

## **1.0 Introduction**

The Persian Empire was one of the largest Empires of its time.<sup>1</sup> Its enduring legacies of inimitable conquest, diplomacy and cultural tolerance<sup>2</sup> are a far cry to the current Islamist expansionist intentions of modern Iran, an emerging threat to Middle Eastern stability and mutual cooperation.<sup>3</sup> Within the last five years it has gone on record to denounce the historical accuracy of the Holocaust and declared that it would “wipe Israel off the map”.<sup>4</sup> Up till the 1980’s Iran has always maintained strong ties with Israel. Even as far back as the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, at the height of its powers, the policies of their great predecessor, Cyrus II (the Great) - as recorded in the famous ‘Cyrus cylinder’- sanctioned the return of the exiled Israelites to rebuild their Temple and promised help and support for such an endeavor.<sup>5</sup> Such ties have since then be severed in the name of religious and political ambitions; indeed, an examination of the ancient empire and its development (which would necessarily include its *entente* with ancient Israel), may hold important lessons for our consideration today.

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<sup>1</sup> Amelie Kuhrt, “The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid imperial policy,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* no 25 (F 1983): 83.

<sup>2</sup> Kuhrt, “The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid imperial policy,” 84.

<sup>3</sup> Stanley A. Weiss, “Israel and Iran: The Bonds that tie Persians and Jews,” in *International Herald Tribune*; available from <http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/07/10/opinion/edweiss.php>; Internet; accessed 7 October 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Nazila Fathi, “Wipe Israel ‘off the map’ Iranian says,” in *International Herald Tribune*; available from <http://www.iht.com/articles/2005/10/26/news/iran.php>; Internet; accessed 7 October 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 65-93, 129-241. It was the consistent policy of Persian kings to help restore the sanctuaries of their subjects. Bagoas, the Persian governor of Judah, and Delaiah, governor of Samaria, issued a memorandum concerning the rebuilding of the Jewish temple at Elephantine, “to rebuild it on its site as it was before, and the meal-offering and incense to be made on that altar as it used to be.” Kraeling interprets this passage to mean that this was “a directive presumably suggesting that the rebuilding be done at government expense” with a hint of government subsidies for the offerings.

## **2.0 Development**

The earliest records of the rise of the Persian Empire are sketchy at most, and what is known is that they were tributaries of the Assyrian Empire during the later part of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BC.<sup>6</sup> Eventually the Medes rose to rule, throwing off the yoke of their Assyrian masters and became an independent Median Empire where the Persians were subject to them.<sup>7</sup> According to scholars, the first Persian Empire (also known as the Achaemenid Persian Empire) was said to be founded by a man named Achaemenes and became the first of two Persian Empires that would rule over greater Iran for almost 220 years, having its greatest expansion during the reigns of Cyrus II “the Great” (559-530 BC) and Darius I (522-486).<sup>8</sup> Cyrus II, a Persian king, seized power when he rebelled and overthrew his Median grandfather Astayges in 559 BC, thus unifying both the Median and Persian empires.<sup>9</sup> This great empire fell after its last king, Darius III (336-330), was defeated by Alexander the Great in 330 BC.<sup>10</sup>

During the period of rule, other notable sovereigns include Darius I, who brought organization to the empire. He divided the vast empire into 20 major provinces, each under the authority of a Governor or Satrap. The Satrap position was usually hereditary and autonomous, allowing each province to maintain its own distinct laws, traditions and elite class.<sup>11</sup> Each of these regions were also required to pay considerable tribute to the emperor in the form of gold or silver.<sup>12</sup> During his reign, significant building projects were commenced, including the building of the capital Persepolis and the “Royal Road”, which was highly organized and free from bandits.<sup>13</sup> During Darius’ time, the coinage

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<sup>6</sup> Jack M. Sasson, ed., *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, Volume 11 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1995), 1001-1051.

<sup>7</sup> Sasson, *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, 1015-17.

<sup>8</sup> Sasson, *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, 1003.

<sup>9</sup> Sasson, *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, 1016.

