

**Old Testament History**  
by  
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**Part Seven**  
**Between the Testaments:**  
**The Persian Period**

**INTRODUCTION TO PART SEVEN**

*The time between the close of Old Testament history and the beginning of the New Testament period has often been called "the four hundred silent years." To the historian, however, these centuries were anything but silent, and they seem to become more vocal with each passing decade.*

*To the student of ancient history, names like Cyrus, Darius, and Alexander the Great make this period one of paramount importance. The Jew notes during these centuries the development of synagogue worship, the successful Maccabean revolt, the emergence of those parties within Judaism which have set the pattern for Jewish life and thought during the past two millennia.*

*The Christian looks upon the Old Testament as preparatory, looking toward the fulfillment of its hopes and promises in the Person of Jesus Christ. He is interested in the history of the centuries preceding the coming of Christ, for he sees in them a preparation for the advent, and a progress toward that period of history termed "the fulness of time" (Gal. 4:4).*

**CHAPTER 78**

***Cyrus and the Rise of the Empire***

1. The Beginnings

The Persian Empire came into being as the result of the efforts of one man -- Cyrus. Of his background we know nothing. His father was named Cambyses, and the ancestry of his mother is unknown. Tradition makes her the daughter of a Median king. The story was probably invented to make Cyrus appear as a legitimate monarch of royal Median ancestry.

Cyrus first appears in history when, in 559 B.C., at the age of forty, he inherited the small kingdom of Anshan. This territory was tributary to the Median Empire, one of the eastern

rivals of Babylon.

The Medes and the Babylonians were former allies. In 612 B.C. their combined forces destroyed Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire. Kyaxeres the Mede seems to have taken the lead in the assault on Nineveh. Nabopolassar of Babylon, however, fought the Assyrians alone after the destruction of their capital city. Perhaps the Medes were called home by problems that required immediate attention. Median and Babylonian leaders may have become estranged as a result of a conflict of interests. In any event, the Medo-Babylonian alliance was short-lived. The fall of Nineveh and the subsequent end of Assyria brought about a realignment of the states of the ancient Near East.

Babylon quickly capitalized on Assyria's disaster. Nebuchadnezzar, son of Nabopolassar and commander of the Babylonian armies, marched westward and annexed the territories which had once belonged to Assyria. Egypt tried to make trouble for Nebuchadnezzar, with a view to the annexation of additional territory, but the tide of Babylonian victory could not be stopped.

All this also affected the Jews. The last kings of Judah were torn between the claims of Egypt and Babylon. Jeremiah had insisted that resistance to Nebuchadnezzar was futile, and the pro-Egyptian party succeeded in bringing about a series of rebellions. The result was tragic. By 587 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed Jerusalem, with its Temple. Most of the Judeans were taken to Babylon.

Exile in Babylon brought the Jews to a fresh realization of the nature of their God. Idolatry had been rampant during the years before the fall of Jerusalem. The Exile was seen as punishment for this unfaithfulness to Yahweh, the God of Israel. With the destruction of the Temple, animal sacrifices ceased. In place of the Temple, synagogues became the accepted houses of worship. There the sacred Torah was read and explained. It comprised the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch. The word *Torah* is usually translated "law," but might better be rendered "instruction." The Torah gave instruction by example as well as by precept. Ultimately other sacred books were accepted as inspired Scripture. Jeremiah was lightly dismissed during the years of his ministry in Jerusalem, but in Babylonian exile his countrymen came to see that his prophecies were true. A collection of the "Prophets" -- including some of our historical books -- came into being. The synagogue also recognized a third section of the Old Testament, the "Writings," beginning with the Book of Psalms and including books of poetry as well as history and prophecy. The New Testament bears testimony to the law, the Prophets, and the Psalms as the three sections of Scripture. This threefold division is still used in printed editions of the Hebrew Bible.

