

Old Testament History

Lesson #27

The Persian Period

Introduction. Galatians 4:4 says, *“But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law.”* There is benefit to learning the background of the time in which Jesus was born because it can help us to better understand groups that we see and events which occur in the New Testament. This lesson will study the end of the great Persian Empire.

I. ***Xerxes I And The Attempted Conquest Of Greece***

A. Revolts in the empire.

1. Xerxes had been carefully groomed as successor to Darius. The Persian form of the name Xerxes is Khshayarsha, which in Hebrew is rendered Ahasuerus.
2. When, at the age of 35, Xerxes succeeded his father as king, the land of Egypt was in rebellion and the Greek problem had not been resolved. Xerxes acted quickly and quelled revolts in Egypt and Babylon.

B. Xerxes and Greece.

1. Careful preparation was made for a simultaneous land and sea attack on Greece, a project attempted but not successfully executed by Darius. Xerxes recruited his army from 46 nations.
2. Before attacking, Xerxes sent heralds to the Greek cities to give them an opportunity to submit voluntarily, which would be signified by returning portions of earth and water. Athens and Sparta then formed a coalition to fight the Persians.
3. The early battles were disastrous for the Greeks. Xerxes hoped to complete his conquest by engaging the Greek fleet which was concentrated at Salamis. However, this battle became one of the most decisive in history in favor of Greece.
4. After several more land battles, Xerxes failed to overtake the Greeks and Byzantium, the last Persian stronghold in the Greek world, fell and the bitter struggle between the Persians and the Greeks was ended.

C. The close of Xerxes' reign.

1. After the Greek debacle, Xerxes was not to distinguish himself again in battle. He lived fourteen years after the loss of Greece, but little is known about them.
2. He was murdered by a usurper, Artabanus, the captain of his body-guard, who is said to have reigned seven months before being killed by Artaxerxes, the son and legitimate heir of Xerxes.

D. Xerxes and the Bible.

1. Ezra 4:6 is the only biblical reference which bridges the 58 year period between the dedication of the temple and the arrival of Ezra in the seventh year of Artaxerxes.
2. Xerxes seems to have been too busy elsewhere to trouble himself with the problems of Judah. The lot of the Jews who had chosen not to return to Judah is described in the book of Esther.

II. ***Artaxerxes I And The Loss Of Persian Prestige***

A. Artaxerxes and Egypt.

1. The age of Artaxerxes is one of the best documented periods in classical antiquity. Artaxerxes had the usual problem of putting down rebellions in various parts of the realm when he became king of the Persian Empire.
2. However, disturbances in Egypt gave Artaxerxes more cause for concern. Although a Greek fleet of two hundred vessels came to the aid of the rebellious Egyptians, the Persians were victorious, but at a great cost of life.

B. Artaxerxes and the Jews.

1. At this time Ezra requested permission from Artaxerxes to lead a fresh group of Jews back to Judea. Ezra gathered 1,500 Babylonian Jews as a group of colonists who would reinforce and assist the earlier settlers, and help accomplish the necessary rebuilding and defense operations.
2. In the seventh year of Artaxerxes, the group organized at Ahava, a district in Babylonia. Bearing gold, silver and temple utensils, they started out on a journey which would take them over five months to complete.
 - a) Arriving safely on the twelfth day of the seventh month, Ezra lost no time in beginning his ministry. The reading and interpretation of the Law, and its enforcement, particularly in the matter of mixed marriages, occupied much of his time and energies.
 - b) Enemies of Judah sought to find some excuse to prevent the Jews from fortifying and protecting the city of Jerusalem. In the days of Artaxerxes a letter was addressed to the Persian king in which the Jews were accused of plotting rebellion against the crown. Artaxerxes ordered the Jews to halt their rebuilding operations.
 - c) This situation plagued the heart of Nehemiah, the cupbearer to Artaxerxes. When the king learned of this he gave him a leave of absence to return to Jerusalem to assist in repairing the broken walls.

- d) Although there were difficulties, Nehemiah pressed the people to complete their work. After an absence of twelve years, Nehemiah returned to Susa to report to the king. He had no sooner left Jerusalem than the old problems began to reappear. Nehemiah made a second trip to Jerusalem. Nehemiah accomplished a second reformation of the religious and civil life of Jerusalem. With this, both the book of Nehemiah and the history of the Old Testament comes to a close.
3. Artaxerxes was not in the position to strengthen his holdings in the west, and the decline of the Persian Empire is usually dated from his reign. Egypt and Cyprus were still subject to Persia, but most of the rest of the west was gone.

III. ***The End Of The Persian Empire***

A. Darius II.

1. The reign of Darius II was one of intrigue and corruption. Although no battles were fought with the Greeks, Persian gold was used to incite Athens against Sparta in the Peloponnesian War. Persian influence over the Greek cities of Asia Minor was thus strengthened.
2. Revolts continued throughout the Persian Empire. The Medes rebelled. Egypt was restive. The Jewish temple at Elephantine was destroyed, but Persia was unable to punish the insurgents.

