

Babylon and Beyond

The Persian Empire

The Rise of Persia

- The Persians began as a nomadic tribe that settled in modern southwestern Iran around 1000 B.C.
- Cyrus II (“the Great”, 585-529) led the Persians to defeat and absorb the territories of the Medes in 550 and Lydia in 546.
 - Isaiah prophesied about him by name in 700 B.C. – Isaiah 44:28, 45:1
- Cyrus defeated the Babylonian army at Opis in 539 and soon captured the city of Babylon.
 - There is a festival in the city, and it falls with little or no resistance – Daniel 5
 - Greek historian Herodotus says that they Persians rerouted the Euphrates River, which flowed under the walls of the city, and invaded through the river channel.
 - While Cyrus is the great king, Darius the Mede is the administrative ruler over Babylon as it transitions into the Persian Empire – Daniel 5:31, 6:1-3
- The empire Cyrus establishes may be called the Medo-Persian Empire, the Achaemenid Empire, or simply the Persian Empire.

Persia and the Jews

- Cyrus is very friendly to the Jews and other conquered peoples, and establishes a policy of restoration where they are allowed to return to their homelands and rebuild their temples – II Chronicles 2:36:22-23, Ezra 1:1-4, see also the “Cyrus Cylinder”
 - He returns Temple vessels to the Jews and commissions the reconstruction of the Temple – Ezra 1:7-11, 6:3-5
- By 538, Jews began to return to home to Judah, with 49,897 returning in the first wave – Ezra 1:5-6, 2:1-70; Nehemiah 7:5-73, 11:20-36, 12:1-26; I Chronicles 9:2-34
- In 536, an altar is built at Jerusalem, sacrifices are resumed, and the Feast of Tabernacles is kept – Ezra 3:1-7
- In 535, work begins on the Temple, but it is suspended due to opposition – Ezra 4:1-5
- No progress is made on the Temple during the reign of Cyrus’s successor Cambyses (529-522) – Ezra 4:6-24
- Under Darius I (“the Great”, ruled 521-486), interest in rebuilding the Temple is renewed by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah and the Jewish governor Zerubbabel – Ezra 5:1-2, Haggai 1-2, Zechariah 1-14

- Opposition is overcome and Darius expands on Cyrus's original decree – Ezra 5:3-6:14
- The Temple is completed in 517 and dedicated in 516 – Ezra 6:15-18
 - Thus ends the 70-year period of Jeremiah 25:11-12, 29:10.
- Around 458, Ezra is commissioned by Artaxerxes I (ruled 465-424) to lead a group of Levites to return to Judah – Ezra 7:11-8:30
- In 454, Nehemiah is appointed governor and oversees the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls – Nehemiah 1-6
 - About this time, he and Ezra lead in a great revival – Nehemiah 8-9
- In 452 (the 32nd year of Artaxerxes), Nehemiah visits Babylon and returns to many problems to be addressed – Nehemiah 13:6-31
- Malachi writes the last book of the Old Testament around 400.
- The Persian period closes with the conquests of Alexander the Great from 335 to 325

Esther

- I purposefully left out Esther from the above Chronology because there is a lot of debate about which king marries Esther.
- *Ahasuerus* could be a title rather than a name, and there are compelling arguments made for multiple rulers.
- Esther 2:5-6 is the only time marker, but people debate how to read it.
 - If it was Mordecai that was taken captive by Babylon in 597, then the king could be Darius the Great (ruled 521-486) and Mordecai could be in his eighties. (This is Reese's opinion)
 - If it was Mordecai's great-grandfather Kish that was taken captive in 597, then the king could be Xerxes the Great (ruled 486-465) and Mordecai could be much younger. (This is my opinion)
 - Many older writers, such as Josephus, think it is Artaxerxes I (ruled 465-424)

The Jews Under Persian Rule

- The Persians ruled through an intense bureaucracy that supported the Jews and welcomingly integrated them.
- Men like Zerubbabel, Mordecai, and Nehemiah could hold high places of authority with no problems from the Persians.
- Few Jews returned to Judah and the province of *Yehud Medinata* was sparsely populated. Many Jews remained scattered across the empire.
- Without a king and with the final prophets, the main leaders were the governor, high priest, and scribes (Ezra).