When Cyrus came to the throne of Anshan, Nabonidus (Nabu-naid) was the unpopular king in Babylon. A philosopher and mystic, he felt called by Marduk to restore the temple of the moon-god Sin at Harran. When Nabu-naid protested that the proximity of the Medes would prevent the enterprise, Marduk, through his priests, replied:

"The Mede of whom you are speaking, he himself, his land, and the kings who march at his side are not! When the third year comes, the gods will cause Cyrus, king of Anshan, his little slave, to advance against him with his small army. He will overthrow the wide extending Medes; he will capture Astyages, king of the Medes, and take him captive to his land."<sup>1</sup>

Had Marduk been a true prophet he might have added that Babylon would soon fall into the hands of Cyrus also.

In 550-549 B.C. Cyrus revolted against Astyages, his Median overlord. Meanwhile Nabonidus turned the kingship of Babylon over to his eldest son Bel-shar-usur (Belshazzar of the Book of Daniel) and headed for Harran, confident that the Medes had trouble enough with Cyrus to keep them busy. Such proved to be the case. Astyages sent an army under Harpagus against Cyrus, but Harpagus, remembering how Astyages had cruelly slain his son, deserted with most of his soldiers to Cyrus. Then Astyages determined personally to lead a second army against Cyrus. Reaching Parsa, the capital of Anshan, this second army mutinied against Astyages and handed him over to Cyrus.

Cyrus proved to be a generous conqueror. Although he did not hesitate to plunder the wealth of Ecbatana, the Median capital, the city itself was spared and became one of the capitals of the Medo-Persian Empire. Many of the Median officials were kept at their posts. This policy of clemency was new in the politics of the Near East, but it was to characterize the reign of Cyrus.

With the conquest of Media, Cyrus fell heir to Median claims in Assyria, Mesopotamia, Syria, Armenia, and Cappadocia. Some of these claims conflicted with those of Babylon, and we read no more of an alliance between Babylon and Cyrus. Beside the Medo-Persian Empire there were now three great powers -- Lydia, Babylonia, and Egypt. The first two of these were subdued by Cyrus himself. His son Cambyses was to conquer the third.

## 2. Cyrus and Lydia

The Kingdom of Lydia first enters history when, in 660 B.C., Ashurbanipal demanded tribute of a Lydian King, "Gyges of Luddi." The Kingdom of Lydia was the country lying west of the Halys River in Asia Minor. It was blessed with fertile land and natural resources, not the least of which was gold. Gyges had conquered an area known as the Troad, giving his people an outlet to the sea. Under the fifty-seven year reign of Alyattes, grandson of Gyges, Lydia became a major power. Alyattes took Smyrna, the great port on the Asia Minor coast and, one by one, added the Greek coastal towns to his domain. Benevolent in his rule, Alyattes permitted the Greek cities to retain their own customs,

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1 Abu Habba Cylinder, col. 1, 11. 8-32. Quoted in A. T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire*, p. 36.

institutions, and local government. Their taxes, however, helped the Lydian monarch to become the richest ruler of his age.

Croesus, the son and heir of Alyattes, completed the capture of the Greek settlements on or near the Aegean Sea by adding Ephesus and Miletus to his empire. His fabulous wealth is responsible for the simile, "as rich as Croesus." Herodotus repeats a legend to the effect that Solon visited Croesus and instructed him in the meaning of life by a series of illustrations summarized in the phrase, "Call no man happy until he is dead."

After the conquest of the Medes, the outer fringes of Cyrus' empire reached the eastern bank of the Halys River. Sooner or later a showdown must come with Lydia.

Cilicia offered no resistance when Cyrus laid claim to his provinces in Asia Minor. Realizing the imminence of attack, Croesus, however, hastily made alliances with Amasis, king of Egypt, and Nabu-naid of Babylon. Sparta offered him her fleet. Cyrus determined to strike immediately when he learned of Croesus' action through Eurybatos, a trusted friend of Croesus who betrayed his country. Eurybatos had been entrusted with large sums of money to be used in raising mercenaries in the Peloponnesus. Instead he fled to Cyrus and informed him of the plans of Croesus.

