

# Old Testament History

## Lesson #26

### 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.”* For many of us, the time between the testaments is a “dark” period because Christians generally do not know much of it. However, there is benefit to learning the background of the time in which Jesus was born. This lesson will study the first two great rulers of the Persian Empire -- Cyrus and Darius.

#### I. **Cyrus And The Rise Of The Empire**

##### A. The beginnings.

1. The Persian Empire came into being as the result of the efforts of one man -- Cyrus. He first appears in history when, in 559 B.C., at the age of forty, he inherited the small kingdom of Anshan. This territory was tributary to the Median Empire, one of the eastern rivals of Babylon.
2. The fall of Nineveh and the subsequent end of Assyria brought about a realignment of the states of the ancient Near East. The last kings of Judah were torn between the claims of Egypt and Babylon. Exile in Babylon brought the Jews to a fresh realization of the nature of their God.
3. In 550-549 B.C., Cyrus revolted against Astyages, his Median overlord. Meanwhile Nabonidus turned the kingship of Babylon over to his eldest son Belshazzar and headed for Harran, confident that the Medes had trouble enough with Cyrus to keep them busy.

##### B. Cyrus and Lydia.

1. The kingdom of Lydia was blessed with fertile land and natural resources, not the least of which was gold. Croesus, the ruler of Lydia, had enormous and legendary wealth.
2. Because Lydia was becoming more powerful and Cyrus was marching westward, a showdown between the two was inevitable. Cyrus routed Croesus and legend suggests that Cyrus dealt kindly with Croesus, allowing him to live in comfort near the ancient capital of Media.

##### C. Cyrus and the Greeks.

1. The conquest of Lydia brought Cyrus into contact with the Greek cities of Asia Minor which had made their peace with Croesus.
2. With the conquest of Greek Asia Minor, two Persian satrapys (lieutenants) were formed. The Ionian satrapy was joined to Sardis, and the area south of the Hellespont was organized into a satrapy

named "Those of the Sea." Sooner or later Persia would have to fight the mainland Greeks.

D. Cyrus heads eastward.

1. While Cyrus was conquering Lydia and Greek Asia Minor, Nabonidus was having his own troubles in Babylon. Graft and mismanagement developed under Nabonidus and his son Belshazzar brought on conditions of near starvation.
2. Cyrus marched eastward, incorporating Dragiana, Arachosia, Margiana and Bactria into his empire. He crossed the Oxus River and reached the Jaxartes, where he built fortified towns to defend his northeastern frontier against the attacks of central Asian nomads.

E. The fall of Babylon.

1. In his expedition against Babylon, Cyrus considered himself a deliverer rather than a conqueror, and this feeling was shared by many Babylonians. Nabonidus was completely unsuited by temperament for the office of ruler.
2. In early October, 539 B.C., Cyrus was ready to invade lower Mesopotamia. Since the defenses of Babylon were reputedly impregnable, Cyrus had wisely bypassed Babylon until he had secured the territory to the east and to the west of the fabulous city. When Cyrus arrived, however, he was able to advance.

F. Cyrus and the Jews.

1. The policy of the restoration of captive deities and captive peoples had special application to the Jews, whose religious ideals were respected by Cyrus and his successors as superior to those of the other nations with whom they dealt.
2. About 50,000 Jews availed themselves of the opportunity to return to their homeland with the blessing and help of Cyrus (Ezra 6:3-5).
3. In the second year of their return the foundations of the temple were laid amid scenes of great rejoicing (Ezra 3:12). Nothing more was accomplished in the work of rebuilding the temple during the lifetime of Cyrus.

G. The last days of Cyrus.

1. After the conquest of Babylon, Egypt alone remained of the allies of Croesus who had challenged Cyrus in his bid for world power.
2. Cyrus set out to deal with a revolt of the nomads on the eastern frontiers of the empire. There, in what should have been a mere skirmish, Cyrus was mortally wounded.
3. Few world conquerors have been regarded as highly as Cyrus. To the Jews he was the Lord's anointed who ended the Babylonian exile and opened a new era in the history of Israel.

## II. ***Cambyses And The Conquest Of Egypt***

### A. The ascension of Cambyses.

1. For eight years before the death of Cyrus, his eldest son Cambyses had lived in Babylon and acted as his father's representative at the annual New Year's festival.
2. Persian custom decreed that the king should not leave his empire unprotected when he left for a foreign war. Before leaving to defend his eastern borders, Cyrus recognized Cambyses as regent with authority to use the title "King of Babylon."
3. A second son, Bardiya, was entrusted with the eastern provinces of the empire. When the news of Cyrus' death reached the empire, disorder broke out on all sides. Cambyses is reported to have murdered his brother, concealing his death.

