

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

**CHAPTER 80**

***Darius and the Reorganization of the Empire***

Darius claimed to be the legitimate successor of Cambyses. In the eyes of many of his contemporaries he was a usurper. Olmstead entitles his chapter on Darius, "Usurper Darius." The Behistun Inscription shows the pains which Darius took to prove that he was the scion of the house of Achaemenes. He gives his pedigree thus:

"My father is Hystaspes; the father of Hystaspes was Arsames; the father of Arsames was Ariyarmenes; the father of Ariyarmenes was Teispes; the father of Teispes was Achaemenes . . . on that account are we called Achaemenians; from antiquity are we descended; from antiquity hath our race been kings . . . eight of my race were kings before me, I am the ninth."<sup>1</sup>

Legend states that, after the death of Cambyses, seven Persian nobles, under the leadership of Darius, conspired against the false Bardiya. They agreed to choose as king the one whose horse neighed first after sunrise. Through the ruse of his groom, the throne was won for Darius.

1. Revolt in the Empire

Whatever may be said of Darius' claim to the throne, it was established with the greatest of difficulty. With the assassination of Bardiya, the empire began to split apart. Darius, however, was not one to sit idly by and see the empire dismembered. When but twenty years of age, he had accompanied Cyrus in his campaign against the northwestern mountaineers. He had been in Egypt with Cambyses. Revolts began in Elam and Babylon and spread through most of the empire. Within two years, however, Darius was firmly established as the Persian monarch. To accomplish this, he adopted a policy of firmness reminiscent of the cruelty of Assyrians such as Ashurbanipal. More than once we read of the treatment of a rebel in which Darius boasts that he "cut off his nose and his ears and

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1 The Behistun Inscription, col. 1, lines 2-4.

his tongue and put out his eyes,"<sup>2</sup> and cast him in fetters at the royal court to be gazed at by the people as a warning that rebellion does not pay.

## 2. The Behistun (Bisitun) Inscription

Darius wanted his victories to be remembered by posterity. He likewise wished to have his contemporaries respect his power. It was the policy of many Pharaohs and kings of the Near East to prepare monuments to commemorate their victories. The stela of the Egyptian Merneptah commemorates a victory in Palestine and is the first Egyptian mention of Israel. The black obelisk of Shalmaneser shows subject peoples, including Jehu of Israel, paying tribute to the Assyrian. The annals of Sennacherib boast of the victories of the Assyrian who besieged Jerusalem and shut up Hezekiah "like a bird in a cage." Cyrus had recorded his choice by Marduk and his benevolent policy toward captive peoples and gods. None of these ever attempted a monument on so grand a scale as the Behistun Inscription of Darius. He chose a mountainside on which to record his deeds on imperishable stone. On the main caravan route between Bagdad and Tehran, sixty-five miles from Hamadan, at an altitude of five hundred feet, a series of inscriptions fifty-eight feet, six inches long can still be seen. By the side of the road is a spring where the ancient traveler had to stop. Darius used the techniques of the modern billboard advertiser!

Beneath the symbolic figure of his god, Ahuramazda, stands Darius, with his foot resting on the prostrate form of Gaumata, the false Bardiya. The uplifted hand of Darius demands the attention of the passerby, insisting that he stop and read. Behind Gaumata are nine men, their hands bound behind their backs and cords about their necks. These are the pretenders and rebels whom Darius has defeated. Behind Darius are two armsbearers.

The inscription itself was written in Old Persian, Babylonian, and Elamite. As a tri-lingual inscription it may be compared with the Egyptian Rosetta Stone. As the Rosetta Stone provided the key to the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphics to Champollion and his successors, so the Behistun Inscription provided the key to the decipherment of Babylonian (or Akkadian) cuneiform to Rawlinson and later cuneiformists. It would be hard to exaggerate the value of such studies in helping us to reconstruct the history of the ancient Near East.

## 3. Darius and the Jews

The work of rebuilding the Jerusalem Temple, begun as a result of the edict of Cyrus, had come to a halt. The last days of Cyrus and the reign of Cambyses were times of disillusionment and adjustment for the returned exiles. Harassed by unfriendly neighbors, they found they had all they could do to provide for the necessities of this life. The people were agreed on one thing: "The time is not yet come, the time that the Lord's house should

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<sup>2</sup> The Behistun Inscription, col. 2, line 13.

be built" (Hag. 1:2).

This spirit of defeatism was not shared by Haggai and Zechariah, two prophets who began to prophesy to Judah in the second year of Darius. They were aware of the problems which the Jews faced, but theirs was the heroism of faith:

"Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, saith the LORD; and be strong, O Joshua, son of Josedech, the high priest; and be strong, all ye people of the land, said the LORD, and work: for I am with you, saith the LORD of hosts: according to the word that I covenanted with you when ye came out of Egypt, so my spirit remaineth among you: fear ye not" (Hag. 2:4-5).

