

Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino, Judaism Before Jesus,

Session 3, The Persian Empire

© 2024 Tony Tomasino and Ted Hildebrandt

This is Tony Tomasino and his teaching on Judaism before Jesus. This is session 3, The Persian Empire.

When we get to the end of the Old Testament, we find that the Jews are part of the realm of a people known as the Persians.

Now, the Persians don't figure a lot in the Old Testament. They're not major players in most of Israel's history. You know, we know all about the Egyptians, we know all about the Babylonians and quite a bit about the Assyrians, but not so much about the Persians, because they're kind of distant foreign people.

Distant also in terms of their ethnicity. The Persians are part of a group of Indo-Aryan people who migrated into the Middle Eastern lands and sort of settled down there to stay. Oftentimes in the Bible, we hear about the Medes and the Persians in those books where they're mentioned.

For instance, in the book of Daniel, they talk about the Medes and the Persians as if they were a single group. And there's a reason for that. They were closely related to one another.

But chronologically speaking, the Medes precede the Persians. So, the kingdom of the Medes, as you can see from the map here, was really quite large and rivaled many of the other kingdoms of the day. The Medes arrived in Iran circa about 1500 BC.

We know this because of archaeological remains. Primarily, they were a nomadic people. So, horsemen, they loved their horses, and horses were actually an important part of their culture, and even important part of their religion.

But when they arrived and settled down and began to build a kingdom, really they begin to become players on the international scene around 836 BC. They are involved in, for instance, the downfall of the Assyrian Empire. And they were players in that whole event as well.

The tribes of the Medes and the other Indo-Aryan peoples that were settled in that region, really were united by a fellow by the name of Cyaxares. Now, these names are all put in kind of a Greek form because they've been preserved for us in Greek sources primarily. So, the original names, of course, are pronounced a little bit different from this.

But Cyaxares is kind of almost a mythological figure in the history of the Medes as far as his ability to organize and bring people together under his rule. And through him, an empire was created, an empire that really rivaled that of Babylon. And here we can see, as far as geographical area is concerned, the Median Empire was actually quite a bit bigger than the Babylonian Empire.

It didn't contain as many people because you have some major population areas down here in the Fertile Crescent region. And this area here is a lot of barren land. But there were a number of peoples that were united together under the Median Empire.

One of those peoples united under the Medians was the Persians. So, the Persians, like the Medians, came from the Indo-Aryan regions. Like them, they were original horse nomads.

And they settled down and began to found a kingdom. And that kingdom was conquered and became part of the Median Empire. They are really culturally indistinguishable from the Medes, except their language is a little bit different.

The Persian language, somewhat different from that of the Medes, their writing system a little bit different and so on. But as far as architecture, as far as some of their cultural characteristics and so on, they are pretty much the same. They were vassals of the Medes until 550 BC.

In 550, another fellow came along who would make a big change in that arrangement. And that was this fellow by the name of Cyrus, whom we know as Cyrus the Great. Now, Cyrus is known to us from a number of different sources.

The Greeks admired him greatly. And so, Herodotus, Ctesias, and Xenophon, who lived shortly after the time of Cyrus, all wrote about him. And then we have, in this case, a rare native work that talks about Cyrus and his work and his rule.

And this is a monumental inscription. We call it the Behistun inscription because it's located at Behistun, where it's found. The Behistun inscription was made by Darius, who was Cyrus's, not his immediate successor, but a couple of kings after him.

Darius told of Cyrus's reign and claimed a relationship with Cyrus. There are questions about whether or not he was actually related to Cyrus, but Darius justified his own rule by claiming that he and Cyrus were cousins. So, at any rate, this is a remarkable piece of work, this inscription.

Still some questions about how it was done because even the archaeologists who made the initial decipherments of this were swinging from ropes while they were

copying the characters. But the opening of the inscription here reads, I am Darius, the great king, king of kings, the king of Persia, the king of countries, the son of Hystaspes, the grandson of Arsames, the Achaemenid. And it's this term here, Achaemenid, which is kind of where he's claiming his relationship with Cyrus the Great because Cyrus was also claimed to be, not by Cyrus himself, but by his successors to be an Achaemenid.

So, back to Cyrus. Was he an Achaemenid? We really don't know. Now what I mean by Achaemenid is I mean a descendant of Achaemenes, who most of the kings of Persia claim descent from this fellow by the name of Achaemenes.

So, we call it the Achaemenid Empire, or the Achaemenid dynasty. Cyrus may or may not have actually been a part of that dynasty, but Darius and his successors claimed he was, and perhaps as a way of justifying their own rule. He became king of Persia in 560 BC.

He proved himself to be very apt in battle and managed to expand his own holdings. His work and putting down some of the kingdoms around the Median Empire very much impressed the emperor of the Medes. And King Astyages decided that the best way to deal with a man like Cyrus was to make him part of the family.

Because, you know, if you've got a man with a lot of ambition and ability, well, you want to make sure that he's on your side. And so Astyages married Cyrus off to his own daughter, thinking that that would keep him in line. Well, he was wrong.

Because in 555 BC, Cyrus revolted against Astyages, and displaced him, and took him from the rulership of the empire, and changed the Median Empire into a Persian Empire. Now, what happened to Cyrus's father-in-law? Well, he remained king. Actually, in 550 BC, when the conquest was completed, Cyrus became the emperor, and Astyages became one of his client kings.

This was really kind of one of his major modes of operation is whenever he could arrange it, he kept the local rulers in their positions, just trying to win over their loyalty rather than trying to displace them, or crush them, or whatever. So, when he conquers Lydia in 547 BC, he manages to maintain this policy of tolerance and this policy of keeping the locals in line by changing as little as possible. Now, of course, these people have to pay their taxes and their tribute, that's typical of an empire, but for the most part, they found that life under the Persians didn't change in any real drastic ways.

Now, it was quite a while after the founding and the expansion of the Persian Empire before he turned his attention to Babylon. And the Babylonians were getting quite nervous, because Cyrus was going about and expanding by the conquest of these various kingdoms, and nations, and territories around them, but they were leaving

Babylon alone for the most part. But, all this time, Cyrus was conducting a different kind of war.