B. Artaxerxes II.

1. Artaxerxes II barely missed being killed by his brother Cyrus during his coronation ceremony at Persepolis.
 - a) Artaxerxes pardoned Cyrus. Returning to his satrapy, Cyrus again plotted rebellion. He raised an army, partially from the Greeks, and came close to winning a decisive battle. Cyrus was killed in battle and the dreams of his followers were dissipated.
 - b) The story of the Greek contingent in Cyrus' army was immortalized by Xenophon. After the disastrous battle of Cunaxa, the Ten Thousand, as the Greeks were called, fought their way back home, passing through hostile territory. Xenophon was chosen as one of the leaders of the retreat. He led the Ten Thousand up the Tigris to the Black Sea and Byzantium. Xenophon's account of this famous retreat in *The Anabasis* became one of the great books of military science in the ancient world.
2. The Greek cities of Asia Minor were subject to Artaxerxes and opposition found a quick response. Persian forces on land and sea maintained control over the Ionian Greeks, although the glory of Persia was now past.
3. Egypt had declared its independence at the accession of Artaxerxes and had never been reconquered. Cyprus, Phoenicia and Syria took

advantage of this weakness to follow suit. Gradually, the western satrapies all fell away from the empire.

C. Artaxerxes III.

1. Artaxerxes III was cruel and brutal, but had the willpower to restore order. His first act was the extermination of all his brothers and sisters, thereby eliminating a direct threat to his authority. Then he went against Egypt, but his first attempt to regain control over the Nile Valley failed. That setback encouraged a new round of revolts in Sidon, which spread to Israel, Lebanon and Cilicia, but Artaxerxes crushed them in the same year they started.
2. Although Persia was now stronger than it had been for over a century, it refused to give Athens aid against the rising power of Philip of Macedon. By the end of the reign of Artaxerxes, Philip had united all of Greece under his rule. Now Persian gold could no longer influence Greece.
3. Artaxerxes III was poisoned by his physician at the order of a eunuch named Bagoas. Bagoas made Arses the next king in hopes of being the power behind the throne. When Arses did not bend to his will Bagoas poisoned him also.

D. Darius III.

1. Darius III became king of Persia in 336 B.C. That same year, twenty-year-old Alexander ascended the throne in faraway Macedonia with a commission from his father to make war upon Persia.
2. The tide of the empire moved toward Alexander and away from Darius. In 333 B.C., Darius was defeated in the battle of Issus. Two years later, Darius fled to Ecbatana, and then on to Bactria, where he was murdered by his cousin Bessus who took command of the unsuccessful opposition to Alexander in Bactria.
3. With the death of Darius III, the empire founded by Cyrus the Great came to an end. The dynasty is named after Achemenes, a minor ruler of a mountainous district in southwestern Iran. The period of ancient Persia's greatness extended from about 550 B.C. to 330 B.C.

IV. *The Problems And Progress Of The Jews*

A. The Samaritans.

1. In 722 B.C., a large number of influential citizens were deported to various cities of the Assyrian Empire. Conversely, colonies of non-Jews from Babylonia, Syria and Elam were settled in Samaria. The result was a mixed population and a disposition to worship Yahweh as God of the land, along with a reverence for the others gods which the new settlers had formerly worshiped.

2. From the earliest days of the resettlement after the Babylonian Captivity, the Samaritans and the Jews had animosity toward one another. The Samaritans offered to help in rebuilding the temple, but they were rebuffed. The Jews had learned that cooperation with the idolator would bring the judgment of God.
 3. It is noteworthy that Jesus saw fit to go through Samaria and thus show that His disciples were not to allow any restrictions to be placed on the preaching of the gospel (Luke 10:30-37; 17:12-19; John 4:3-42).
- B. The Jews of Elephantine.
1. A Jewish community at Elephantine, the island in the Nile at the border of Nubia, was probably founded as a military installation around 650 B.C. during Manasseh's reign to assist Pharaoh Psammetichus I in his Nubian campaign.
 2. Many ancient papyri were discovered in the early twentieth century written between the years 494 and 400 B.C.
 - a) The most interesting document is a letter written in 407 B.C. and addressed to Bigvai, the governor of Judah.
 - b) It tells how Egyptian priests, with the connivance of the local governor and the active assistance of the governor's son, destroyed the temple which the Jews had built at Elephantine.
 3. The very existence of a temple and fully developed sacrificial system indicates that the Elephantine Jews rejected the concept of a single central sanctuary as the place to which sacrifices to Yahu (Yahweh) must be brought. They did not deem it necessary to take sides in the conflicts between Jerusalem and Samaria.
- C. The synagogue.
1. During the time between the testaments, the synagogue and its worship became the focal point of Jewish life through the centuries. The word "synagogue" is of Greek origin, meaning a gathering or congregation of people.
 2. The chief article of furniture in the synagogue was the "ark," containing the scrolls of the Law and other sacred writings. The ark stood by the wall farthest from the entrance. In the center of the synagogue was a raised platform (bimah), on which was placed a lectern. The chief seats were close to the ark, facing the people. As a rule, the front of the synagogue faced Jerusalem.
 3. Synagogue worship was doubtless very simple in its early history. The elements of prayer and the reading and explanation of a portion of scripture was a part of the service from the earliest days.

Conclusion. Xerxes, Artaxerxes and later rulers saw the end of the Persian Empire. During this time the Jews developed certain characteristics

which are significant in the New Testament. In the next lesson we will examine the rise of Alexander the Great and the division of his empire.