The threats and the promises of Haggai and Zechariah stirred discouraged Judah to renewed activity. The work of rebuilding began in earnest. Perhaps at the instigation of "the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin," the Persian governor "beyond the river," Tattenai (perhaps "Thithinaia" in Persian) made a visit to investigate the activities of the Jews. Anything that savored of rebellion against Darius would be dealt with promptly. Tattenai's question was a pointed one: "Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this wall?" (Ezra 5:3). The Jews appealed to the decree of Cyrus, and suggested that a search be made of the royal archives for the royal decree.

In the royal archives at Ecbatana the decree was found. Darius determined that it must be honored. His royal order said: "Let the work of this house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews build this house of God in his place" (Ezra 6:7). He further decreed that funds be given the Jews from the royal treasury to assist in the rebuilding project (Ezra 6:8).

The difficulties of the Jews were not over. The adversaries continued to stir up trouble, but it is to the credit of Darius that he honored the decree of Cyrus and encouraged the Jews in their labors.

In the sixth year of Darius (516 B.C.) the Temple was completed. Special dedicatory sacrifices were offered, and the priests and Levites were assigned their respective tasks (Ezra 6:15-18).

#### 4. Civil Government Under Darius

The policy of ruling through native princes, which Cyrus followed, had certain political weaknesses. The opening days of Darius' reign were proof that instability was fostered when the central government was not independently strong. The death of a king was a signal to the native princes to revolt in the hope that the new king would not be able to assert imperial authority.

The institution of the satrapy existed before Darius. The word, in its Persian form *Khshatrapava*, occurs in the Behistun Inscription. Darius developed the institution and extended it over all his empire.

In government as organized by Darius, the king was supreme and absolute. Yet there were certain restrictions upon his liberty. The other six of the seven Persian nobles who had conspired against the false Bardiya had extensive land grants. They also had the right to provide the king's wives. Unless the king married within the royal Achaemenian line as did Darius, he was permitted to marry only the daughters of the Persian nobles. These men must be consulted on important occasions. Seven counselors might be consulted in matters of lesser importance.<sup>3</sup> On points of law, seven judges, appointed for life, must be consulted. The king was bound by his own decisions, as is reflected in the proverbial expression, "the law of the Medes and Persians which altereth not" (Daniel 6:8, 14, 15; cf. Esther 1:19, 8:8).

Under the king were the satraps, each restricted to his own satrapy. The satrap was a civil governor only. The military chief in the satrapy was independent of the governor, and responsible directly to the king. The chief satrapies were filled by members of the royal house. Where such were not available, the king's daughters might be married to a satrap. Rogers observes, "So complete was the process of appointing in the first instance and of hedging about with surveillance within and without that we hear astonishingly little of malfeasance in office among the satraps."<sup>4</sup>

The disappearance of Zerubbabel from his position as governor of Judah may be a result of the civil reorganization effected by Darius. There is no hint in the Biblical records that he was removed for sedition, as some have suggested. The fact that his name simply drops out of the Biblical record may suggest that the change of policy which Darius inaugurated resulted in his removal.<sup>5</sup>

The development of roads and the postal system was another of the projects which Darius designed to facilitate the government of his far-flung empire. Several great roads were inherited from the old Assyrian Empire. One of these extended from Babylon to Carchemish, with a connecting spur to Nineveh, and was prolonged westward and southward to Egypt. Another bound Babylon to the heart of Media. Darius rebuilt the road which connected Nineveh to Ecbatana, passing over the Zagros Mountains, and the road from Ecbatana to Sardis passing through Harran with a spur going down to Susa.

The Persian postal system far surpassed all of its predecessors. The network of roads was divided into post routes with horsemen stationed at regular intervals. Any message from king to satrap, or satrap to king, was carried from one stage to the next until it reached its

3 Cf. Herodotus, *Histories* VII. 8; Ezra 7:14.

4 Robert William Rogers, *A History of Ancient Persia*, p. 112.

5 N. H. Snaith, *The Jews from Cyrus to Herod*, p. 17.

destination. Herodotus' famous description of the Persian Post can be seen engraved across the front of the New York post office: "These neither snow nor rain nor heat nor darkness of night prevent from accomplishing each one his appointed task, with the very utmost speed."<sup>6</sup>

One hundred and eleven post-stations were located along the 1,677-mile road from Susa to Sardis and Ephesus. The caravans took ninety days to travel this road from end to end. The royal couriers, availing themselves of the fresh relays of horses at the post-stations, covered it in a week. The postal system helped to hold the empire together.

## 5. Military Tactics of Darius

The standing army maintained by Darius was surprisingly small. His personal bodyguard consisted of 2,000 cavalry and 2,000 infantrymen of noble birth and 10,000 "immortals" recruited from the Medes and Persians. Further recruits from the Median or Persian nobility might be summoned as needed.

At the most important fortresses, such as Sardis, Memphis, Elephantinae, Daphnae, and Babylon, forces of the standing army were kept. In the event of minor rebellions, the satraps, either alone or in concert with neighboring satraps, were expected to find means to restore order. The king himself was responsible for meeting a major threat. The guard was mobilized and a levy was made to secure recruits. Their lack of adequate training would be a weakness in the event of a major attack. The empire suffered only minor skirmishes for a long period, and the military program was adequate for such.

