**Overview of Medo-Persia**

By J. W. Navarro

The Achaemenid Empire (or as it is known to Old Testament Scholars, the Medo-Persian Empire) played a crucial role in God’s plan for Israel that was centuries in the making. Prophecies concerning the Empire were made as early as the Book of Isaiah.

In 612 B.C., the Persians aided in the downfall of the Assyrian empire by capturing Ninevah with the help of the Chaldeans. Under King Cyrus II, Persia conquered Media in 549 B.C. The two countries became what we know of as the Medo-Persian Empire. Together the Medes and Persian conquered Babylon in 539 B.C., resulting in them taking over much of the known Western and Middle-Eastern world at the time.

The Medes were first mentioned in the Bible when Isaiah prophesied against Babylon, saying “Behold, I will stir up the Medes against them, which shall not regard silver; and as for gold, they shall not delight in it… And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldees’ excellency, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah” (Isaiah 13:17, 19)

While Babylon has the reputation for destroying Jerusalem and taking the Israelites into captivity, Medo-Persia gained the reputation (thanks to king Cyrus II) of partially restoring Israel and returning them from exile. The Persians dynasties for the most part practiced religious tolerance. and with the combined efforts of Ezra and Nehemiah, the Israelites were restored to their homeland and the walls of Jerusalem rebuilt.

In the book of Daniel, Cyrus II was supreme monarch of Medo-Persia and Darius the Mede was appointed the governor of conquered Babylon. Many of the kings of Persia shared names. There were 3 Darius’s (Darii?), not including Darius the Mede from Daniel. There were several kings referred to as Artaxerxes, and a handful of Cyrus’s as well, so don’t be worried if a Darius is mentioned in the book of Ezra when the timeline doesn’t line up with Daniel! (Hint, Ezra’s Darius is Darius I, or “Darius the Great”).

In Cyrus II’s first year following the conquest of Babylon, he allowed the Jews to return to their homeland, just as Isaiah had prophesied centuries beforehand. It seems God chose Persia as the force to overthrow Babylon because Persia had a strict policy on allowing religious freedom among nations that were conquered, thus enabling the Jews to worship God as they saw fit.

The king of Esther, Xerxes (called Ahasuerus in the book), was the prophesied “Fourth King” in Daniel 11:2. He led a campaign against Greece, which ended in failure. This happens between chapters 1 and 2 of Esther, laying the groundwork for Grecian hatred of Persia and the prophesied downfall of Medo-Persia.

The final king of the Persian Empire before the arrival of the Grecian Empire was Darius III. He became king after several of his predecessors, including Artaxerxes III were poisoned by the court eunuch, Bagoas. Bagoas was very picky about who he wanted to be king and murdered several kings and potential kings before choosing Darius III. As it turns out, Bagoas was even dissatisfied with Darius and tried to poison him! Darius was wise to this scheme and asked Bagoas for a toast with the cup he knew was poisoned, forcing the eunuch to have a taste of his own medicine. As cunning as Darius III was, he was no match for the utter speed, discipline, and brutality with which Alexander of Macedon gathered the Grecian armies and decimated Medo-Persia. In fact, Darius fled from battle so many times that his people were glad to accept Grecian rule at the end.

Though a mighty empire feared around the world, the Medes and Persians were merely an instrument in God’s plan for His people, ensuring they would return from exile, rebuild their temple and walls. This in turn helped their survival when the Maccabean Revolt occurred under Antiochus IV.