He was conducting a, what we might call a propaganda war. Cyrus was, in a sense, a master of propaganda. He had announced to the Babylonians, through his messengers, that he was coming there not as a conqueror but as a liberator.

He portrayed himself as the friend of the gods. We really don't know what Cyrus's religion was, by the way. We assume that it was probably this kind of typical Iranian polytheism that was pretty prominent before the rise of Zoroastrianism, which I will get to in a minute.

But, one of the things that helped Cyrus out here was the great unpopularity of the last king of Babylon, who was a fellow by the name of Nabonidus. Now, here's the real problem with Nabonidus. You've got this ambitious, competent king who's conquering everything all around you, and what does Nabonidus do? He takes a vacation.

We really don't know where Nabonidus was when Cyrus actually conquered Babylon. But what we do know is that Nabonidus had pretty much managed to make everybody angry with him before he left. The main reason was because he was a religious reformer.

The chief god of Babylon was a fellow by the name of Marduk. By the time we get to the Old Testament, not to be confused with Marmaduke, by the way, that's a big dog in the comics. However, Marduk was a storm god, and by the time of Cyrus, most of the Babylonian religious texts identified Marduk as the epitome of all gods.

It's really kind of remarkable reading some of the texts from this period because it's almost bordering and kind of almost monotheism with their devotion toward Marduk as being the epitome of all the other Greek Babylonian gods. But Nabonidus isn't having that. Nabonidus, instead of being devoted to the god Marduk, who has been traditionally the god of the Babylonian peoples, throws himself to worship the moon goddess, Sin.

He begins to disenfranchise the temples of Marduk, and he begins to throw money into the temples of the moon goddess. Now, this, of course, was great for the people who were the devotees of the moon goddess but not so great for the common people who loved Marduk. You can imagine what it would be like if the president of the United States were to announce, from now on, we're going to be Buddhists in this country.

Buddhism is the religion of the United States. And, doggone it, we're going to give Buddhists all kinds of tax breaks, and everybody else is going to have to start paying their fair share. And that's kind of like what happened in Babylon with Nabonidus.

And so, Cyrus made friends with the priests of Marduk, and he told them what a shame it was that their god was being neglected, and that the people's religion was being trampled underfoot by Nabonidus. And so, he portrays himself as essentially the great liberator. He is going to liberate the people of Babylon from the incompetence and the apostasy of Nabonidus.

Interesting, of course, the word also got out to Judah because in the book of Isaiah, in Isaiah chapter 45, we read about Cyrus, who is going to be the great deliverer anointed by the Lord to bring the people of Judah out of their captivity as well. But, Cyrus had a dream, and he records this in one of his texts, where he says that the god Marduk appeared to him in his dream and said, please come and rescue my people from this impious imposter Nabonidus. Please come and set them free and restore me, Marduk, to my proper place.

So, October 29, 539 BC, Cyrus marched into Babylon. We don't know how exactly this happened. There are possibilities.

One account says that he diverted a river and that by diverting the river, he managed to enter Babylon. And this was questioned quite a bit because it was thought that the rivers were too deep, but recent excavations have actually shown that it may have been possible that the river that went under the gates of Babylon and through the city was actually about 12 feet deep, and that in certain areas, it would have been possible to actually ford that river and maybe to cut off the waters. So, that's one possibility.

Another possibility is he had help on the inside because we certainly wouldn't put it past the priests of Marduk to have opened the gates and just kind of left them open, you know. Oh, gee, did we forget to lock that gate? Wow, dear us, you know. But at any rate, Babylon was taken with very little bloodshed and hailed Cyrus as, again, their liberator.

This is a text called the Cyrus Cylinder, and it was found and has been deciphered, and his words are recorded by the people of Babylon. He says I am Cyrus, the king of the globe, the great king, the mighty king, the king of Babylon, the king of the lands of Sumer and Akkad, king of the something, four-quarters of the earth, the son of Cambyses, the great king, king of Anshan, grandson of Cyrus, the great king, king of Anshan, descendant of Thespis, the great king, king of Anshan, progeny of an unending royal line. One thing you notice here is that he doesn't mention anything about Achaemenes.

So, you know, okay. But anyway, whose rule the gods Bel, that's Marduk, and Nabu, another traditional Babylonian god, cherish, whose kingship they desire for their hearts and pleasures. When I well-disposed entered Babylon, I had established a seat of government in the royal palace of the ruler amidst jubilation and rejoicing, probably not really an exaggeration.

Marduk, the great god, induced the magnanimous inhabitants of Babylon to love me. And I sought daily to worship him when my numerous soldiers and great numbers peacefully entered Babylon and moved about undisturbed in the midst of Babylon. I did not allow anyone to terrorize the peoples of the land of Sumer and Akkad.

This really was Cyrus's policy throughout. He did not allow his soldiers, really, to terrorize native inhabitants. He portrayed himself as a friend of all the gods, as somebody who would go about and do good.

And he gave a lot of money to a lot of temples. So in this way, he won the hearts of the priests. And winning the hearts of the priests, oftentimes, of course, the people followed.

As to the inhabitants of Babylon, who, against the will of the gods, were enslaved, I abolished the corvée, which was against their social standing. I freed all slaves. What a guy, you know? I brought relief to their dilapidated housing, putting thus an end to their misfortunes and slavery.

Marduk, the great lord, was well pleased with my deeds and rejoiced. And to me, Cyrus, the king who worshipped him, and to Cambyses, my son, the offspring of my loins, and to my troops, he graciously gave his blessings. And in good spirit before him, we stood peacefully and praised him joyously.

So that's Cyrus describing himself and his own attitudes. Cyrus managed to spread his empire throughout pretty much almost all of the ancient Near East, up through Asia Minor, Turkey, and of course, down into the lands of Israel, all the way down pretty much basically to the borders of Egypt. He did not conquer Egypt, but spread through quite a while.

He remained popular with his subjects throughout his entire life. A lot of this had to do with the fact that he was a benefactor of the native cults and the native peoples. He put money into rebuilding projects.