<sup>10</sup> David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Volume 5: O-Sh (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 236-244.

<sup>11</sup> Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 239.

<sup>12</sup> Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 239.

<sup>13</sup> Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 240.

was also fixed and the golden Daric was introduced.<sup>14</sup> Darius also allowed the Jews to continue to rebuild the Temple of Jerusalem, which had initially stopped under Cyrus.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Volume 1: A-C (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1079-1082.

<sup>15</sup> Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 159.

### **3.0 Rulers**

The list of rulers of the Achaemenid Persian Empire are as follows:

Name of King	Descendent	Year of Reign	Comments
Achaemenes	??	?	Eponymous founder of Empire
Teispes of Anshan	Achaemenes	??- 640	Son of Achaemenes; captured Anshan
Cyrus I of Anshan	Teispes	640-600	Reigned in Anshan; brother Ariaramnes of Persia
Cambyses I of Anshan	Cyrus I	580-559	Great grandson of Achaemenes
Cyrus II, the Great	Cambyses I	559-530	Ruler of Anshan (559); Conquered Media in 550 BC; Builder of Empire
Cambyses II	Cyrus II	529-522	Conquered Egypt
Smerdis (Bardiya)	Imposter	522	Possibly a usurper
Darius I, the Great	Grandson of Arsames	521-486	Allowed Jews to continue building Temple (516); failed in subduing Greek revolt
Xerxes I	Darius I	486-465	Unsuccessful in Greek Conquest; Continued father's building projects
Artaxerxes I Longimanus	Xerxes I	465-424	Commissioned Ezra to take charge of ecclesiastical affairs
Xerxes II	Artaxerxes I	424	Murdered by Sogdianus
Sogdianus		424-423	Murdered by Darius II
Darius II Nothus		423-405	Originally called Ochus
Artaxerxes II Mnemon	Darius II	404-359	Traditionally known as Ahasuerus in Book of Esther.
Artaxerxes III Ochus	Artaxerxes II	358-338	Poisoned by Bagoas, Vizier of Persia
Artaxerxes IV Arsēs	Artaxerxes III	338-336	Poisoned by Bagoas, Vizier of Persia
Darius III Codomannus	Great-grandson of Darius II	336-330	Almost killed by Alexander the Great in battle; deposed and assassinated by satrap, Bessus

Some of the key leaders in the Empire include Cyrus II, Darius, Xerxes I and Artaxerxes

I. A brief summary of their contributions is included below.

#### **a. Cyrus the Great**

Cyrus II was the greatest of the Achaemenid kings and the official founder of the Achaemenid Persian Empire. He was an equestrian prince from the southern Iranian highlands, who had been quite unknown outside his home country until the middle of the sixth century BC when he defeated his Median overlord (and grandfather) for Median ascendancy. He also went deep into Asia Minor and conquered the Kingdom of Lydia.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 73.

Even the Jews were highly favorable to him, as he became stronger and united the Persian and Median kingdoms. Some of the passages in ‘Deutero-Isaiah’ showed how enthusiastically the Jews supported him. They believed that YHWH had raised up the Persian King, endowed him with special *sedeq* and enabled him to conquer so swiftly it would seem like his feet barely touched the ground (41:1-5).<sup>17</sup> In other parts of the Old Testament, the book of Ezra regards him as “the saviour of the Jews, through his conquests and his edicts.” (Ezra 1:2-4)<sup>18</sup> The Persian King’s generous edict is also cited in 2 Chronicles 36:22-23 and Ezra 1:1-4 and 6:3-5.<sup>19</sup>

However, not all were fully bought over. Some of the Jewish rabbis of the Talmudic age were “embarrassed at the thought that Cyrus, a pagan king, should be so honoured and used by Jehovah. They applied Isaiah 41:2 to Abraham rather than to Cyrus. In interpreting Isaiah 45:1 the rabbis sought to construe the text as a conversation between Jehovah and the Messiah about Cyrus.”<sup>20</sup> And, contrary to what some of the prophets believed, Cyrus would eventually ascribe his successes to his God, Bel Marduk, not YHWH.<sup>21</sup>

