mighty Babylonian Empire fell to a combined force of Medes and Persians. Thus began a two hundred year dominance of the Medo-Persian, or simply Persian, Empire. The reign of the Persian kings paralleled the final decades of the Old Testament. Historical records of this period point to the accuracy of the biblical account, which mentions by name five of Persia's kings.

Cyrus the Great (559-530 BC)

Cyrus the Great was responsible for conquering the Medes and welding them into the growing Persian superpower.

Cyrus traced his roots back to both the Medes and the Persians. Both were descendants of Aryan tribal folk who had moved south to the Urartian plateau from Russia and who, by 1000 B.C., had settled in the vicinity of Lake Urmia in what is now extreme northwestern Iran. Gradually the Medes moved east and occupied west Iran south of the Caspian Sea, while the Persians migrated far to the southeast and settled in southwest Iran toward the Persian Gulf.¹

This combined coalition of Medes and Persians soon threatened the waning Babylonian Empire. Under the direction of one of Cyrus' generals, identified as Darius the Mede in Daniel 5:31 (some suggest that this was simply another name for Cyrus), the city of Babylon fell without a fight. The Persian Empire now reigned supreme.

Cyrus adopted a political policy of restoring captive people to their homelands. According to the famous Cyrus Cylinder, Cyrus' own record of his political activities, Cyrus earned the favor of various regional gods by rebuilding their temples and restoring their people. He stated, "I (also) gathered all their (former) inhabitants and returned (to them) their habitations."² The application of Cyrus' political policy as it related to the Jews is recorded in 2 Chronicles 36:22-23 and Ezra 1:1-4. Cyrus not only opened the door for the Jews to return to Judah, but also restored the articles related to the temple (Ezra 1:7-8) and authorized supplies for rebuilding the Jewish temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 3:7; 4:3-5). Later, after the work on the temple had stalled, the archival records of Cyrus proved the right of the Jews to restart their building plans (Ezra 5:13-17; 6:3, 14).

The prophet Daniel, who had been exiled to Babylon, survived to see the fall of Babylon to the Persians and served under Cyrus (Daniel 1:21; 6:28; 10:1). In a remarkable (and contested) prophecy, Cyrus was "Predicted by name a century and a half earlier by Isaiah (44:28; 45:1) as one who would conquer rapidly and would be God's 'servant' in effecting deliverance for the Jews."³

When Cyrus died in battle, his son Cambyses (530-522 BC) took the throne. "There are no biblical references to Cambyses because the Jews were unable to continue work on the temple during his reign."⁴ Because Cambyses left no heir to the throne, a brief period of unrest occurred in which a man named Gaumata attempted to take the throne. Soon, however, Darius I became the ruler of the Persian Empire.

Darius I (522-486 BC)

Darius Hystaspes, known as Darius I, documented his right to the Persian throne on a massive inscription called the Behistun Inscription which “was written in three languages, and has proven invaluable in modern times for providing the key to reading old Akkadian.”⁵ Darius continued to expand the Persian Empire, and even invaded Greece. However, during that invasion in 490 BC, Darius was defeated in the Battle of Marathon.

The Old Testament refers to Darius in relationship to the rebuilding of temple. “Darius is mentioned prominently in Ezra 4-6 (compare Hag. 1:1, 15; 2:10; Zech. 1:1, 7; 7:1) as the Persian monarch under whom the temple at Jerusalem was finally reconstructed after the Jewish return from exile under Cyrus.”⁶

Xerxes (Ahasuerus) (486-465 BC)

Xerxes sought an opportunity to avenge his father’s defeat at the hands of the Greeks. He defeated the Greeks at the Battle of Thermopylae, but was ultimately defeated at the Battle of Salamis in 480 B.C. It seems that at this point Xerxes returned to Persia, displaced his queen, and brought Esther into his royal harem.

Xerxes is called Ahasuerus in the Old Testament, but “there is no doubt that Ahasuerus was Xerxes (485-465 B.C.), the son of Darius I.”⁷ He’s mentioned in passing in Ezra 4:6 in regard to the contested right of the Jews to rebuild their temple. Daniel 11:2 may hint at Xerxes’ war against Greece. “There seems to be a clear allusion to Xerxes in Daniel 11:2, if one interprets the first three kings as Cambyses, Gaumata, and Darius”⁸ Biblically speaking, Xerxes is best known for his role in the book of Esther as the king who identified and elevated Esther to the position of Queen of Persia.

Artaxerxes I (465-423 BC)

“Artaxerxes I was nicknamed by the Greeks ‘long-armed’ (Greek *markocheir*; Latin *Longimanus*). According to Plutarch

(*Artaxerxes I*), ‘the first Artaxerxes, among all the kings of Persia the most remarkable for a gentle and noble spirit, was surnamed the Long-handed, his right hand being longer than his left, and was the son of Xerxes.’”⁹

Artaxerxes is known in the Old Testament as the king who prevented the Jews from rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem due to letters of accusation against them (Ezra 4:7, 11-24), but it appears that Artaxerxes later changed his policy in light of Cyrus’ earlier decree (Ezra 6:14). Artaxerxes was responsible for sending Ezra from Babylon to Jerusalem to establish God’s people (Ezra 7:1-7, 11-26; 8:1). It was this same Artaxerxes who commissioned Nehemiah to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the city walls (Nehemiah 2:1; 5:14).

Darius II (423-405 BC) or Darius III (335-330 BC)

Nehemiah 12:22 refers to a Persian king named Darius. This was probably Darius II Nothus, the successor to Artaxerxes, but some have suggested that this was Darius III Codomannus.¹⁰ Darius III fell to the Greeks and Macedonians under Alexander the Great.

¹ Merrill, Eugene H.. *Kingdom of Priests*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996, p. 478.

² Pritchard, James B., Editor. *The Ancient Near East, Volume 1: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958, p. 208.

³ Wood, Leon. *A survey of Israel’s History*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970, p. 388, footnote 38.

⁴ Yamauchi, Edwin M. *Persia and the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990, p. 94.

⁵ Wood, p. 390.

⁶ Yamauchi, pp. 129-130.

⁷ Yamauchi, p. 187.

⁸ Yamauchi, p. 188.

⁹ Yamauchi, p. 241.

¹⁰ Yamauchi, pp. 129-130.