

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

CHAPTER 79

Cambyses and the Conquest of Egypt

For eight years before the death of Cyrus, his eldest son Cambyses had lived in Babylon and acted as his father's representative at the annual New Year's festival. A document dated February 20, 535 B.C., gives us a clue concerning the nature of his administration. Reference is made to the house of Nabu-mar-sharri-usur, steward of the king's son. The name means "May Nabu protect the king's son," and refers to Belshazzar, son of Nabonidus. The name suggests that its possessor was a palace dignitary, responsible for the welfare of members of the royal family. It is significant that Cambyses not only retained the civil officers of the Nabonidus regime, but kept the palace dignitaries as well.¹

Persian custom decreed that the king should not leave his empire unprotected when he left for a foreign war. Before leaving to defend his eastern borders, Cyrus recognized Cambyses as regent with authority to use the title "King of Babylon." When news of his father's death reached Cambyses, he assumed his father's full title, "King of Babylon, King of Lands."

A second son, Bardiya, or Smerdis, as the Greeks called him, was entrusted with the eastern provinces of the empire. When the news of Cyrus' death reached the empire, disorders broke out on all sides. These have commonly been attributed to an attempt of Bardiya to challenge Cambyses' right to the throne. The period is obscure, and the facts that have reached us have been interpreted differently. Cambyses is reported to have murdered his brother, concealing his death. Later, however, on his return from Egypt, Cambyses was to learn of the revolt of one who called himself Bardiya (known as Pseudo-Smerdis by the Greeks). The Behistun Inscription (see chapter 80, p. 516) of Darius agrees with the tradition that Cambyses actually murdered Bardiya:

He who was named Cambyses, the son of Cyrus, one of our race was king before me.
That Cambyses had a brother, Bardiya by name, of the same mother and father as

1 A. T. Olmstead, *The History of the Persian Empire*, p. 87.

Cambyses. Afterwards Cambyses slew this Bardiya. When Cambyses slew Bardiya it was not known unto the people that Bardiya was slain.²

With the question of succession settled, Cambyses was free to proceed with the long-planned expedition against Egypt. The era of Egypt's greatness was long past, but her Pharaohs still had illusions of grandeur. Pharaoh Hophra had contested Nebuchadnezzar's claim to Palestine and encouraged Zedekiah to revolt. Trusting in Egyptian aid, Zedekiah defied Nebuchadnezzar. When Jerusalem fell in 587 B.C., the prestige of Egypt reached a new low.

Repercussions at home were hardly favorable to Hophra. A revolt among the warrior class was quelled by the skill of Amasis, a man who had come up through the ranks and held their confidence. Amasis was actually hailed as king, but a compromise was effected and a co-regency established in which Amasis had full power. Differences between Amasis and Hophra led to war and the death of Hophra. He was accorded a royal burial, but Amasis was free to go on with his own plans.

Seeing the rise of Cyrus and the Persian army, Amasis realized that he needed powerful friends. When the temple of Delphi was destroyed by fire in 548 B.C., he made a substantial contribution toward its rebuilding. He made an alliance with Polycrates, tyrant of Samos. The Greek world was the one hope of Amasis in his determination to challenge the Persian Empire. This alliance, however, was as much a disappointment to Egypt as Egypt had been to Judah in the contest with Nebuchadnezzar.

In about four years after his accession, having settled his domestic problems, Cambyses was ready to turn toward Egypt. While he halted at Gaza to survey the problems of marching his troops through the deserts and marshes which separated him from Egypt, unexpected help came. Polycrates of Samos decided to desert Amasis. In this way one of the best Greek generals in the service of the Pharaoh came to Cambyses to reveal the secrets of the Egyptian defense. This general, Phanes of Halicarnassus, put Cambyses in touch with the Sheikh of the Bedouin who arranged to station relays of camels with water along the route of march! The fifty-five miles of desert were quickly traversed, and Cambyses approached the walls of Pelusium where the Greek mercenaries were commanded by a son of Amasis, Psammeticus III. Amasis did not live to meet the attack of Cambyses. He died after a short illness. This seemed to be another ill omen to the already pressed Egyptians. A few days after the accession of Psammeticus III, rain fell at Thebes -- a rare event which added to the nervous fear of the Egyptians.

After a fierce battle at Pelusium, Psammeticus and his armies fled to Memphis. Eighty years after the battle of Pelusium, Herodotus was shown the bones of the dead strewn over

² The Behistun Inscription, col. 1, line 10. Olmstead considers this account a fiction devised by the usurper Darius to legitimize his own rule. *Op. cit.*, p. 107 f.

the battlefield.³ He was told that Egyptian skulls were harder than those of the Persians!