Notwithstanding these, and also previous revolts where people were indeed relocated<sup>22</sup>, Cyrus’ ultimate legacy was one of benevolence and humanitarianism. As mentioned, one of the passages in the Cyrus cylinder records that Cyrus “restored cults and returned exiled peoples to their homes.” (11.30-32) Some scholars have also argued that the specific interest shown by Cyrus in the Jerusalem cult could be attributable to the fact

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<sup>17</sup> Klaus Koch, *The Prophets*, Volume Two: The Babylonian and Persian Period (Suffolk: SCM Press Ltd, 1983), 127-131. Nowhere in the Bible is a foreign king praised so unreservedly. The prophet turns directly to the Persian conqueror with an oracle of assurance, conferring on him the title of messiah, the anointed one, which had hitherto been the supreme religious predicate for Israelite kings (45:1-7). Elsewhere, Cyrus is mentioned explicitly in Isaiah 44:28 and 45:1 as the Lord’s “shepherd” and as his “anointed”. Additional passages, which seem to have Cyrus in mind, are Isaiah 31:2-3, 25-26; 45:13; and 46:11.

<sup>18</sup> Brian E. Colless, “Cyrus the Persian as Darius the Mede in the Book of Daniel,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* no 56 (Dec 1992): 115.

<sup>19</sup> Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 72.

<sup>20</sup> Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 74.

<sup>21</sup> Koch, *The Prophets*, 130.

<sup>22</sup> Kuhrt, “The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid imperial policy,” 94.

that the cult was more in line with their own religion, which was essentially an ethical monotheism.<sup>23</sup>

### **b. Darius I, the Great**

Born around 550, he was about twenty-eight years old when he came to the throne.<sup>24</sup> He was not a member of the family of Cyrus and Cambyses but belonged to a collateral Achaemenid line. Darius is mentioned prominently in Ezra 4-6 (cf. 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. He also had to quell uprisings and revolts, fighting a total of nineteen battles and subduing at least nine kings.<sup>25</sup>

### **c. Xerxes I (also known as Ahasuerus)**

The successor to Darius took the throne above his other brothers. He was tall and handsome, and wanted to surpass his father's failed efforts. This eventually led to a disastrous Greek Campaign (Aug 480- 479), in which he lost three of his half-brothers, his general (Mardonius) and much of his army. He would later concentrate his efforts at continuing his father's building projects- extending Persepolis and building great monuments for himself. Some conservative scholars place Esther around this period.

### **d. Artaxerxes I**

It is recorded in Nehemiah and Ezra that king Artaxerxes allowed for the rebuilding of the Temple and walls of Jerusalem (Ezra 4:8-23, Neh. 2:1). If Artaxerxes I is the intended ruler, than the rebuilding of the walls would have taken place between 444 and 427. Aksim texts from Elephantine and the Samaria Papyri have provided external evidence for identifying Sanballat, Nehemiah's rival as the governor of Samaria in the reign of Artaxerxes I.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Kuhrt, "The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid imperial policy," 84.

<sup>24</sup> Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 138.

<sup>25</sup> Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 146.

<sup>26</sup> Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Volume 1, 463.

## **4.0 Conquests**

Some of the major conquests of the Achaemenid Persian Empire are briefly highlighted below:

### **a. Conquest of Media and rebellion against Astayges (550 BC)**

According to Herodotus (1.127-28) Cyrus overcame the Medes in two battles. According to Strabo (15.3.8) the scene of the decisive battle was in the plain where Cyrus was to build his new capital: “Cyrus held Pasargadae in honor because there he conquered Astyages the Mede in his last battle, transferred to himself the empire of Asia, founded a city, and constructed a palace as a memorial to his victory.”<sup>27</sup> The Nabonidus Chronicle states that Cyrus was aided in his victory by the defection of Astyages’ own men: “(Astyages) mustered (his army) and marched against Cyrus, king of Anshan, for conquest [...] The army rebelled against Astyages and he was taken prisoner.” The text further indicates that Cyrus marched to Ecbatana, the Median capital, and carried its treasures back to the region of Anshan, sparing Astyages.<sup>28</sup>

