

Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino, Judaism Before Jesus, Session 3, The Persian Empire

Abstract:

This lecture by **Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino** examines the history of the **Persian Empire** and its profound impact on the Jewish people before the era of Jesus. It details the rise of the **Achaemenid dynasty**, beginning with **Cyrus the Great**, whose policies of religious tolerance allowed Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem and begin rebuilding their temple. The text further explores the administrative genius of **Darius the Great**, who standardized laws and infrastructure, and the more volatile reign of **Xerxes**, during which the story of **Esther** is traditionally set. **Tomasino** highlights how Persian governance encouraged the **codification of Jewish law** and provided a secure environment for the faith to evolve. The narrative concludes by tracing the empire's eventual fall to **Alexander the Great** and the subsequent legacy of the **Parthian** and **Sassanid** periods. Over these centuries, the interaction between **Zoroastrianism** and Judaism helped shape the cultural and religious identity of the Jewish nation.

Briefing Document:

The Persian Empire and Its Impact on Pre-Christian Judaism

Executive Summary

The Persian Empire, specifically the Achaemenid dynasty, represents a pivotal era in the history of the Jewish people and the development of Judaism. Emerging from Indo-Aryan roots and succeeding the Median Empire, the Persians—led initially by Cyrus the Great—established a model of imperial governance defined by religious tolerance, administrative efficiency, and cultural pluralism.

For the Jewish people, the Persian period marked the end of the Babylonian Captivity and the beginning of a national restoration. Key Persian monarchs, including Cyrus, Darius the Great, and Artaxerxes, provided the political and financial support necessary to rebuild Jerusalem and the Second Temple. Crucially, the Persian policy of codifying local laws to ensure imperial stability inadvertently fostered the standardization of Jewish law and the canonization of scripture. While the empire eventually succumbed to internal corruption and the military genius of Alexander the Great, its legacy of tolerance allowed Jewish communities to flourish, setting the stage for the Parthian and Sassanid empires to follow.

Origins and the Rise of the Achaemenid Empire

The Persians were part of a larger group of Indo-Aryan nomadic horsemen who migrated into the Middle East. While closely related to the Medes, the two groups were distinct yet culturally similar.

The Median Predecessors

- **Arrival and Settlement:** The Medes arrived in the Iranian region around 1500 BC. They emerged as major international players by 836 BC and participated in the downfall of the Assyrian Empire.
- **Unification:** A leader named Cyaxares united the Median tribes, creating an empire that rivaled Babylon in geographical size, though it was more sparsely populated.
- **Persian Subjugation:** The Persians were originally vassals of the Median Empire, culturally indistinguishable except for variations in language and writing systems.

Cyrus the Great (r. 550–530 BC)

Cyrus transformed the Median Empire into the Persian Empire after revolting against his father-in-law, King Astyages, in 555 BC.

- **Policy of Tolerance:** Unlike previous conquerors, Cyrus often retained local rulers as client kings to secure their loyalty.

- **Propaganda as Statecraft:** Cyrus portrayed himself as a "liberator" rather than a conqueror. This was particularly effective in Babylon, where he exploited the unpopularity of Nabonidus, a religious reformer who had abandoned the chief god Marduk in favor of the moon goddess, Sin.
- **The Fall of Babylon (539 BC):** Cyrus entered Babylon with little bloodshed, allegedly aided by the priests of Marduk who opened the gates. The "Cyrus Cylinder" records his claim that Marduk chose him to restore order and free the enslaved.

Administrative and Economic Innovations under Darius the Great

Darius the Great (r. 522–486 BC) provided the structural stability that Cyrus's charisma alone could not maintain. He justified his rule via the Behistun Inscription, claiming descent from Achaemenes.

Key Imperial Reforms

Reform Category	Impact and Description
Administrative Districts	Reorganized the empire into 20 satrapies , each governed by a native leader who reported to the king.
Economic Standardization	Introduced the deric (gold coin) and fixed the value ratio of gold to silver across the empire.
Postal System	Created a courier system using riders (the model for the Pony Express) to deliver messages rapidly across vast distances.
Legal Codification	Mandated that all ethnic groups codify and standardize their local laws to ensure imperial predictability.

The Persian Empire and Jewish Restoration

The Persian era was instrumental in transitioning the Jewish people from a group of captives back into a functioning nation.

The Return and the Second Temple

- **Cyrus's Decree:** Cyrus allowed Jewish captives to return to Jerusalem and provided initial funding for rebuilding. Though a small wave of repatriates arrived under Sheshbazar, the project stalled due to social and economic friction.
- **Social Tensions:** Returning Jews faced conflict with the "people of the land"—those who had moved into vacated properties after 587 BC. This created a lasting bifurcation between the returning "observant" elite and the local population.
- **Completion under Darius:** Darius sent Zerubbabel (a descendant of David) to Jerusalem. The Temple was finally completed in 515 BC.
- **Linguistic Shifts:** The returning elite brought Aramaic back from Babylon, leading to a class-based linguistic split: the upper classes spoke Aramaic/Scholar's Hebrew (Mishnaic), while the lower classes continued using "vulgar" Hebrew.

