

## CHAPTER 6

### HOW DID FIVE PERSIAN KINGS GET IN OUR BIBLE?

As we have learned already, some of Israel's history is intermingled with that of Persia. Between the end of the Babylonian captivity and the rebuilding of Jerusalem, the Jewish people were under the authority of Persian kings and their history was dated by the reigns of those kings, since Israel no longer had kings. In fact, the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi were written in the early part of the Persian Kingdom, giving us a glimpse of Persian-Israeli relations. In order to understand the background of these books, we will do a quick survey of Persian history. A note of caution is in order: it is important to remember, as we discussed in Chapter 4, "The World's Most Accurate History Book", that names change over time and in translation from one language to another. The following are some of the early Persian kings:

<u>Date</u> <u>B.C.</u>	<u>Secular Persian Name</u>	<u>English</u> <u>Historical</u> <u>Name</u>	<u>English Biblical</u> <u>Name</u>	<u>Scripture</u> <u>Reference</u>
539-530	Korrush	Cyrus	Cyrus	Isaiah 45-Daniel; Ezra 1-3
530-521	Cambujieh	Cambyses	Ahasureus (KJ) Xerxes (NIV)	Ezra 4:6
521 B.C.	Berooyeh Dorougi (liar)	Pseudo Smerdis	Artaxerxes	Ezra 4:7-23
521-486	Darous	Darius the Great	Darius	Ezra 5,6
486-465	Khashayarshah	Xerxes	Ahasureus (KJ) Xerxes (NIV)	Esther 1-10
464-423	Ardashir Deraz Dast(long hand)	Artaxerxes I	Artaxerxes	Nehemiah 1-13; Ezra 7-10

There were 3 Persian kings named Ardashir. Ardashir Deraz Dast ruled from 464 BC to 423 BC, Ardashir the Second from 403 BC to 359 BC, and Ardashir the Third from 358 BC to 337 BC.

**Note: The standard translation of the Persian Old Testament which was translated around 100 years ago had the word Akhshurosh from old Persian for Khashayarshah and the word Artahshasta from old Persian for Ardashir. We will use the name Khashayarshah and Ardashir as the kings' names in this and other chapters. Let's look at these kings in more detail:**

1. Cyrus the Great was the founder of the Medo-Persian Empire, conquering the Median, Lydian, and Babylonian kingdoms. A gracious liberator, he permitted the conquered nations to worship their own gods. He was benevolent toward various captive people who had suffered under the rule of Nebuchadnezzar and his successors. With his

blessing and financial assistance, the Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple. See chapter one for more information on Cyrus.

2. Cambyses, the son of Cyrus, was his father's successor. He was given the task of conquering Egypt which he did after he assumed the throne following his father's death. Persian history says that on the way home from his conquest, Cambyses heard that someone pretending to be his brother, Smerdis, had taken the throne. Cambyses died on his return trip. His biblical name is Akhshurosh (Ezra 4:6), not to be confused with Khashayarshah, the husband of Queen Esther. (See Section B in this chapter for more comments.)
3. Pseudo Smerdis, the traditional imposter, ruled for several months. He gained a large following by remitting future taxes for three years throughout the empire. (Has politics changed much in the last 2500 years?) However, Darius kept the loyalty of the Persian army and eventually captured and killed Pseudo Smerdis and claimed the throne. Note that Pseudo Smerdis' biblical name is probably Artahshasta (Ezra 4:7-23), not to be confused with the Ardashir who would reign more than half a century later. (See Section B in this chapter for more comments.)
4. After killing Pseudo Smerdis, Darius defeated nine kings in nineteen local uprisings in 2 years. These victories are recorded in the famous Behistun inscription, a rock carving located about 30 miles from the Persian city of Bakhtaran (formerly Kermanshah) in west-central Iran. Darius began the great work of building the palace complex at Takhe Tamshid, located 30 miles north of Shiraz. The main hall has the inscription, "I am Darius, great king, king of kings, king of lands---who constructed this palace." Darius was a good organizer, who established an efficient postal system. In fact, the United States postal slogan is of Persian heritage. The saying, "Neither rain nor snow nor sleet nor hail shall stop the appointed couriers from accomplishing their tasks," originated from King Darius. Darius was only partially successful at keeping the encroaching Greek Empire at bay. (Ezra chapter 5 and 6)
5. Khashayarshah was Darius' son. He continued the war against the Greeks and the building at Persepolis. The Bible states that Khashayarshah (Akhshurosh) was the husband of Esther. Note that his biblical name is Ahasureus, not to be confused with Cambyses.
6. Ardashir was the son of Khashayarshah. He also continued in the building project at Takhe Tamshid. The Scriptures say that he gave Ezra permission to take more Jewish people back to Jerusalem and gave Nehemiah permission to return to rebuild Jerusalem (Nehemiah chapter 1-13 and Ezra chapters 7-10).