He was undoubtedly instrumental in the initial rebuilding of Jerusalem when he sent the captives home. He employed policies of both religious and cultural tolerance, which was remarkable in those days—not as remarkable as we might think.

Fact is, we hear the stories in the Bible of Nebuchadnezzar the Great setting up a golden image and forcing all people to worship the golden image and so on. Really, that kind of thing was rare in the ancient world, but Cyrus took tolerance to a new level. And in fact, as I say, he displayed himself as being a friend of the gods.

Cyrus was not a great organizer. Now, he really held his empire together by the force of his own charisma. And so he didn't build the structures that would assure its continued success.

That would go to another king to do that. We really don't know precisely when he died. We really don't know how he died.

Most believe he died in 530 in battle against a group called the Scythians, who were kind of a northern people who were very, well, again, very warlike and caused a lot of trouble on the northern borders of the empire. But Cyrus's tomb was actually very simple and unadorned for somebody who had accomplished as much as he had accomplished. You would have thought he would have some kind of a great, some kind of monument that would really catch the eye and be imposing.

But no, it was really quite simple. According to the Greek records, there was a rather simple inscription that said something to the effect of, here lies Cyrus; I conquered the world, so please don't begrudge me, my little monument here. And really, it was kind of a rather small and modest monument.

And for such a great man, kind of a fitting, simple tribute. So, what did Cyrus do for the Jews? Well, in Isaiah 45, he's described as the anointed of the Lord, God's chosen deliverer. And in that same chapter of the book of Isaiah, it says, even though you do not know me, I have held your hand, and I am going to lead you and give you success.

So, the Lord acknowledges that Cyrus was not a Yahwist. He was not a worshiper of the Lord. And yet God blessed his work because he was doing the work of the Lord.

His policies allowed the Jewish captives from Babylon to return to Jerusalem. The original wave of the repatriates was probably pretty small. But even so, this began to lay the foundation for rebuilding the land of Judah and particularly the city of Jerusalem.

Very likely, he had intentions of rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem and had provided funding and personnel to do that. But it was not completed in his lifetime. And we don't know why not, frankly.

It's kind of a strange sort of mystery. So Shesh Bazar, who was sent, was a member of the royal family. And no doubt, when Shesh Bazar arrived in Jerusalem, there was a

sense among the people that the days of glory were about to be restored and that the royal line of David was going to come back and they were going to be a kingdom again.

But it didn't happen. Shesh Bazar kind of just disappears. And the temple is not completed in his reign and not completed until really quite a bit later.

Again, very likely, Cyrus provided state funds for the rebuilding of Jerusalem. However, perhaps the most important thing is that he made opportunities available for the Jewish people to begin to form a nation again and to see themselves as a people again who had hope and a future. One of the things we should bear in mind about this period, though, is that all things did not go smoothly when you had this influx of people coming back from Babylon.

You think about what happened here. So, 587, 586 BC, Babylonians conquered Jerusalem. They destroy much of the city.

They destroy the city wall and many of the buildings. They destroy the temple. They take away all the rich and wealthy and influential people and carry them off to Babylon.

Well, Jerusalem was a city that, at that point, had a number of suburbs, particularly people who had moved into that region to escape from the depredations of the armies and so on. When the city of Jerusalem was suddenly depopulated, it didn't sit there empty. A lot of those people who had been living in the areas around the city then moved into Jerusalem and settled down in those houses and into those lands and places that had been formerly owned by some very wealthy people.

Well, now those people are coming back to Jerusalem and saying, we want our houses back. There was a lot of tension, a lot of social upheaval, and disturbance in Jerusalem at that time. And this is the beginning of that friction between the people that were considered to be the wise ones, the good ones, the observant ones of the Jews and the people of the land.

A number of remarkable things happened here. One of the things that happened is when these people had been up here in Babylon, they had been acculturated to some extent. Now I've talked a little bit already about how they kind of drew in their ranks and looked at one another for support.

And they're way out there in a foreign land. They're trying to preserve their identity and they're building these structures to make sure they maintain their identity. But on the other hand, they got to live in that place.

So, what do they do? They begin to adopt the language of the people up there. Aramaic becomes the language of the people who are educated, the people who are wealthy. Now they come back down to Jerusalem where Hebrew is still being spoken among the lower classes.

So, you got this kind of strange bifurcation already. You can tell who are the upper class people versus who are the lower class people by the language they speak. And remarkably, it's the lower-class people who are speaking Hebrew, not the upper-class people.

Hebrew eventually became like the scholar's language. But Hebrew continued to be a living language for quite a while. Even up until the time of Jesus, we can see that Hebrew was a spoken language still in that day in the marketplace because we have bilingual inscriptions from things like balsam jars and things of this sort from that period.

So, the Hebrew language continued on, but Hebrew itself kind of had this bifurcation between the language of the common people, a kind of vulgar Hebrew, and then the language of the scholars, which eventually would become what we call the Mishnaic Hebrew. But that's a different story. So again, under Cyrus, very likely the rebuilding of the temple started.

But for some reason, it screeched to a halt and would not be taken up again for some time. Now, after the days of Cyrus, we have almost the opposite, a state of affairs with his son Cambyses. Cambyses does not have a long reign.

He reigned for several years, but Cyrus had named him his successor. We saw him named there in the Cyrus cylinder as his favored son. And he had been named to take over after Cyrus's death.

It's possible that Cambyses killed his own brother in order to secure his place to the throne. This, again, could be part of Greek propaganda. We don't know.

But according to the story, he had a brother by the name of Bardia who was killed by Cambyses as a way of making sure that there would be no rivals. This Cambyses is also known by the name Smerdis, which is kind of funky. But from the accounts that we read, this Smerdis is also known as Pseudo-Smerdis because apparently this fellow took the place of Cambyses' brother, a fellow by the name of, well, Smerdis, who just happened to look just like Cambyses' brother.

I don't know. But at any rate, so that's the story. Here we have it.

Cambyses becomes king. He apparently kills his brother. And then apparently this other guy, Smerdis, says, hey, I'm Cambyses' brother, Bardia.

I should be king. Well, Cambyses decides he's going to add Egypt to the Persian realm. And he marches down to Egypt.