### B. The expedition against Egypt.

1. With the question of succession settled, Cambyses was free to proceed with the long-planned expedition against Egypt. The era of Egypt's greatness was long past, but her Pharaohs still had illusions of grandeur.
2. Seeing the rise of Cyrus and the Persian army, Pharaoh Amasis formed an alliance with Polycrates, ruler of Samos. The Greek world was the one hope Egypt had to challenge the Persian Empire. However, this alliance proved unfruitful.
3. After a fierce battle at Pelusium, the Egyptian army fled to Memphis. When Cambyses demanded that the capital surrender, his messengers were murdered. Then Cambyses attacked in strength and overtook the Egyptians.
4. Cambyses behaved as a true successor to the Pharaohs. He paid homage to the gods of Egypt and reformed the land. With Egypt firmly under control, Cambyses determined to press on to other African areas and add them to his domains.
5. During his campaign into Ethiopia, Cambyses received news that his throne had been usurped by Guamata who had assumed the name of Bardiya or Pseudo-Smerdis. Cambyses never reached home.
  - a) Herodotus says his death resulted from a wound accidentally self-inflicted when mounting his horse. The Persian record suggests suicide.
  - b) Two months later, Guamata was taken prisoner by an army still loyal to Cambyses and executed. Darius became the next Persian monarch.

### III. ***Darius And The Reorganization Of The Empire***

#### A. Revolt in the empire.

1. Darius claimed to be the legitimate successor of Cambyses. In the eyes of many of his contemporaries he was a usurper. With the assassination of Pseudo-Smerdis, the empire began to split apart.
2. Because of his fierceness, within two years Darius was firmly established as the Persian monarch. To accomplish this, he adopted a policy of firmness reminiscent of the cruelty of Assyrians such as Ashurbanipal.

#### B. The Behistun Inscription.

1. Darius wanted his victories recorded for posterity, so he chose a mountainside on which to record his deeds. On the main caravan route between Baghdad and Tehran, sixty-five miles from Hamadan, at an altitude of five hundred feet, a series of inscriptions fifty-eight feet, six inches long can still be seen.
2. Beneath the symbolic figure of his god, Ahuramazda, stands Darius, with his foot resting on the prostrate form of Gaumata. The uplifted hand of Darius demands the attention of the passer-by, insisting that he stop and read. Behind Gaumata are nine men, their hands bound behind their backs and cords about their necks. These are the pretenders and rebels whom Darius has defeated. Behind Darius are two arms-bearers.
3. The inscription itself was written in Old Persian, Babylonian and Elamite. The Behistun inscription provided the key to the decipherment of Babylonian (or Akkadian) cuneiform.

#### C. Darius and the Jews.

1. The last days of Cyrus and the reign of Cambyses were times of disillusionment and adjustment for the returned exiles.
2. The threats and the promises of Haggai and Zechariah stirred discouraged Judah to renewed activity. The Persian governor tried to stop the Jews but the effort was unsuccessful (Ezra 5:3; 6:7-8).
3. In the sixth year of Darius (516 B.C) the temple was completed. Special dedicatory sacrifices were offered (Ezra 6:15-16).

#### D. Civil government under Darius.

1. The opening days of Darius' reign were proof that instability was fostered when the central government was not independently strong. In government as organized by Darius, the king was supreme and absolute. Yet there were certain restrictions upon his liberty.
2. Darius developed a judicial system much like ours, along with the satrapy (civil governors), roads and a postal system to help manage his far-flung empire.

#### E. Military tactics of Darius.

1. The standing army maintained by Darius was surprisingly small. His personal bodyguard consisted of 2,000 cavalry and 2,000 infantrymen of noble birth and 10,000 "immortals" recruited from the Medes and Persians.
2. The empire suffered only minor skirmishes for a long period and the military program was adequate for such. However, in 512 B.C., Darius decided to attack the Scythians.
  - a) Greek sources suggest that the army raised by Darius for his Scythian campaign numbered about 700,000.
  - b) This was the first military encounter between Asia and Europe. However, Darius failed to conquer the Scythians, settling for Thrace instead.
3. In the days of Pharaoh Necho an unsuccessful attempt had been made to build a canal between the Nile River and the Gulf of Suez. In 518, Darius dug the canal.

#### F. Greek rebellion.

1. Darius was never able to incorporate the mainland Greeks into his empire. Darius tried to interfere in the internal affairs of Athens, which had a pro-Persian party, but the presence of Persian gold in Athens had a negative effect. Athens threw in her lot with the opposition.
2. The area suffered at the hands of the Persians to such an extent that the consequences were felt for two centuries. One of Darius' generals was very cruel, and this served to unite the various factions of Greeks against Persia. They saw clearly that the Persians would show no mercy toward the conquered Greeks.
3. When Darius landed at Marathon, he was met by the Athenian army. Before reinforcements could arrive from Sparta, the Athenians met the Persians and won a resounding victory.
4. Troubles in Egypt demanded the attention of Darius, and he gave up his plans for resuming his operations against Greece. Shortly after the battle at Marathon, Egypt was in open revolt against Darius. The Greeks had probably encouraged revolt in Egypt and other trouble spots in the Persian Empire.

#### G. The end of Darius.

1. Before the Egyptian revolt was ended, Darius had died. As an organizer of the civil government he has seldom been equaled. The royal palace which he built at Persepolis was one of the great structures of antiquity.
2. Although Darius could be cruel, the Persian Empire reached its organizational peak of efficiency under him, but decay had already begun to set in.

**Conclusion.** Cyrus and Darius were very influential rulers in the Persian Empire. In the next lesson, we will consider Xerxes and Artaxerxes along with the final rulers of the Persian Empire. Some of the developments among the Jews in this period which have New Testament significance will also be examined.