Leaving Sardis, Croesus crossed the Halys River for his first encounter with Cyrus. He consulted the oracles. They told him that, if he should send an army against the Persians, he would destroy a great empire. They had failed to tell him which empire! Croesus' initial victories over the Cappadocians filled him with confidence. When Cyrus offered Croesus his throne and kingdom in exchange for recognizing Persian sovereignty, Croesus was in no mood to accept. He indignantly retorted that he had never been subject to another power, whereas the Persians had been slaves to the Medes and would be the future slaves of the Lydians. Cyrus attacked at once.

After two indecisive battles, Croesus was driven from the field in a hopeless rout. He felt sure that Cyrus would not pursue him to Sardis because of the cold, snowy season which was approaching. Cyrus determined, however, not to wait until the allies of Croesus could come to his aid. Herodotus tells of the decisive battle in which camels were placed in the Persian front line to face the famed cavalry of Croesus. The horses, which had never seen camels before, stampeded. The infantry was unable to rally, and the battle became a rout, with the broken forces of Croesus seeking refuge in Sardis.

Although Croesus sent pleas for aid to Egypt, Greece, and Babylon, it was too late to save the day. The Spartans hastened to prepare their fleet, but before it could be launched, word arrived that Sardis had fallen and Croesus was a prisoner of the Persians.

The Nabu-naid Chronicle gives this official report of Cyrus: "In the month Aiaru (May) he marched against the country Lydia . . . killed its king, took his possessions, put [there] a

garrison of his own."<sup>2</sup> Legends suggest that Cyrus dealt kindly with Croesus, allowing him to live in comfort near the ancient capital of Media. Actually it appears that Croesus followed the oriental custom of immolating himself to escape the usual indignities heaped upon a captured monarch before he was put to death. An Attic vase painter, Myson, within a half century of the death of Croesus, depicted him enthroned upon a pyre which a servant was about to light.

The once wealthy Lydian Empire now became the Persian satrapy of Saparda, or Sardis. A native Lydian, Pactyas, was placed in charge of the captured treasure of Croesus.

### 3. Cyrus and the Greeks

The conquest of Lydia brought Cyrus into contact with the Greek cities of Asia Minor which had made their peace with Croesus. Cyrus demanded that the coastal cities recognize his sovereignty, but they refused, only to be conquered one by one by the might of Persian arms or the diplomacy of Persian gold. There were Greeks, however, who welcomed Cyrus. The city of Miletus was shrewd enough to realize that Cyrus held the future, and submitted to him.

For some reason, the priests of Apollo, the Greek god of oracles, were thoroughly sympathetic with Cyrus. It was Apollo of Delphi who had uttered the ambiguous oracle that lured Croesus to his death. Apollo of Miletus, through his priests, was also clearly sympathetic with the Persians. When the city of Cyme asked counsel of the Apollo oracle concerning the disposal of a Greek who had rebelled against the Persians, Apollo ordered the surrender of the Greek rebel.

With the conquest of Greek Asia Minor, two Persian satrapies were formed. The Ionian satrapy was joined to Sardis, and the area south of the Hellespont was organized into a satrapy named "Those of the Sea."

Sooner or later Persia would have to fight the mainland Greeks. The Persians learned much from their dealings with the Greek cities of Asia Minor. Other important conquests in the East must precede a final showdown with the Greeks, however.

### 4. Cyrus Heads Eastward

While Cyrus was conquering Lydia and Greek Asia Minor, Nabonidus was having his own troubles in Babylon. Under Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon had developed into a progressive and efficient state. Graft and mismanagement which developed under Nabonidus and his son Belshazzar brought on conditions of near starvation. Gobryas, or Gubaru as the Babylonians called him, had been one of Nebuchadnezzar's ablest generals. To him was

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<sup>2</sup> Translation of A. Leo Oppenheim in James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 306.

entrusted the governorship of the Babylonian province of Elam, or Gutium. To add to the woes of Nabonidus, Gobryas deserted to Cyrus and began to attack Babylonian territory. His first blows were directed against the ancient city of Uruk, the Erech of Genesis 10.