And in 525 BC, he conquers Egypt. He is declared the pharaoh of Egypt. Now, interestingly enough, unlike Cyrus, Cambyses had a rather intolerant attitude, particularly toward Egyptian religion.

The Egyptians had this bull called the Apis Bull. The Apis Bull, let me pause here for a minute. The Apis Bull was believed by the Egyptians to be an incarnation of the god Ra, the sun god.

And so every time the bull dies, they embalm the bull. And then a new bull would take its place, which would be a new incarnation of the sun god. Well, the story goes that when Cambyses was in Egypt, for some reason, he took it upon himself to kill this bull.

And, of course, that did not at all ingratiate himself to the Egyptians. So, did he do this? We don't know. All we know is the Greeks love to tell the story.

Well, while Cambyses is in Egypt, this fellow Bardiya or Smerdis or whoever he is, decides that he is going to declare himself to be the king, the rightful king of the Persian Empire. And so, while all these people are confused because this fellow bears a striking resemblance to Cambyses' brother, well, Cambyses down in Egypt is kind of unable to really do anything about it. Now, how does Bardiya ingratiate himself to the people? Well, he immediately declares a tax holiday.

Guess what? I'm king now. Nobody has to pay taxes. Well, gee.

So suddenly, he's become very, very popular with the people. Well, Cambyses knows he can't let this pass. So, he begins to hurry back toward Persia.

He dies on the way to Persia. Now, a lot of people think he committed suicide because they think that his crime of murdering his brother had been exposed. They're saying that maybe this Bardiya actually was his brother.

Again, all kinds of mysteries regarding this. Herodotus, the way he tells the story, is that it was an accident, but a divinely appointed accident, that he was mounting his horse, and his sword somehow managed to stab him in the very same place where he had stabbed the Apis bull. And so, it was divine retribution that he died, according to Herodotus.

We don't know how he died. We don't know why he died. We know he died.

And so, we have this fellow up in Persia calling himself the brother of Cambyses. And we have some other people, some Persian noblemen who don't like the fellow. And particularly here, we're talking about Darius the Great, who tells us why and how he had to depose the king of the lie, this Bardiya, this pseudo brother, with the help of some noble people.

It is a wonderful story, the way that Herodotus tells it, and the Behistun inscription also tells us something about the story. What we can say is that he united seven great noble princes against Bardiya, and they formed a pact that they would then depose Bardiya, and then they would choose among themselves who would be the successor to the kingship. Darius claims to be the cousin of Cyrus the Great, which would seem to give him actual cred to be the new king.

But the way he becomes king doesn't really have anything to do with his lineage so much. And we'll get to that story in a moment here. But what we found is that once we have united the seven princes... Take a moment to tell this story here.

According to the account given by Herodotus, the seven noble princes decided to have a contest for who would become the new emperor of the Persian Empire. And they decided to do so by using their horses. And the man whose horse was the first to emerge from its stall in the morning would become the king of the Persian Empire.

It doesn't exactly sound like the best way to choose an emperor, really. But in a sense, it kind of has a sort of ring of authenticity because of the fact that we know that the Persians were really kind of hung up on their horses and viewed their horses as kind of like extensions of the divinity and this kind of thing. But at any rate, Darius's horse managed to emerge first by some very clever machinations from his groom.

And so Darius becomes the king of the Persian Empire. Now, the people of Persia and many of the territories they had conquered were not cool with this. They liked having tax holidays.

But Darius immediately finds himself with a series of revolts on his hands. And so, he has to put these down. He also finds that several Greek colonies in Asia Minor have decided to assert their independence at this time.

And he manages to knuckle them under the power of the Persians as well. Yet another addition to his kingdom, Macedon and Thrace cross into the realm of the Greek peoples. He managed to add these realms to his kingdom as well.

So, by the time he's done, Darius has managed to amass a mighty big kingdom. Some of the things that he did are recorded in the Behistun inscription. But other things we

find from other sources because even some of the Greek historians were really impressed by Darius.

One of the things he did was he standardized coinage. He created a coin called the derrick. You know, name it after yourself.

Well, he invented the thing, so why not? But a single coin could be used throughout the entire Persian Empire. This was the first time anybody had thought of doing something like this. So, it was a pretty amazing kind of accomplishment that would be followed and copied by a lot of people afterward.

Another thing he did, he reorganized the empire into 20, what we call satrapies, or what we might call regions or administrative districts. And over each one of these, he placed a governor. And the governor was a native of that realm, of that region.

So, they were reporting, the people were reporting to somebody who looked like them, who talked their language, who knew their culture. And then these heads of the satraps, the satraps reported then, of course, directly to the king. He created the first postal system.

Before the time of Darius, if people wanted to get messages from one place to another, they generally had a very difficult time bringing the word because you have to go through several different channels and so on. Well, Darius created a system using writers that would go from one place to another so that a message could be taken from one portion of the empire to its furthest reaches in actually very little time. Sound familiar? This was the model for the Pony Express that was used in the United States for a very short time because it was soon replaced by the telegraph.

But at any rate, the Pony Express was literally modeled after Darius's postal system. Herodotus recorded something about the motto that the writers used, which was adopted by the U.S. postal system. You might remember, if you're old enough, neither rain nor snow nor dark of night shall keep these couriers from their appointed rounds.

He also fixed the ratio of the value of gold to silver, which was a remarkable achievement because it meant that everybody knew how much their money was worth. Coinage, the fixing of the standardization of gold and silver values, all these things put the empire on a very firm financial basis. He codified law codes.

And this is one of Darius's accomplishments that really figures prominently for the Jews. So here you've got this huge empire stretching way up from India all the way down to Egypt. Maybe a hundred different ethnic groups there.

Many of them had their own laws. Many of them had their own customs. And Darius, for the most part, was okay with letting people have their own laws and their own customs, for the most part.

However, he wanted those laws and those customs codified. He wanted them standardized. So, for instance, let's take the Jews here as a great example.

You've got Jews living in Judea. You've got Jews living in Persia. You've got Jews living in Egypt.

Now, let's say a Jew living in Persia says, Well, you know, I can't work on Saturday, Sunday, or Monday, because those are my Sabbath days. It says so right in my laws, doggone it. Whereas, you know, the Jews in Judea are saying, No, it's just Saturday.