### **b. Conquest of Lydia (547 BC)**

According to Herodotus (1.77) the battle took place in November. Because winter was approaching, Croesus the king of Lydia retired to Sardis and asked his three powerful allies- Sparta, Egypt, and Mesopotamia- to send him aid in the following spring. He even dismissed his foreign mercenaries. Croesus had underestimated the cunning of Cyrus, who only pretended to withdraw but instead pursued the Lydians to Sardis. In a battle in the plain of Sardis the Lydian horses were unsettled by the odor of the camels ridden by the Persians. The acropolis itself was taken when the Persians discovered an unguarded pathway (Herodotus 1.84).<sup>29</sup> Ctesias offers another alternative perspective on the taking of the city in Sardis. Wooden manikins dressed like Persian soldiers when elevated over the walls caused panic among the inhabitants and led to the capture of the city.

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<sup>27</sup> Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 56.

<sup>28</sup> Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 81.

<sup>29</sup> Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 82.

Eventually Cyrus spared the life of Croesus and granted him the city of Barene near Ecbatana.<sup>30</sup>

### **c. March into Babylon (539 BC)**

The morale level in Babylon was already low, with the last Neo-Babylonian king, Nabonidus having moved to Teima in Arabia for ten years, leaving Babylon in the hands of his son Belshazzar.<sup>31</sup> However, sensing the growing Persian threat, Nabonidus moved back in 543, but it was too late. In the spring of 539, the Persians diverted the Euphrates which flowed into the city, and marched into the city through the canals. The Nabonidus Chronicle confirms that Ugbaru (Gubaru) and his troops entered Babylon “without a battle” on October 12. Nabonidus was sent into exile and Belshazzar was believed to have been killed.<sup>32</sup> This account is also confirmed in Daniel 5:29-31, although the name of the King is different (see section 5.0 ‘a’ below).

### **d. Battle of Marathon (490 BC)**

In 492, Darius sent an expedition led by his son-in-law Mardonius to quell an Ionian Revolt led by the Athenian Greeks from 499-494.<sup>33</sup> The fleet was wrecked off the peninsula of Mount Athos in the northern Aegean Sea. He sent another contingent in 490, and after a few days of deliberation, the Athenians attacked first, charging at a run, which gave them tactical advantage over the more lightly armed Persian infantry. The numerically superior Persians were completely routed by the 9,000 strong Athenian force, losing 6,400 men whilst their opponents lost 192. The ships retreated for an attack some other day.<sup>34</sup>

### **e. Battle of Thermopylae (480 BC)**

After Darius died, his son Xerxes I led a powerful force to invade Europe through Greece, covering both land and sea. Most modern scholars agree that the land forces were estimated at 200,000, but Herodotus’ account places the total number at almost 5 million,

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<sup>30</sup> Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 83.

<sup>31</sup> Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 86.

<sup>32</sup> Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 87.

<sup>33</sup> Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 170.

<sup>34</sup> Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 170-172.

which includes supply troops (Herodotus 7.186). At any rate, this force was held back at Thermopylae for several days by 300 Spartans and 3,000 other auxiliary forces under the leadership of the Spartan king, Leonidas. But a local traitor by the name of Epialtes led the Persians along a mountain ridge that outflanked the Greek position (Herodotus 7.213-18). Leonidas allowed most of the auxiliary forces to leave, and then perished with the remaining men. Herodotus reports that as many as twenty thousand Persians were killed, including two of Xerxes' half-brothers.<sup>35</sup>

#### **f. Battle of Salamis (480 BC)**

After their momentary setback at Thermopylae, Greeks found themselves arrayed against a massive Persian fleet at the narrow bay of Salamis, and again battling incredible odds, the Greek ships utilized a mixture of tactics, trickery and bravery as they lured the Persian ships to engage in the narrow strait, not dissimilar to tactics used at Thermopylae. When the ships came closer, the Greek ships, equipped with battering-rams affixed to their hulls (“*embolon*”) dealt great damage to the enemy ships. Once losses were irreconcilable, the Persians retreated for the winter.