Ezra and Nehemiah

Under Artaxerxes (r. 465–424 BC), the Jewish national identity was further solidified:

- **Ezra:** Commissioned to bring the Laws of Moses to Jerusalem. The Persian requirement for law codification likely accelerated the canonization of the Bible.
- **Nehemiah:** A royal cupbearer granted the resources to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, making the city defensible and restoring national pride despite local opposition.

Religious Dynamics: Zoroastrianism and the Limits of Tolerance

Persian religion evolved from Iranian polytheism to **Zoroastrianism**, a monotheistic faith centered on the god Ahura Mazda.

- **Compatibility with Judaism:** Zoroastrianism and Judaism shared similarities that allowed for a productive dialogue and a generally favorable view of Jews within the empire.

- **Xerxes and the "Daiva" Inscription:** While generally tolerant, the Persians drew the line at what they considered demon worship. Xerxes (r. 485–465 BC) recorded destroying a sanctuary of "daiva" (demons) and replacing it with the worship of Ahura Mazda.
- **Ruthlessness of Xerxes:** Xerxes was less tolerant than his predecessors. He melted down the golden statue of Marduk in Babylon after a revolt, a sharp departure from Cyrus's "liberator" persona.

Conflict with Greece and Imperial Decline

The Persian Wars represented the first major clash between East and West. Despite their massive numbers, the Persians struggled against the Greeks.

Military Disparities

- **Armament:** Persians used unarmored cavalry and light troops. Greeks utilized heavily armored hoplites with long spears and large shields.
- **Motivation:** Persian armies consisted largely of hired mercenaries and conscripts. Greek soldiers were battle-hardened veterans of internal wars, motivated by ethnocentric pride and the defense of their city-states.
- **Tactics:** The Greeks employed the **phalanx**, a highly efficient formation that staved off much larger forces at battles like Marathon (490 BC), Thermopylae, and Plataea.

Internal Rot and the Role of Eunuchs

Following Artaxerxes I, the empire entered a "cultural phase" marked by grand building projects (like the Hall of 100 Columns at Persepolis) but administrative incompetence.

- **The Power of Eunuchs:** Castrated males, originally trusted because they could not form dynasties, became powerful "kingmakers." A eunuch named **Bagoas** was instrumental in the assassinations of Artaxerxes III and Artaxerxes IV.
- **The Fall:** The empire ended when Darius III was conquered by Alexander the Great between 336 and 330 BC.

The Post-Achaemenid Legacy

Though the Achaemenid dynasty fell, Persian culture and people remained world powers for centuries.

1. **The Parthian Empire (247 BC – 242 AD):** Founded by the Parni tribe, they styled themselves after the Achaemenids and frequently clashed with Rome.
2. **The Sassanid Empire (224 – 651 AD):** Known as the "Second Persian Empire," it was a self-consciously Zoroastrian state where Jewish communities thrived and engaged in significant intellectual growth.
3. **The Fate of Zoroastrianism:** While once the umbrella of protection for Jews and Christians, Zoroastrians were eventually pushed toward extinction by radical Islamic conquests because they were not classified as "People of the Book."

"Here lies Cyrus; I conquered the world, so please don't begrudge me my little monument here." — *Inscription on the tomb of Cyrus the Great*

Study Guide:

Study Guide: The Persian Empire and its Impact on Ancient Judaism

This study guide examines the history of the Persian Empire as presented in Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino's "Judaism Before Jesus." It details the rise of the Achaemenid dynasty, its administrative and religious policies, its interactions with the Greek world, and its pivotal role in the restoration of the Jewish people and the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

I. The Origins of the Medes and Persians

The Persians and Medes were Indo-Aryan nomadic horsemen who migrated into the Middle Eastern lands, settling in what is now Iran circa 1500 BC. While the Bible often links them together, they were distinct but closely related groups.

- **The Median Empire:** Preceding the Persians in dominance, the Medes became major international players around 836 BC. Under the leader Cyaxares, they helped overthrow the Assyrian Empire and established a realm larger than Babylon, though less populated.
- **The Persian Transition:** Originally vassals of the Medes, the Persians were culturally similar but possessed a distinct language and writing system. In 550 BC, Cyrus the Great revolted against the Median King Astyages, transforming the Median Empire into the Persian Empire.