So how is Darius to know what are the laws of the Jews? Well, he wanted all those laws codified. And he wanted those standardized. And this would become a policy throughout the Persian empire.

And we're going to see this later on, where this is going to play again. But because of that policy, the laws of the Jews became a much more homogeneous set of actions. You would know what a Jew was in Persia.

You would know what a Jew was in Judea. You'd know what a Jew was in Egypt, because they all obeyed the same laws. And that, of course, is just one people, because there were other peoples as well, many other peoples.

He had some basic laws that all peoples were to understand and respect. You know, you got to pay your taxes. You don't go killing your neighbors.

You're not allowed to invade the neighboring community or anything of that sort. But at the same time, he was willing to allow people to do their own thing as long as it was clear what their own thing was. And another thing, too, is that just like Cyrus, he built a lot of palaces and a lot of temples.

So, Darius might have taken the kingship under some sort of shady circumstances, but boy, he put the Persian Empire on some really solid foundations, and his accomplishments would be really copied by many of the emperors to come. So particularly some of the things that he did for the Jews, one of the things was he was the guy who sent Zerubbabel to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. Zerubbabel was a descendant of King David.

And again, the presence of this man in Jerusalem was very much an occasion for rejoicing. And we have the prophets like Zechariah and others who are excited about the presence of Zerubbabel. And we have that wonderful verse that people like to

quote out of context, you know, not by not might, not by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord.

Well, read the whole thing. Those words are directed to Zerubbabel. Not by not might, not by power, but by my spirit shall this temple be built, says the Lord God.

And he says that there's a road rough in front of you, Zerubbabel. I will make that road a plain. Now, the temple has been rebuilt in that time frame.

It's kind of strange, though, because Zerubbabel is gone when the temple is completed. We don't know what happened to Zerubbabel. Very similar to what the situation with Sheshbazar, who had come before.

He just kind of seems to disappear from the story. So we don't know. We know that he laid the foundations of the temple.

We know that he was involved in its founding under the patronage of Darius. But apparently, he was not responsible for completing it. So, it's kind of a mystery.

So, it was under Darius, though, and in his time that the temple was completed, 515 BC. He encouraged the standardization of the Jewish laws as part of his whole process of standardization. It might have been his work and his policies that encouraged the canonization of the scriptures.

Now, it's going to be a little later that a fellow by the name of Ezra is going to come. And usually, people point to Ezra as being responsible for creating kind of like the first Bible. But certainly Ezra, I think, is the beneficiary of a process that started in the days of King Darius.

He encouraged the spread of Jews throughout the empire. How did he do that? Well, simply by making it safe and creating opportunities. It was safe for Jews to go to Persia.

It was safe for them to go to Asia Minor. It was safe for them to go down to Egypt. In any place throughout the empire of Darius, travel was fairly secure.

There was not a lot of worry about being accosted or being harassed because of your national origin, because everybody's part of the Persian empire. And so, a kind of a nationalism about being part of Persia at that time. And you might even say some positive feelings about it.

Now, one of the big events and one of the big episodes in the history of the world is the first clash between the East and the West, the Persian Wars. So, you can see in

this map here, along this coast here are a number of little red spots. And those are all Greek colonies, colonies that were established by the Greeks in Asia Minor.

But you also see from this big orange here that all those little Greek colonies are in the Persian empire. And the Greeks felt that the Persians, well, the Greeks felt that it was wrong for the Persians to be dominating Greeks because the Greeks were very ethnocentric people. You know, everybody else is a barbarian if you're not a Greek.

Well, everybody in those days was ethnocentric, but the Greeks were more so. Right? Anyway, the Persian Wars really began with the revolt of Miletus, which is, I believe, right down here, a little bit hard to see, but I believe it's down there. Miletus revolted against the Persian empire in 500 BC.

And the Persians, of course, put down the rebellion, and that made the Greeks mad. Because according to their way of thinking, Greeks had a right to be free from barbarian rule. And there was a certain amount of ruthlessness involved in the suppression of this revolt as well.

Darius decides he's going to expand his realm into the Greek lands. In 492 BC, he sent fleets into Greece, and he had to reestablish his control of these realms up here, Thrace and Macedon, because they had managed to break free from Persian rule for a while. In the process, however, he found that those waters could be very treacherous.

And in fact, the Persians were going to find a number of times that these waters could be very treacherous. And he lost many of his ships that were smashed on the rocks. One of the most famous battles of the struggle is the Battle of Marathon.

Marathon is down here in this area. And what happened here was that the Persian troops and the Greek troops were fighting actually in the Greek mainland. And the Persians were defeated soundly by the Greeks.

And what happened is, according to the legend, a runner ran from Marathon all the way down to Athens to report the news of the victory. And once he finished his race and said, we won, he promptly died. Well, 26 miles from Marathon to Athens.

And so that, of course, has given us the name of the 26-mile race called the Marathon, which still claims many a victim to this day. Well, maybe not. But anyway, in 487, Egypt revolted against the Persian Empire.

So, the Greeks have to go down, or the Persians, rather, have to go down and take care of putting down the rebellion of the Egyptians. And so, they have to break off their wars against the Greeks at that time. And so that ends the first set of Persian wars.

486 BC, Darius died of some kind of illness. We're not really sure what. Very likely natural causes.

He was getting to be a pretty old man by this point. But, you know, everybody's always speculating that maybe he was poisoned or something of that sort. But even so, what we can say is that when he passed away, the Persian Empire was strong and was set up for a long history of profitable and, I would say, orderly reign.

Unfortunately, that would not be because some of his successors were incompetent. But that's a little bit further down the road here. So, one of the questions that people often wonder about is, why was it that small Greek armies could defeat much, much larger Persian armies? How could this happen? Well, part of it is exaggeration.

Almost certainly, the Greek armies were not outnumbered 10 to 1 by Persian soldiers, but somehow, they managed to overcome them all. But there's no question that the Greek armies were able to conquer oftentimes much larger Persian forces. And there are a number of reasons for that.