#### **g. Battle of Plataea (479 BC)**

This battle decisively stemmed the Persian onslaught into Greece and discouraged all future attempts at conquering the Greeks with force of arms. After the monumental defeat at sea in the Battle of Salamis, the Persians, under the command of Xerxes' general Mardonius, sought to crush the Greeks with a force of 300,000, but met with one of the largest Spartan force to be deployed in battle (over 10,000), in addition to other allied troops. After cutting off supplies from the Greeks, the Persian force harassed the Greeks with arrows and cavalry, but were eventually repulsed and beaten back by the superior weapons and ferocity of the Greeks. It was not long before the massacre of Persians began, resulting also in the death of Mardonius, who had instigated Xerxes right at the start to embark on the ill-fated campaign (Herodotus 7.5).

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<sup>35</sup> Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 205-206.

## **5.0 How Persia Impinged on the history of ancient Israel/Judah**

By the time the Persian Empire came into the regional theater of world empires, the northern nation of Israel had been in exile for almost two hundred years. Whatever sliver of national identity had dissolved in the repatriation policies of the Assyrian Empire which had conquered her. However, it is recorded that the fall of Assyria was greeted with hope by the Israelites in captivity (Isaiah 13, 14, 21; Jerem. 1, 51). Since the nation of Israel as a divided entity to Judah would no longer return to its original form, the impact of the Persian Empire would be such as it would be on any other satrapy, in that the usual levies and controls would be extended. It was to the nation of Judah that the greatest impact would be felt.

Judah, having been conquered by Babylon less than thirty years previously, was awaiting salvation from their immediate masters in the form of the Persian armies, when they marched into Babylon and ended an era. Cyrus, recorded as having taken the city at the age of sixty, would eventually be a key figure in Judah's quest to return to their homeland and fulfill the prophecies uttered by Jeremiah the prophet (Dan. 9:2). Some of the key figures that lived during the Persian Empire include Daniel, the prophet(s) of Deutero-Isaiah, Esther, Ezra and Nehemiah.

### **a. Daniel the Jew in the Court of 'Darius the Mede'**

There is existing scholarship debating the historicity of 'Darius the Mede.'<sup>36</sup> Although it is hard to argue convincingly for either side: i) whether Darius was actually Cyrus II<sup>37</sup>; ii)

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<sup>36</sup> Lester L. Grabbe, "Another look at the Gestalt of 'Darius the Mede'," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (no 2 Ap 1988): 198. Grabbe states the accepted consensus among scholars was that Darius the Mede was a composite character. H.H. Rowley's thesis that questioned Darius' historicity has been generally accepted by most critical scholars.

<sup>37</sup> Brian E. Colless, "Cyrus the Persian as Darius the Mede in the Book of Daniel," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* no 56 (D 1992): 113-126. In the book of Daniel, by contrast, Cyrus is only ever mentioned in passing (Dan. 1.21; 6.28; 10.1); not a single deed or decree is attributed to Cyrus; here the Iranian figure dominating the world is 'Darius the Median' (5.31; 6.1-28; 9.1; 11.1). It is this Darius who takes over the kingdom of Babylon, when he is 62 years old (5.31); but history records that it was Cyrus the Persian who conquered Babylon and who was aged about sixty when the city fell to him (in 539). It is not Cyrus but Darius who organizes the new Iranian empire (6.1), who issues decrees binding on all subjects of the Iranian realms (6.9, 26), and administers 'the laws of the Medes and Persians' (6.8,12). Daniel's Darius has apparently usurped the imperial roles that are assigned to Cyrus the Great by the Jewish Chronicler.

whether Darius was a conquering satrap by the name of Ugbaru<sup>38</sup>; iii) whether ‘Darius the Mede’ was more a title to fulfill a literary purpose<sup>39</sup>; or even iv) whether Daniel even existed<sup>40</sup>), the fact remains that Cyrus was instrumental in bringing about the return of the Jews to Judah. Historical evidence is scant regarding the existence of a ‘Darius the Mede’ in the time of Daniel.