Meanwhile Cyrus was giving his attention to the less civilized but strategically important lands to the east. While the wealth of his empire came from the west, for security reasons Cyrus had to control the east. The lands of Hyrcania and Parthia had been united before Cyrus had turned eastward. Their *kavi*, or local kinglet, was Hystaspes, famous as the father of Darius the Great. Hystaspes acknowledged the sovereignty of Cyrus and continued his rule as a Persian satrap.

The details of Cyrus' eastern campaign were not chronicled, as were those of his conquests of Lydia and Babylon. We know, however, that Cyrus continued his eastward march, incorporating Dragiana, Arachosia, Margiana, and Bactria into his empire. He crossed the Oxus River and reached the Jaxartus, where he built fortified towns to defend his northeastern frontier against the attacks of central Asian nomads.

## 5. The Fall of Babylon

Cyrus next turned his attention to Babylon. In this expedition he considered himself the deliverer rather than the conqueror of Babylon, and this feeling was shared by many Babylonians. The priests of Marduk, the god of Babylon, were happy to welcome Cyrus.

There was good reason for dissatisfaction with Nabonidus. He was an archaeologist and a mystic at heart. Like the famous Pharaoh Akhnaton of Egypt, Nabonidus was wholly unsuited by temperament for the office of ruler. An incompetent may succeed for a time if his challengers are equally incompetent, but Nabonidus was faced with the genius of a Cyrus. There was a time when Cyrus might have been stopped. Croesus might have succeeded in checking him had Babylon acted swiftly to aid her northern ally. But Nabonidus was spending his time in Teima watching the excavation of temple sites and admiring the handiwork of his predecessors. No aid reached Croesus, and Cyrus marched on.

Nabonidus was a very religious man. He chose to let the gods act as his guardians. When Babylon was threatened, he imported images of the gods from the surrounding cities, but this only added to dissatisfaction. The custodians of these local shrines were unhappy to have their temples plundered. The priests of Marduk in Babylon felt neglected, because Nabonidus seemed preoccupied with a host of "foreign" deities. Nabonidus alone lived in a fools' paradise.

In early October, 539 B.C., Cyrus was ready to invade lower Mesopotamia. Since the defenses of Babylon were reputedly impregnable, Cyrus had wisely bypassed Babylon until he had secured the territory to the east and to the west of the fabulous city. When Cyrus

arrived, however, he was able to advance unchecked.

After an initial encounter at Opis, Sippar was taken without battle on October 11th. Nabonidus fled from Babylon, leaving his son Belshazzar in charge. Two days later, Gobryas, the governor of Elam (Darius of Daniel 6), captured Babylon without battle. Belshazzar was slain. Gobryas was named satrap of the new province of Babirush by Cyrus, who personally entered Babylon later in the month and proclaimed peace to everyone in the city.

The Cyrus Cylinder gives Cyrus' own account of the capture of Babylon:

"Marduk, the Great Lord, a protector of his people/worshipers, beheld with pleasure his [i.e. Cyrus'] good deeds and his upright mind [lit.: heart] [and therefore] ordered him to march against his city Babylon. He made him set out on the road to Babylon going at his side like a real friend. His widespread troops -- their number, like that of the water of a river, could not be established -- strolled along, their weapons packed away. Without any battle, he made him enter his town Babylon, sparing Babylon any calamity."<sup>3</sup>

Cyrus realized the value and the need of a "return to normalcy" in Babylonian affairs. The reign of Nabonidus had been abnormal, but Marduk himself had provided a righteous ruler in the person of Cyrus. This is the way Cyrus himself describes it: "Marduk . . . scanned and looked [through] all the countries, searching for a righteous ruler . . . he pronounced the name of Cyrus, king of Anshan, declared him to be[come] the ruler of all the world."<sup>4</sup>

The disapproval of the priests of Marduk had been a major factor in the downfall of Nabonidus. Cyrus showed his cooperation with the Babylonian priests by going through the prescribed ritual at the great New Year Festival. By taking the hand of the god of Babylon he legalized the new line of Babylonian kings. Cyrus became "king of Babylon, king of the land."