One of the reasons was because of simply the kind of armament that the soldiers used. Persian cavalry typically did not wear armor. Greeks, on the other hand, tended to be fairly heavily armored.

And they used these lovely shields and these long swords and these nice long spears. Another thing, too, was that the Greeks tended to be very well-trained, battle-hardened veterans. The reason why is that the Greeks were always fighting each other.

The only thing the Greeks hated more than each other was foreigners. But the Athenians hated the Spartans. The Spartans hated the Athenians.

They both hated the Thebans. They hated the Corinthians. Everybody hated each other up there.

They were constantly fighting. And everybody was constantly training for battle. Everybody was training for war.

It was considered to be one of the greatest, and pretty much the only thing for a real man to do was to become a warrior in Greece. Well, not so much in Persia. Persians were kind of laid-back.

The fact is, most of their army consisted of conscripts, people hired as mercenaries. So, they were fighting for different kinds of things as well. You've got the Greeks who are fighting for their national pride, to protect their Greek superiority.

And the Persian armies are fighting for money. So, with those different kinds of motivations, as well as different kinds of training, and finally different kinds of tactics, one of the things that we'll talk about a little later is the use of the phalanx, which was a remarkably efficient battle technique. The Greeks were able to stave off and oftentimes conquer much larger forces.

So, after Darius dies, he is succeeded by a fellow by the name of Xerxes. And Xerxes has become famous from the "300" movie, and his depiction there as claiming to be a god and all that kind of thing. Xerxes never claimed to be a god.

Persian kings didn't claim to be gods. That's, yeah, that's actually more of a Greek thing, to tell you the truth. But at any rate, Xerxes reigned for 20 years, from 485 to 465 BC.

This is very likely a picture of him that, we didn't have a lot of good pictures of Xerxes. A lot of the pictures were later lost in various ways. But he was a son of Darius, and of a woman by the name of Atossa, who was a daughter of Cyrus the Great.

So, he's actually got a much stronger claim to the throne than his father did. But his first order of business, once he becomes king, is to quell those revolts in Egypt. And then the Babylonians revolted as well.

Now, here's where we find that Xerxes is a different kind of man than either his grandfather Cyrus or than his father Darius. A much more ruthless fellow in his way. Now, in Babylon, not only did he put down the revolt kind of ruthlessly, and was known for slaughtering a lot of people, but he took the statue of Bel, or Marduk, the main god of the Egyptians, and he melted it down to slag, as a way of totally humiliating the people of Babylon.

Now remember, of course, Cyrus the Great had this wonderful dream about how Marduk had called him and taken him by the hand and led him into Babylon. And now here we have Xerxes melting down his statue. He did his first invasion of Greece in 480 BC, from 480 to 479.

He's kind of famous for this wonderful battle of the Thermopylae Pass. And this one has been romanticized and idealized, but essentially the story is Xerxes' Persian troops are marching inland, heading toward Athens. And the Athenians needed to evacuate their people, because they were afraid of all the horrible things that would be done to their people by these wicked Persians.

So as the Athenians were evacuating their people, a troop of Spartans, 300 Spartan soldiers, decided to head them off at the pass, the Thermopylae Pass. And according

to the story, for several days they managed to hold them off until the Athenians had managed to evacuate their city. Every Spartan died in battle except one.

And he was so ashamed that he did not die that he killed himself. Yes, that is the story according to the Greeks. And we will, you know, take that again with a bit of a grain of salt.

According to the Greeks, when Xerxes reached Athens, he destroyed the city, plundered it, made a total disaster, and burned all the great cities to the ground.

Once again, this is according to the Greeks. And once again, we take this with a grain of salt. And part of the reason why is because there is no archaeological evidence that this was ever actually done, right? Here's one of the good uses of archaeology, you know.

There is no evidence that he actually burned Athens to the ground. And it just seems kind of out of character for the Persians to have been given to wanton destruction. Except, of course, to idols of Marduk, of people who were rebelling against them.

Eventually, once again, they had to withdraw. There was a battle, a naval battle at Salamis. And this turned into a disaster for the Persians.

It's the way that the story is told. The Greeks had smaller ships than the Persian ships. The Persian ships were very large and not very maneuverable.

And the Persians managed to lure the Greek fleet into an area of shallow waters and a place that was hard to navigate. And then the Greeks just kind of closed a pincer on them. Almost annihilated their fleet.

And I believe that there are wonderful stories that the Greeks tell about these things again. But one of the stories is told is that one of the few heroes of this naval battle was a female commander of one of the Persian ships. And Xerxes despaired and said, my women have become men and my men have become women.

At any rate, so Xerxes was forced to return to the east because the Babylonians revolted again. I wonder why. Could it be something having to do with maybe the fact that he melted down the statue of their god? Maybe.

But anyway, the remaining forces in Persia and the remaining Persian forces in Greece were defeated at the Battle of Plataea, which is remarkable because it really doesn't get a lot of airplay. You know, nobody's made any big movies about Plataea or anything. No comic books or anything of the sort.

And even the Greeks didn't seem to attach very much importance to it. But really this battle kind of signaled the turning of the tide. Because the slaughter of the Persian forces there at Plataea pretty much was the death knell of Persian incursions into Greece.

Another example of Xerxes we might call intolerance, I would call it more an example of his piety, was the daiva inscription. Daiva is an Indo-Aryan word, a Persian word. It's related probably to the word deus, which means, you know, God.

But it refers to a divine spirit. And to the Zoroastrians, daiva were demons. Now, Zoroastrianism, we're going to talk about that in a little bit.

But Zoroastrianism, by the time of Xerxes, had become the major religion of the Persian Empire. And Zoroastrianism, for the most part, was a very tolerant religion. But they had their limits.

And worshipping demons, as they considered them, was one of those limits. And so we have this wonderful inscription from King Xerxes where he says, when I became king, there was among these countries one that was in rebellion. Ahura Mazda, that's the great god of the Zoroastrians, bore me aid.

By the grace of Ahura Mazda, I smote that country and put it down in its place. And among these countries, there was a place where previously demons, daiva, were worshipped. Afterward, by the grace of Ahura Mazda, I destroyed that sanctuary of demons.