II. The Era of Expansion: Cyrus the Great (560–530 BC)

Cyrus the Great is characterized as a master of propaganda and a practitioner of cultural and religious tolerance. Rather than displacing local rulers, he often maintained them as client kings to ensure loyalty.

The Conquest of Babylon (539 BC)

Cyrus portrayed himself as a "liberator" rather than a conqueror. He took advantage of the unpopularity of Nabonidus, the last king of Babylon, who had alienated his subjects by attempting to replace the worship of the chief god Marduk with the moon goddess, Sin.

- **The Cyrus Cylinder:** A monumental inscription where Cyrus claims that Marduk chose him to restore the god's proper place.
- **The Fall of the City:** Babylon was taken with little bloodshed, possibly through the diversion of a river or assistance from the priests of Marduk who opened the gates.

Impact on Judaism

Cyrus's policies allowed Jewish captives to return to Jerusalem, a move described in Isaiah 45 as the work of the "anointed of the Lord."

- **Restoration:** He sent Sheshbazar, a member of the royal family, to Jerusalem to begin rebuilding.
- **Funding:** Cyrus likely provided state funds for the initial rebuilding of the city and the temple foundations.

III. The Administrative Genius of Darius the Great (522–486 BC)

Following the brief and somewhat intolerant reign of Cambyses (who conquered Egypt), Darius I consolidated the empire through unprecedented administrative reforms.

Key Reforms and Achievements

Reform	Description
Satrapies	Reorganized the empire into 20 administrative districts, each governed by a local native.
Coinage	Standardized currency by creating the "derrick" and fixing the value ratio of gold to silver.
Postal System	Created a courier system using horse riders that served as the model for the modern Pony Express.
Law Codification	Mandated that ethnic groups codify and standardize their own traditional laws.

Relationship with Judah

Darius sent Zerubbabel, a descendant of David, to Jerusalem. Under Darius's patronage, the Second Temple was finally completed in 515 BC. His insistence on legal standardization likely contributed to the eventual canonization of Jewish scriptures.

IV. Xerxes and the Greco-Persian Wars

Xerxes (485–465 BC) transitioned the empire toward a more ruthless and religiously assertive stance.

- **Conflict with Greece:** Xerxes led famous incursions into Greece, including the Battle of Thermopylae (against the 300 Spartans) and the naval Battle of Salamis. Despite his victories, the Persians were ultimately defeated at the Battle of Plataea (479 BC).
- **Religious Policy:** Unlike his predecessors, Xerxes demonstrated limits to Persian tolerance. The "Daiva Inscription" records his destruction of sanctuaries dedicated to "daiva" (demons) in favor of the worship of the Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazda.

- **The Esther Connection:** While the Book of Esther is set during his reign, historians note difficulties reconciling the biblical Esther with his historical wife, the formidable Amestris.

V. The Cultural Phase and the Fall of the Empire

Under Artaxerxes I and his successors, the empire entered a "cultural phase" focused on architecture and internal arts rather than conquest.

- **Ezra and Nehemiah:** Artaxerxes I commissioned Ezra to bring the Mosaic law to Jerusalem and supported Nehemiah in rebuilding the city walls.
- **Decline:** The later Achaemenid period was marked by incompetence, palace intrigues, and the rising power of royal eunuchs (such as Bagoas).
- **The End of the Dynasty:** The empire fell in 332 BC to Alexander the Great after the defeat of Darius III.

VI. Subsequent Persian Legacies

Though the Achaemenid Empire fell, Persian culture and Zoroastrianism persisted through subsequent iterations:

1. **Parthian Empire (247 BC–242 AD):** Founded by the Parni tribe, they styled themselves after the Achaemenids and frequently clashed with Rome.
2. **Sassanid Empire (224–651 AD):** Known as the Second Persian Empire, it was a self-consciously Zoroastrian state where Jewish communities thrived until the Muslim conquests.

Review Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2-3 sentences based on the provided text.

1. How did the relationship between the Medes and the Persians change in 550 BC?
2. Why was the Babylonian king Nabonidus unpopular with his own people?

3. What was the "propaganda war" conducted by Cyrus the Great prior to his entry into Babylon?
 4. How did Darius the Great standardize the economy of the Persian Empire?
 5. What was the role of the "satrapies" in Darius's government?
 6. According to the text, what happened at the Thermopylae Pass?
 7. How did the religious policy of Xerxes differ from that of Cyrus the Great?
 8. What evidence exists regarding the destruction of Athens by Xerxes?
 9. Why were eunuchs, such as Bagoas, often given positions of high authority in the Persian court?
 10. In what way did the Sassanid Empire provide a beneficial environment for the Jewish community?
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Quiz Answer Key