Cyrus also determined to restore to their own shrines the gods which had been taken to Babylon by Nabonidus. The Cyrus Cylinder declares this as a matter of policy: "Furthermore, I resettled upon the command of Marduk, the great lord, all the gods of Sumer and Akkad whom Nabonidus has brought into Babylon to the anger of the lord of the gods, unharmed, in their [former] chapels, the places which make them happy."<sup>5</sup>

The Babylonians had made it a practice to remove peoples from their homeland and settle them under the watchful eyes of the Babylonian kings. Such a policy had been used by Assyria. Assyria not only moved populations from their former homes, but moved others in to occupy the vacated areas. The ancestors of the Biblical Samaritans had such a history

3 Cyrus Cylinder, Pritchard, *op. cit.*, p. 315.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.* p. 316.

(II Kings 17:23-24; see also chapter 84).

The Assyrian policy of permanent transportation meant the end of any hope for return to its former territory by the members of the exiled northern tribes. The Babylonians had not resettled the Jerusalem area, however, and the exiles beside the waters of Babylon continued to weep as they remembered Zion. They longed for return to the land of their fathers.

Such restorations were part of the "back to normalcy" policy of Cyrus. Of the captive peoples he writes: "I [also] gathered all their [former] inhabitants and returned [to them] their habitations."<sup>6</sup>

The motives of Cyrus may not have been entirely humanitarian. Egypt was on the agenda, and thoroughly loyal settlers in the buffer area of Syria-Palestine would be of great help when Persia undertook the conquest of Egypt. Cyrus was wise as well as humane, and his policy with respect to captive peoples exhibited both aspects of his character.

## 6. Cyrus and the Jews

When Cyrus became lord of Babylonia, the dependencies of Babylon likewise came under his control. He adopted a benevolent policy toward those former Babylonian provinces on the principle that the happier their lot, the more likely they would be to cooperate with Persian aims and goals. Phoenicia pledged its loyalty and its fleet, which was the match of any the united Greeks could raise.

The policy of the restoration of captive deities and captive peoples had special application to the Jews, whose religious ideals were respected by Cyrus and his successors as superior to those of the other nations with whom they dealt. To be sure, the Jews had no image that must be restored to its shrine, but Nebuchadnezzar had taken utensils from the Temple at Jerusalem. They had been used in Belshazzar's feast. If the gods of the other nations were restored, certainly the vessels used in the worship of the God of Israel must receive similar treatment.

Many Jews had prospered in Babylon and had no desire to leave. Not only were they permitted to remain, but many of them prospered in business and government during the Persian period. Daniel was among those that remained. The Book of Esther records both the influence and the trials of Jews in the Persian Empire. Nehemiah was cupbearer to a Persian king.

Yet the prophetic predictions of a return to a glorious Zion were not wholly unheeded. The permission to return for the purpose of rebuilding the Temple was made the subject of

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6 *Ibid.*

an official decree:

"As for the house of God which is at Jerusalem, Let the house be built, the place where they offer fire continually; its height shall be ninety feet and its breadth ninety feet, with three courses of great stones and one of timber. And let its cost be given from the king's house. Also, let the gold and silver utensils of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took from the house of God and brought to Babylon, be restored and brought again to the Temple which is in Jerusalem, each to its place. And you shall put them in the house of God" (Ezra. 6:3-5).