And I proclaimed the demons shall not be worshipped. Wow, religious interference there, huh? Where previously the demons were worshipped, there I worshipped Ahura Mazda at the proper time and in the proper manner. And there was other business that had been done ill that I made good.

That which I did, all I did by the grace of Ahura Mazda. Ahura Mazda bore me aid until I completed the work. So here we are, seeing the limits of Persian toleration.

Worshipping gods, you know, and they tended to think of the main gods of other nations as being different manifestations of Ahura Mazda. So, they got along pretty well with the Jews, which was kind of interesting. And we'll get into that a little bit more later.

But the beings that they had considered demons under the Zoroastrian religion would not tolerate the worship of those spirits. Some other things that Xerxes accomplished. Well, Xerxes was married to a woman by the name of Amestris, the daughter of Otanes, who was one of the seven noblemen who were responsible for putting Darius into office as the emperor.

Amestris, I might add, was not somebody you would want to be married to. She was truly one of the great shrews of history. And among her many accomplishments, we might say, was when she found out that her husband had had an affair, which, you know, was kind of common for those days in their way.

She had the mother of the woman with whom she had had the affair mutilated and cut off her nose and her breast and just had her totally mutilated and sent her out in public like this as a shame, as a message to her husband not to do this kind of thing again. And also as a way of just simply showing her dominance over the other noble families, because this was not the way you treated noble people in Persia, you know. Later on, we're told that near the end of her life, in order to preserve her spirit for the afterlife when she knew she was getting close to death, she had a bunch of noble young men buried upside down in the earth as an offering to the gods of the underworld.

Now, that doesn't sound like a Zoroastrian. But at any rate, and this might be Greek propaganda, who knows. But at any rate, everybody thought that this was a very scary woman, not the kind of lady you wanted to mess with.

Another thing he did was build the gate of all nations and the hall of 100 columns at Persepolis. Persepolis was one of the great cities of the ancient world, and Xerxes was responsible for a number of the building projects that made it so spectacular. He completed the Apadana, the palace of Darius, and the treasury, which had been started by Darius but hadn't been finished by him.

He built his own palace, twice the size of his father's, of course, you know. He was assassinated in 465 BC by a fellow by the name of Artabanus, who was the commander of the royal bodyguard, which was probably the most powerful position in the court at that time, with the help of a royal eunuch. And this is one of the things that's going to become a theme in Persia from this time forward, is the role of these royal eunuchs.

Because these guys are powerful and influential and dangerous, because it seems they have nothing to lose. But one of the other things, of course, that's important about Xerxes, particularly for the Jews, is that the story of Esther is set during the reign of Xerxes. Now, I have to say it is very difficult to reconcile historically the story of Esther with what we know about Persian history.

A number of scholars have tried, and a number of the problems have been solved. But I think the one problem that hasn't been solved is the fact that, according to several different historians, the wife of Xerxes was this nasty lady named Amestris, not the Jew Esther. So until somebody comes up with some clever solution to that problem, we have to say that the question of whether or not Esther should be

regarded as history, or rather as maybe more of a parable, should remain an open question.

Artaxerxes reigned 465 to 424 BC, a rather long reign, actually. He's the son of Xerxes and Amestris, and he took over when Xerxes was assassinated. By this point, I think the Persians were sick of the Greeks.

They decided that trying to pursue any sort of conquest of Greece was out of the question. So, instead of attacking Greece directly, Artaxerxes gave a lot of money to various little kingdoms and realms that were rebelling against the Greeks. Boy, this sounds familiar to anybody who knows anything about modern politics, but essentially they could claim, oh, it wasn't us, really, seriously, we didn't have anything to do with it, you know? And it's like, well, why do these spears have made in Persepolis printed on the side, you know? So yeah, the Persians were encouraging people to rebel against Greek rule, but not doing it themselves.

He did sign a treaty with Athens and Argos in 449 BC, basically saying, we won't bother you and you don't bother us. At this point, we know that Zoroastrianism was very clearly the religion of the Persian Empire, the religion of the state. And this was actually good for the Jews, not so good for people who had worshipped the daiva, the things that people regarded as demons.

But for the Jews, it worked out pretty well, because, as we're going to talk about next lecture, there were a lot of similarities between Zoroastrianism and Judaism, which made the religions, in a way, very compatible. And so there was a lot of basis for dialogue there. And one of the big things, of course, that he did for the Jews was he commissioned the work of both Ezra and Nehemiah.

Ezra went to Judah at this time, and of course, his story's in the Bible, so we don't have to go through it in any detail. But Ezra went with the job, essentially, of bringing the laws of Moses to the people of Jerusalem. And one of the things that kind of is remarkable as you read through the book of Esther, seeing that as Ezra stood before the people and read the laws of Moses, and it says the people wept and tore their garments because they said, we didn't know these things.

Like, you wonder, well, how could they not have known it? Maybe the Bible wasn't sitting on everybody's bookshelf in those days. So yeah, and not only some people have claimed, you know, that's just the book of Ezra. How can we trust it? Well, we actually have some archaeological evidence that backs up some of these claims, and we're going to talk about that in a little bit.

Nehemiah, of course, is responsible for rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. And as I talked about earlier, that, of course, was considered essential. We know that the neighbors of Judea, Judah at that time, or Yehud, as it was known during that Persian

period, the neighbors of Yehud did not want that wall rebuilt because it would mean that the city of Jerusalem was rising again.

It was becoming a city. It was becoming defensible. It was becoming a place where people could take pride in who they were and where they lived.

So, there was much opposition, but under Artaxerxes, the Jews were given the resources they needed to be able to complete that wall. So, after the time of Artaxerxes, we entered into what was called the cultural phase of the Persian Empire. During this time, they were really not interested in conquest, and they really weren't even that interested in administration.

We call it the cultural phase because of the many building projects the artwork and the literature and other things that were kind of enhanced and expanded upon during this era. Not a lot of great accomplishments by these people. Darius II reigned for 20 years.