#### **A. RETURN OF THE JEWS WITH CYRUS' PERMISSION**

1. The prophet Jeremiah predicted that the Jews, because of rebellion against God, would be taken captive for 70 years and then would return to their own land. These

prophecies are found in Jeremiah 25:12; 29:10; and Isaiah 44:28; 45:1-13. Chapter one, A Monarchy Is Born, describes the Kingdom of Persia and more specifically, the person through whom God would fulfill these prophecies, Cyrus the Great, who helped the Jews return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. See the Scriptural fulfillment of those prophecies in Ezra 1:1-4 and II Chronicles 36:22-23. Jeremiah 29:10 states:

“This is what the Lord says; “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place.”

2. We see that God was merciful in giving extra benefits to the Jews through Cyrus as he let them return to Israel. They were to rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:4), return to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:5), and receive financial aid from the Jews who remained in Babylon (Ezra 1:4). Cyrus himself gave gold and silver (Ezra 1:7-11). In contrast, consider the Jewish people who left the former Soviet Union to migrate to Israel in the 1960's. They were not permitted to take any of their fortunes with them and were forced to pay exorbitant exit taxes to the Russian government. They were despised totally by the Russians who let them leave.
3. There were 42,360 Jews with servants who left Babylon to return to Israel (Ezra 2:64).
4. When the Jews returned to Jerusalem, they built an altar to offer sacrifices according to the Law of Moses first. Then they began to build the temple. When they were able to lay the foundation of the temple, they had a celebration. (See Ezra 3:1-13.)

## **B. TEMPLE CONSTRUCTION STOPPED BY ORDER OF A PERSIAN KING**

The completion of the temple foundation was met with the sound of trumpets and shouts of joy. (There was also weeping by the older priests and family heads, whose memory of the original temple and its loss probably brought contrition.) Looking in from the outside were the surrounding Gentile peoples living in Samaria who suddenly demanded a part in the fun. When the heads of Israel refused, they appealed to the Persian authority and had the building stopped. Read Ezra Chapter 4.

1. Who are these Persian Kings to whom the Samaritans appealed (Ezra 4:6-7)? The Persian Standard Version names Akhshurosh and Artahshasta while the Persian Commentary Version translates the names as Khashayarshah and Ardashir. Two schools of thought prevail:
  - a. The Persian Commentary translation maintain that these Gentile appeals to these two kings are out of chronological order, from a later time period than that covered in the rest Ezra 4. In this case, they would have been set in the text to show that the problems between the Jews and the Gentiles continued beyond the era of Darius. Therefore, the Persian Commentary translation used the names Khashayarshah and Ardashir in Ezra 4:6-7 would then match up with the same kings mentioned in Ezra 7-10, Nehemiah, and Esther.