1. Originally, the Persians were vassals of the Median Empire, which was larger and more established. In 550 BC, Cyrus the Great revolted against the Median King Astyages, successfully displacing him and transforming the realm into the Persian Empire.
2. Nabonidus was a religious reformer who disenfranchised the traditional priests of the chief god Marduk. He instead promoted the worship of the moon goddess, Sin, and neglected the city while taking long absences, which angered the common people and the religious elite.
3. Cyrus sent messengers to Babylon portraying himself as a friend of the Babylonian gods and a "liberator" rather than a conqueror. He claimed that the god Marduk had personally asked him to rescue the people from the incompetent and impious Nabonidus.
4. Darius standardized the economy by introducing a single coin called the "derrick" for use throughout the entire empire. He also fixed the value ratio of gold to silver, ensuring that citizens and traders knew exactly what their currency was worth.

5. Darius divided the empire into 20 administrative districts called satrapies, each headed by a native governor. This allowed the people to report to leaders who spoke their language and understood their specific culture, while the governors reported directly to the king.
6. At the Thermopylae Pass, a small troop of 300 Spartan soldiers held off the advancing Persian army for several days. This delay allowed the Athenians enough time to evacuate their city before the Persians arrived.
7. While Cyrus was known for broad religious tolerance and funding various native cults, Xerxes was more intolerant of what he deemed "demon" worship. He destroyed sanctuaries of the "daiva" and mandated the proper worship of the Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazda.
8. While Greek historians claimed that Xerxes burned Athens to the ground, there is no archaeological evidence to support the total destruction of the city. Such wanton destruction would have been largely out of character for the Persians, who generally preferred to preserve local structures.
9. Eunuchs were trusted with great responsibility because they could not father children and therefore could not establish their own rival dynasties. This perceived lack of long-term political ambition made them ideal candidates for sensitive roles like royal cupbearers or harem guards.
10. The Sassanid Empire was a self-consciously Zoroastrian state that practiced a high degree of religious tolerance. Under this "umbrella of protection," the Jewish community in the region of Persia thrived and engaged in significant intellectual and cultural growth.

Essay Questions

1. **The Master of Image:** Analyze the methods Cyrus the Great used to win the loyalty of conquered nations. Contrast his "liberator" persona with the more traditional "conqueror" model of the Assyrians and Babylonians.
2. **Administrative Legacy:** Evaluate the long-term impact of Darius the Great's reforms—such as the postal system, standardized coinage, and legal

codification—on the stability of the Persian Empire and subsequent civilizations.

3. **The Divergence of History and Scripture:** Discuss the historical difficulties in reconciling the biblical account of Esther with known Persian history, specifically regarding the identity of Xerxes' wife and the nature of Persian court life.
4. **Greco-Persian Conflict:** Explore the reasons why the smaller Greek armies were frequently able to defeat the much larger Persian forces. Consider factors such as training, armor, tactics (like the phalanx), and soldier motivation.
5. **The Restoration of Yehud:** Detail the specific ways in which Persian kings influenced the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the development of Judaism. How did Persian imperial policy indirectly lead to the standardization of Jewish law?

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Achaemenid:** The primary dynasty of the Persian Empire, named after the ancestor Achaemenes, to whom kings like Darius claimed descent.
- **Ahura Mazda:** The "Great God" of Zoroastrianism, frequently cited by Persian kings like Xerxes and Darius as the source of their authority.
- **Artabanus:** The commander of the royal bodyguard who assassinated Xerxes in 465 BC.
- **Bagoas:** A powerful royal eunuch and "kingmaker" who was involved in the assassinations and installations of several later Persian emperors.
- **Behistun Inscription:** A monumental multi-language inscription made by Darius the Great that allowed for the decipherment of Persian history and lineage.
- **Cyrus Cylinder:** A clay cylinder containing an inscription in which Cyrus the Great justifies his conquest of Babylon and outlines his policy of repatriating displaced peoples.

- **Daiva:** An Indo-Aryan term for divine spirits; in the Zoroastrian religion of the Persians, these were regarded as demons.
- **Derrick:** A gold coin introduced by Darius the Great as part of his effort to standardize the imperial economy.
- **Indo-Aryan:** A group of peoples, including the Medes and Persians, who migrated from northern regions into the Middle East around 1500 BC.
- **Nabonidus:** The last king of the Babylonian Empire, whose religious reforms and absence from the city made him unpopular and facilitated Cyrus's conquest.
- **Satrapy:** One of the 20 administrative provinces created by Darius the Great to manage his vast empire through local governors.
- **Sheshbazar:** A member of the Jewish royal family sent by Cyrus the Great to Jerusalem to initiate the rebuilding of the temple.
- **Zoroastrianism:** The monotheistic/dualistic religion of the Persian Empire that emphasized the worship of Ahura Mazda and influenced Jewish thought during the Second Temple period.