The utensils were taken from Esagila, the temple of Babylon, and entrusted to a Jewish prince who had been appointed governor of Judah, Sheshbazzar (perhaps Shamash-apal-usur) by name. About 50,000 Jews availed themselves of the opportunity to return to their fatherland with the blessing and help of Cyrus. Aside from the assertion in Ezra 5:16 that he "laid the foundation of the house of God which is in Jerusalem" in 537 B.C., we read no more of the activity of Sheshbazzar.

The leadership of the band of returned exiles passed to Zerubbabel (*Zer-babili*, "seed of Babylon") and Jeshua (or Joshua) the priest. Consonant with the edict of Cyrus, they built the Altar of Burnt Offerings and began the offering of daily morning and evening sacrifices (Ezra 3:3). In the second year of their return the foundations of the Temple were laid amid scenes of great rejoicing (Ezra 3:12). Nothing more was accomplished in the work of rebuilding the Temple during the lifetime of Cyrus (Ezra 4:5).

The joyful enthusiasm of the early days of the return gave way to the gloomy frustration which resulted from the activities of "the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin" (Ezra 4:1). Northern Palestine was populated with the deported captives from the Assyrian conquests to whom the name *Samaritan* was given (see chapter 84). In the Judean highlands, the Negev, and in southern Judah as far north as Hebron, the Edomites, or Idumeans, had settled. The Nabatean Arabs had pressed from the Arabian desert into the area that had been occupied by the Edomites from patriarchal times. North of the Edomites, people known as the Calebites occupied the territory up to Bethlehem (I Chron. 2:50 ff.) These nations had profited from the expulsion of Judah in the days of Nebuchadnezzar. They could not be expected to hail the returning pilgrims with any enthusiasm.

To be sure, some of those, called "the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin," offered to cooperate in the task of rebuilding, alleging that they had been worshipers of the God of Israel, since they had been introduced to the land of Israel as a result of one of Esarhaddon's deportations (Ezra 4:2). They seem to have shared the common concept that each land has its own god and that, as settlers in Israel, they must worship the God of that land. The leaders in Israel were not convinced of the purity of their faith and replied bluntly: "You have no part with us in building a house unto our God. We ourselves, together, will build unto Yahweh, God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, has

commanded us" (Ezra 4:3).

The "people of the land" used every conceivable tactic to hinder the Jews from their work of rebuilding the Temple. However, the power of the Persian Empire seems to have restrained the "adversaries of Judah and Benjamin" from a policy of open war. Ezra tells us that the adversaries "troubled them in building" and tried to persuade the Persian court that the rebuilding of Jerusalem would prove detrimental to Persian interests (Ezra 4:5, 11-16). The adversaries were temporarily successful. For a period of about eighteen years little or no progress was made in the rebuilding process. In the meantime Cyrus died and Cambyses and Darius succeeded to the throne of the empire.

## 7. The Last Days of Cyrus

After the conquest of Babylon, Egypt alone remained of the allies of Croesus who had challenged Cyrus in his bid for world power. Plans for a campaign against Egypt were entrusted to Cyrus' son, Cambyses, while Cyrus personally set out to deal with a revolt of the nomads on the eastern frontiers of the empire. There, in what should have been a mere skirmish, Cyrus was wounded. In the steppe country east of the Caspian Sea he died. His body was carried back to Pasargadae, one of his capital cities.<sup>7</sup> There his body was covered with wax, according to Persian custom, and placed in a stately, dignified tomb which was guarded by faithful priests for two centuries. The tomb is still standing, but its contents have long since been removed.

Few world conquerors have been regarded as highly as Cyrus. The Persians called him "father." The Greeks regarded him as a master and lawgiver. When Alexander the Great found that Cyrus' tomb had been rifled, he ordered that the body be replaced and the contents of the tomb be restored as far as possible. To the Jews he was the Lord's anointed who ended the Babylonian Exile and opened a new era in the history of Israel. Cyrus did not force Persian ideas on his subjects, but rather formed a synthesis of the ancient cultures of Mesopotamia, Syria, Asia Minor, the Greek cities, and parts of India.

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<sup>7</sup> The others: Ecbatana, Babylon, and Susa.