### **b. Deutero-Isaiah and the Rise of Cyrus**

Bernhard Duhm assigned chs. 40-55 of Isaiah to the years before Cyrus conquered the Neo-Babylonian empire in 539, as the mention of the Persian king Cyrus in Isa. 44:28 and 45:1 meant that the origins of these chapters could not be derived from the prophet of the eighth century BC, but most likely from an anonymous exilic writer who is known as ‘Deutero-Isaiah’, being localized in Babylonia.<sup>41</sup> Koch is also of the same mind and argues that the reference to the destruction of Jerusalem, the rule of Babylonia over the whole inhabited earth, and the rise of the Persian conqueror Cyrus indicate the period the books were written.<sup>42</sup> “This would explain his familiarity with Babylonian divination (43:13) and with the Chaldean processional roads (40:3-5), and the ceremonial ships of their gods, which sailed along the Tigris and Euphrates at the great annual festival (43:14).”<sup>43</sup> However, Baltzer sees Cyrus's role as limited. He does not consider the view of Cyrus to be “contemporaneous with the reign of the Persian monarch”, and instead dates Deutero-Isaiah to the time of Nehemiah, arguing that “the reference to Cyrus as Messiah implies a latent criticism of the present Persian emperor, Artaxerxes I.”<sup>44</sup>

### **c. Queen Esther and King Xerxes I (Ahasuerus)**

<sup>38</sup> James M. Bulman, “Identification of Darius the Mede,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 35 (no 3 Spr 1973): 260.

<sup>39</sup> Colless, “Cyrus the Persian as Darius the Mede in the Book of Daniel,” 125.

<sup>40</sup> Grabbe, “Another look at the Gestalt of ‘Darius the Mede’,” 213.

<sup>41</sup> Rainer Albertz, “Darius in place of Cyrus: the first edition of Deutero-Isaiah (Isaiah 40.1-52.12) in 521 BCE,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27 (no 3 Mr 2003): 371.

<sup>42</sup> Koch, *The Prophets*, 119.

<sup>43</sup> Koch, *The Prophets*, 119.

<sup>44</sup> Lisbeth S. Fried, “Cyrus the messiah? The historical background to Isaiah 45:1,” *Harvard Theological Review* 95 (no 4 O 2002): 374.

According to Gordis, the generally accepted description of the work of Esther in Scripture is a “historical novel”<sup>45</sup> and “the relative stress on the noun and the adjective in the phrase varies widely with the degree of authenticity scholars are prepared to accord the book.”<sup>46</sup> In spite of a divergence of views, one of the conclusions that may be set down as scholarly consensus today is that the author of Esther has an excellent familiarity with Persian law, custom, and language in the Achaemenid period.<sup>47</sup> However, there is still the fact that there was once a large number of Jews residing in Iran before the 1980s,<sup>48</sup> and a report by a Jewish soldier during the Persian Gulf War indicates the presence of archaeological remnants of “Queen Esther’s castle” that remain to this day. Therefore, as much as there is skepticism surrounding the biblical account, these structures stand as silent monuments in the ancient city of Shushan (Susa).<sup>49</sup>

#### **d. Ezra, Royal Emissary of Artaxerxes**

By abolishing the prisoner-of-war status of the *gola* in Babylonia, Cyrus’ edict pointed the way to the restoration of Israel after the exile.<sup>50</sup> It was during this time that the heads of families and tribes, being commended by the King, formed the first wave of exiles and began the task of rebuilding the Temple (Ezra 1; 6:3-5). Along with them came materials and supplies. By 515, the temple was finished, having been started in September 21, 520 (Hag. 1:4-15, Ezra 6:15).<sup>51</sup> During the time of Artaxerxes I, Ezra was commissioned to attend to ecclesiastical affairs and to assist in the ‘beautification’ of the Temple (Ezra 7:27). During this period, and with the sanction of Artaxerxes, Ezra appointed leaders and disciplined the people according to the Law (Ezra 10:10-11). He was instrumental in bringing the people back into the covenant relationship that had been broken through centuries of disobedience.