We know that he helped the Spartans when they were at war against the Athenians, which was kind of ironic after that whole Battle of Thermopylae Pass thing. Artaxerxes II, from 404 to 358, constructed many temples and put a lot of money into helping various places around his empire to rebuild and to glorify the houses of their gods. But by this point, the rot was already at the core of the Persian Empire.

As I might have insinuated a little bit already, the Persians were not really aggressive people. They were not a warlike people. They were, for the most part, by this point, living off of the accomplishments of Darius and of Cyrus before him, which, you know, is a fine foundation.

But the people by this period, I was one of my professors in graduate school, he said, you know, we kind of idealize these people, but let's face it, they were tyrants, particularly when you get to the last of the emperors. These people were very incompetent and very good at the mismanagement of the empire and the resources of the empire. Artaxerxes III, from 358 to 338 BC, he started his reign by assassinating his brothers.

Eight of them are half-brothers. This sounds like a story from the book of Judges. This is how he secured his throne.

He managed to reconquer Egypt, so you have to give him credit for that. But he died, probably, because of being poisoned by a fellow by the name of Bagoas. And this guy pops up again and again.

This fellow Bagoas was a eunuch of the court. And once again, eunuchs by this point are becoming very significant in the life of Persian politics. A little bit about eunuchs, you know.

You don't want to know the stories of how they made eunuchs because it's kind of gruesome. There were two main methods and neither one of them was pleasant. But very frequently, when a nation would conquer another nation, part of the tribute would be young boys who would be made into eunuchs.

Castrated males who supposedly would serve as loyal subjects and servants. They could be trusted with a lot of responsibilities because you didn't have to worry about them trying to build a dynasty. You know, if you're a eunuch, you're not going to be having kids to carry on afterwards.

And in those days, if you didn't have kids who could carry on your legacy, then there really wasn't a reason to be incredibly ambitious. So eunuchs were trusted with a lot of responsibilities, one of them, of course, being taking care of the harem. But there are other responsibilities as well.

Often, the eunuchs were cupbearers. This has been a question regarding the role of Nehemiah, for instance, who was a cupbearer for the king. You know, was he or was he not a eunuch? But that's uncertain.

We don't know. But eunuchs, because of the fact that they were oftentimes trusted not to be rebellious, would be in positions of a great deal of authority. And this fellow, Bagoas, apparently was one of the most crafty.

We could say he was a kingmaker in his way and also a king taker because it's very likely that he was involved in the assassination of Artaxerxes III. Artaxerxes IV, 338 to 336, had a very short reign here. He was murdered by Bagoas, and we know this one for sure.

Darius III, 336 to 330. He was installed on the throne by Bagoas. Now, there's a saying by somebody you might know that says, he who lives by the sword shall die by the sword.

Well, Darius forced Bagoas to take his own life, gave him basically the choice either you kill yourself or I'm going to kill you. And Bagoas killed himself, and so that took him out of the picture. But his reign otherwise is only noteworthy for the way it ended because he was conquered by Alexander the Great, and his reign really was the end of the Persian Empire.

So that said, a little bit about the aftermath of the Persian Empire. We don't know much in the West about the Persians. We don't think a lot about them, because

history is written by the victors, and the victors were the Greeks and the Romans and the West.

And so, we don't think a lot about what actually happened and what went down with the Persians. But really, after the days of the fall of the Persian Empire, we can't say goodbye to these people, because there were still Medes, and there were still Persians, and there were still other Indo-Aryan people around in that region. The Achaemenid Empire was no more.

Alexander the Great was going to put an end to it in 332. But the Persians remained a world power really for many centuries to come. First of all, there was the Parthian Empire.

Now, the Parthian Empire really started in 247 BC. So about 100 years, not quite 100 years after the time of Alexander the Great. Lasted until 242 AD.

That's a long time. The Romans were constantly knocking heads against the Parthians. It was founded by an Iranian tribe called the Parni.

Once again, these were Indo-Aryan peoples related to the Medes, which were related to the Persians. And they styled themselves after the Achaemenid Empire and tried to essentially pattern their reign after the Achaemenids. At one point, they managed to conquer almost the entire Middle East and would be very instrumental later on in Jewish affairs, including during the time of a fellow by the name of Herod the Great.

The Sassanid Empire. After the days and the collapse of the Parthian Empire, we had the rise of yet another Persian empire called the Sassanids. They actually called themselves or have been known as the Second Persian Empire because this one actually did have its center in Persia.

Once again, this was a remarkable place. The Sassanid Empire continued up until really the Muslim conquests. But in the Sassanid Empire, there was a wonderful kind of fluorescence of culture.

The Jewish community in this region, what is now known as Iran, the region of Persia, absolutely thrived under the Sassanids. Christians were occasionally very honored. At other times, they were persecuted, but it went back and forth.

But there was this wonderful kind of give and take in this era. The Sassanid Empire, as well as the Parthian Empire, were both self-consciously Zoroastrian states. But because of their Zoroastrian religion, they tended to be very tolerant of other peoples.

It's kind of ironic. The Zoroastrians have almost been driven to extinction. They still exist.

You can still find them. But almost driven to extinction by the persecution in some Muslim states because of the fact they are not considered a people of the book. So in Muslim understanding, and I'm talking, of course, about radical Islam here, not your more moderate Islam.

But the idea was that the monotheistic religions, particularly the religions of the book, the Jews, the Christians, and some other little sects that claim to worship John the Baptist and follow John the Baptist, they were tolerated because they were all viewed as being incomplete, lacking revelation, but they were redeemable. Someday maybe they would learn the Koran and learn to recognize the prophet. The Zoroastrians, on the other hand, were not regarded as people of the book.

And so, they suffer a great deal of persecution at the hands of the more radical Islamic states. So, under these Zoroastrian empires, Jews flourished, and Christianity was typically tolerated. When it was tolerated, it could grow, it could explore a lot of intellectual pursuits, and a lot of this kind of opportunity for the merging and the growth of the different nations and peoples occurred there under the umbrella and under the protection of the Sassanid kingdom.

So, we'll talk next time a little bit about the Persian culture and a little bit more about the Zoroastrian religion and how it might have influenced Judaism in the years to come.

This is Tony Tomasino, and his teachings were on Judaism before Jesus. This is session 3, The Persian Empire.