By fleeing to Memphis, Psammeticus put himself into the position where one more battle would decide the destiny of Egypt. When Cambyses demanded that the capital surrender, his messengers were murdered. Then Cambyses attacked in strength. Firm Egyptian resistance delayed the fall of Memphis for a time, but in the end the city fell to Cambyses, and the land of Egypt entered a new period of history. Psammeticus III was deported to Susa, and Cambyses behaved as a true successor to the Pharaohs. He paid homage to the gods of Egypt and entrusted a high Egyptian official with the administration of the country. Reforms were ordered in the interest of the Egyptian people.

Cambyses determined to become a good Egyptian. As Cyrus had determined to legitimize his claim to the throne of Babylon, so Cambyses determined to ascend the throne of the Pharaohs as a legitimate sovereign. He adopted the royal costume and laid official claim to be the son of the sun-god Re. A firsthand account of Cambyses as he looked in Egyptian eyes was given by Udjhorresne, admiral of the royal fleet under Amasis and Psammeticus, and priest of the goddess Neith at Sais. Udjhorresne was appointed by Cambyses as head physician and served as a companion of the king and major domo of the palace. He prepared the official cartouch which designates Cambyses as "king of Upper and Lower Egypt" and descendant of Re. At the suggestion of Udjhorresne, Cambyses ordered the temple to be cleared of foreigners who had taken residence there.⁴ Revenues which had been diverted from the temple at Sais to pay for Greek mercenaries were restored.

Thus religious policy inaugurated by Cyrus seems to have been carried on by Cambyses. In some cases, however, gifts to the temples diminished and the activities of the priests were restricted. Later writers imputed to Cambyses an attitude of cruelty and ruthlessness which does not do justice to his character.

With Egypt firmly under control, Cambyses determined to press on to other African areas and add them to his domains. Carthage was then the dominant power in the western Mediterranean. Carthage had been colonized by Phoenicians, and the Phoenicians of Tyre refused to dispatch their ships against their own flesh and blood. Canaanite influence on the culture of Carthage is mentioned as late as the time of Augustine.

A land expedition of 50,000 men was sent against the Oasis of Ammon, west of Egypt. The expedition passed successfully the oases of el-Khargeh and ed-Dakhlah and continued their march through the desert. The Greek sources which relate this expedition tell us that it was overwhelmed by a sandstorm. The troops were never heard from again. Their utter annihilation is still a mystery. That the efforts of Cambyses to conquer African areas west of Egypt did not end in total failure, however, is evident from the fact that the Greeks of

³ Herodotus, *Histories* III, 11,12.

⁴ J. Couyat and P. Montet, *Les Inscriptions du Ouadi Hammamat*, no. 164.

Libya, Cyrene, and Barka submitted.

Greek sources also tell of an expedition into Ethiopia, led personally by Cambyses. Before one-quarter of the distance had been covered, the army ran short of provisions and it was necessary to give orders to retreat. During this campaign Cambyses received news of troubles at home. The throne had been usurped by one who claimed to be his brother Bardiya.

Cambyses remained at Memphis for a short time after his return from the Ethiopian campaign. According to Greek sources, he abandoned his earlier kindly attitude toward Egyptian religion, ridiculed the god Ptah, ordered the statues to be burned, and stabbed to death the Apis-bull at Memphis. Olmstead discounts these tales. He states that the Apis-bull died while Cambyses was on his Ethiopian campaign, and the next Apis-bull, born in the fifth year of Cambyses, survived to the fourth year of Darius.⁵

As the news from Iran became more alarming, Cambyses determined to return home. Egypt was left with garrisons at Daphnae, east of the delta, at Memphis the capital, and at Elephantine at the first cataract of the Nile. The Elephantine garrison is of particular interest because it was garrisoned by Jewish mercenaries who had a temple of their own and had correspondence with their Palestinian co-religionists (see chapter 85).

On the course of his journey homeward, probably in northern Palestine, Cambyses received confirmation of the report of the usurpation of the throne by the pretender Gaumata who had assumed the name of Bardiya, or Smerdes. The new ruler was accepted by nearly all the provinces of the empire. He attempted to win the favor of the people by remitting taxes for three years, and he attempted a religious reform.

Cambyses never reached home. Herodotus says his death resulted from a wound accidentally self-inflicted when mounting his horse. The Persian record suggests suicide. We know that Cambyses suffered from epileptic fits, and there are evidences of insanity in his latter days, particularly if the reputed atrocities committed in Egypt after his return from the Ethiopian campaign are to be believed.

After Cambyses died, the army remained loyal to the government which he represented. Two months later the pretender Gaumata was taken prisoner and executed. Darius, son of Hystaspes was to become the next Persian monarch.

5 A. T. Olmstead, *op. cit.*, p. 90 f.