#### **e. Nehemiah Rebuilds the Walls**

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<sup>45</sup> Carey A. Moore, “Archaeology and the Book of Esther,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 38 (no 3-4 S-D 1975): 79.

<sup>46</sup> Robert Gordis, “Studies in the Esther narrative,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95 (no 1 Mr 1976): 43.

<sup>47</sup> Gordis, “Studies in the Esther narrative,” 44.

<sup>48</sup> Weiss, “Israel and Iran: The Bonds that tie Persians and Jews,” n.p.

<sup>49</sup> Ralph M. Weisberger, “Purim in Persia,” *Reconstructionist* 12 (no 3 Mr 22 1946): 15.

<sup>50</sup> Koch, *The Prophets*, 130.

<sup>51</sup> Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 159.

We know that the rebuilding of Jerusalem took place in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes' reign (Neh. 2:1), or in 445. The earlier correspondence recorded in Ezra regarding Rehum's objections at the rebuilding of Jerusalem might have been located during the earlier part of Artaxerxes' reign.<sup>52</sup> However, we also know that Nehemiah completed the work on the wall in a record of 52 days, and returned to Persia for a number of years.

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<sup>52</sup> Sidney G. Sowers, "Did Xerxes wage war on Jerusalem," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 67 (1996): 48. Rehum and Shimshai were fearful of what would happen should the city be rebuilt from its present devastated condition (vv.4:15f.). They thought it was still possible to prevent this from happening through prompt intervention. Upon investigation and reflection, the king agreed with them and urged them not to be slow in taking action to prevent the rebuilding while there was still time to do so (v. 22). As soon as they received his communication, they went "with haste" to Jerusalem to enforce the cease and desist order with military power (v. 23). Because of this prompt action, Jerusalem would remain a ruin for a few more years, as it still was in 445 at the opening of the Book of Nehemiah. There was a revolt (in Ezra 6:15-22, in the sixth year of King Darius) but Sowers argues that only the city was destroyed, with no strong evidence that the Temple was demolished, as opposed to Morgenstern claims that there was a revolt, massacre and total destruction of the temple and the city.

## **6.0 Conclusion**

An examination of how Persia conquered, ruled and affected Israel can yield a broad range of conclusions:- a) that biblical accounts that relate to Persia although still being disputed by scholars, have provided a glimpse into Persian culture from biblical eyes; b) that the power of Persia rested in a few instrumental kings and that c) God used the Persian Empire to work His will. The existence of Deutero-Isaiah, Esther and Daniel in the OT Corpus are all books which have been subject to question and debate over the years. Their dating would fall within the time of the Persian Empire but scholars wrestle with the limitations of historical evidence that parallel the biblical accounts. Also, the power of Persia centered upon the Cyrus and Darius, who instituted sweeping reforms and built magnificent monuments in the cities of Persepolis and Susa. They also conquered and extended the borders of the Empire far beyond its humble beginnings to become a world power to be reckoned with. With the demise of these leaders came the slow disintegration of the Empire, as jealous and power-hungry individuals jostled for position, each claiming their right to the throne. Also, building on existing successes, these individuals could extend the reach and influence of their predecessors. And finally, history has shown that God used 'gentiles' to work His Will in fulfilling prophecy that He would bring His people back to their land (Ezekiel 11:17). This only means that God can use individuals as well as powerful world empires to bring forward His agenda, and our task would not be to determine what are the times and seasons which we are placed, but to make the best of the time that has been given to us, just as we have seen brave and committed people work out their particular roles in obedience and servitude to God.

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**Select one of the major ancient civilizations (e.g. Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, or Greece) and write an in-depth research on its history, its development, its rulers, and conquests. In your second part of the paper, show how this civilization impinged on the history of ancient Israel and Judah. Provide actual examples from the OT to illustrate this. (Persia)**

**Course:** Introduction to OT (OT 102)

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**Programme:** MDiv 2008

**Word Count:** 2,096 words

**Date of Submission:** 9 Oct 2008

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