- b. Others, myself included, however, believe the wording of the 1900 Persian Standard translation that the “Akhshurosh” of Ezra 4:6 refers to Cambyses, Cyrus’ son, and Artahshasta in Ezra 4:7-23 refers to Berooyeh Dorougi. Several reasons support this theory. First, it follows the chronological order of the kings. Second, the action taken by “Akhshurosh” in stopping the building of the temple is consistent with the character and political orientation of Pseudo Smerdis. Further, some historians believe that the names Akhshurosh and Artahshasta were general titles for kings, such as “Pharaoh” and “Shah” or “His Majesty” and that they were not specific names. (See Ezra and Nehemiah by C. Lyck, pages 28-31). For example, the birth name of the last king of Iran who was overthrown in 1978 was “Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.” However few, particularly in the West, knew him by any other name than “Shah,” which means “king” in Persian. There were hundreds of kings in Persian history from Cyrus to Mohammad Reza Pahlavi who were all called the “Shah.”
2. Why didn’t the Jews let the local Samaritan residents help them build the temple? Since the people who offered to help were not true worshipers of God, the Jews did not want to mix the truth with the false. Only God’s people could participate in building the temple, the place where they would worship God.
3. Unfortunately, King Cyrus died before the temple was built. When refused by the Jewish people to help build the temple, the Samaritans made accusations about the Jews to King Cambyses. Afterwards, they sent a slanderous letter of complaint about the Jews to King Berooyeh Dorougi (See 1b) asking that he stop the building of the temple. Berooyeh Dorougi possibly hoping to secure further political alliances, accepted the petition and revoked the decree of Cyrus to build the temple. Construction stopped. Imagine how discouraging it must have been to look day after day at a bare foundation and partial skeleton of the building of your God and yet have no hope of ever being allowed to finish. Review Ezra 4:17-24

### **C. COMPLETION OF THE WORK ON THE TEMPLE UNDER DARIUS.**

1. God brought hope with the prophet Haggai. Haggai 1:1 states, “In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest.” His entire book was written to encourage the Jewish people to complete the temple. Haggai 1:8 declares, “Are you living in fancy paneled houses while God’s house remains in ruins. You prosper like a hole in your pocket. You never seem to have much money. It never seems to meet all your needs. It is because you neglected God’s house.” Read the Book of Haggai as well as Ezra 5:1-2.
2. Once again, Israel’s enemies objected to the renewed construction of the temple and sent a report to the new king, Darius, hoping he would order a stop to the construction work. Instead, as we find recorded in Ezra 5:2 to 6:18, King Darius searched the archives of Cyrus’ records and found Cyrus’ original decree, which stated that the

Jewish people had permission to return to Israel, rebuild the temple, and receive funding from the king's funds. Consequently, the temple was finished thereafter. Darius' search was made in the city of Ecbatana (Persian Commentary translation), also known as Achmetha (Persian Standard translation), a city in west-central Iran which has the present-day name of Hamadan. Because of its cool climate Hamadan was the summer palace of the early kings. Not long after I arrived in Iran in 1962, my first daughter was born in Hamadan.)

#### **D. MAKE A PERSONAL APPLICATION**

1. Make a list of the spiritual lessons we can learn from the return of the Jews to Jerusalem, the rebuilding of the temple, and the opposition? Just as many godly Jewish people returned to their home country and Jerusalem, have you thought about returning to Iran to share the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ?
2. In Ezra 3:1-13 we learned that when the Jewish people returned to Jerusalem, they first built an altar to offer sacrifices. As a refugee going to a new country or starting a new job, how can you put spiritual things first?
3. We learned at the end of Ezra, chapter 4 that the Jewish people refused the help of the Gentiles in the building of the temple for the sake of purity, not wanting to mingle what was sacred with pagan influence. They paid a price for their decision. For what principles or beliefs would you be willing to pay a price?

#### **D. DIG DEEPER**

How do the complaints of the letters in Ezra 4:7-16 and Ezra 5:6-17 along with the replies in Ezra 4:17-22; 6:6-12 remind you of the Persian culture?

#### **E. FINAL THOUGHTS**

There is a span of 50 years between the last verses of Ezra 6 and the first verse of Ezra 7. During this time, the events in the Book of Esther took place. We see that God was working among the Jews who remained in Iran and Babylon after Cyrus' decree.

Hamadan (formerly Ecbatana in Bible times) claims to have the tombs of Esther and Mordecai. At the time of the Revolution in 1978 there were approximately 90,000 Jews in Iran, many of whom traced their roots to the Babylonian captivity. Even though many Jewish people fled the country during and after the Revolution in 1978, some remained. One estimate says there were 30,000 Jewish people in Iran in 2000.