Darius had been most successful in administering his government. Like many another ruler, he could not stand inactivity. Herodotus reports a conversation in which Atossa, Darius' wife, challenged him with the words, "Sire, you are a mighty ruler; why sit you idle, winning neither new dominions nor new power for your Persians?"<sup>7</sup>

In 512 B.C. Darius decided to attack the Scythians. These nomadic people had come southward and westward from the steppes of Russia and had settled north of the Black Sea, and west and south as far as the Danube.

Tales of the Scythians had spread throughout the Persian Empire. They were ready to occupy Thrace, and Asia Minor would be next! Gold mines were abundant in their country, guarded by griffins and worked by harmless ants as large as foxes! The satrap of Cappadocia had crossed the Black Sea and taken several prisoners from among the Scythians. Darius determined to teach the Scythians respect for Persian arms, and add some Scythian gold to the royal treasury at the same time.

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<sup>6</sup> Herodotus, *Histories* VIII, 98.

<sup>7</sup> Herodotus, *Histories* III, 134.

Although Darius knew little about the Scythians, he had had dealings with the Greeks, and probably hoped to take the Balkans from the rear, and at the same time, deprive Greece of timber for its fleet. Control of the entire Black Sea region would also cut off much of the wheat supply from Greece.

Greek sources suggest that the army raised by Darius for his Scythian campaign numbered about 700,000. This was the first military encounter between Asia and Europe.

Darius' Greek physician, Democedes, was sent with a fleet to reconnoiter the Greek coast and is thought to have reached Tarentum. A force of thirty more ships explored the western waters of the Black Sea. Byzantium accepted Persian rule. The beginnings of the campaign appeared auspicious.

The army passed over the Straits on a bridge of boats and conquered eastern Thrace with little resistance. They followed the contour of the Black Sea to the mouth of the Danube, then followed the Danube west to the head of the Danube Delta where a bridge was built by the Ionians of Darius' army. It was Darius' hope to carry out his land operations in conjunction with the fleet which was to follow along the coast, but the navy and the army soon lost contact and Darius had to plunge into the interior of the country. The Scythians would not stand to give battle, but withdrew before the Persians, forcing the Persians to enter an unknown country. The "scorched earth" policy of the Scythians soon produced real suffering in an army which expected to find its support from the land. Darius was compelled to give up the pursuit of fleeing nomads and retreated toward the Danube bridge and civilization.

The Scythian campaign was not a complete failure. Before recrossing the Bosphorus, a force of 80,000 men was dispatched to complete the conquest of Thrace, and this was successfully carried out. The Persian boundaries were now in contact with the northern Greeks. Macedonia recognized the suzerainty of Darius.

Back in Asia Minor the Greek coastal cities successively fell into the hands of Darius. The centers of the Black Sea wheat trade were all in his hands. Except for Greece itself, Darius was sovereign of the Greek world.

About the time of the Scythian campaign in the west, the Persians decided to descend from the Iranian plateau upon the plain of the Punjab region of India. The project was easily accomplished, and a new satrapy was formed which yielded immense revenues for the Persian crown.

Resisting the temptation to push east to the Ganges, Darius turned his attention to the southeast. He ordered the building of a fleet which was put under the command of Scylax, a Greek admiral in the employ of Darius. For thirty months Scylax explored the Indus

River, the Indian Ocean, and the Red Sea.<sup>8</sup>

Darius was interested in exploration because of his desire to connect Egypt with the rest of his empire. Scylax discovered the relation between the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean.

In the days of Pharaoh Necho an unsuccessful attempt had been made to build a canal between the Nile River and the Gulf of Suez. In 518, while in Egypt, Darius evidently noticed traces of this earlier enterprise. His desire for a cheaper and more direct route to India caused him to give orders for the digging of a new canal. Five red-granite stelae were erected along the banks of the canal. On them Darius declares:

"I am a Persian. From Parsa I seized Egypt. I commanded this canal to be dug from the river, Nile by name, which flows in Egypt, to the sea which goes from Parsa. Afterward this canal was dug as I commanded, and ships passed from Egypt through this canal to Parsa as was my will."<sup>9</sup>

## 6. Greek Rebellion

Darius was never able to incorporate the mainland Greeks into his empire. His successes in Thrace and Macedonia served to put the democratically minded Greek city states on guard. Darius tried to interfere in the internal affairs of Athens, which had a pro-Persian party, but the presence of Persian gold in Athens had a negative effect. Athens threw in her lot with the opposition.

The courage of the European Greeks in daring to defy Darius sparked a revolt of the Ionians who had been Persian subjects. The Ionian league was re-established, and the aid promised by European Greece was proclaimed. The Greeks seized Sardis but had to retreat before Persian reinforcements. Meanwhile the European Greeks withdrew because of war between Athens and Aegina. The area suffered at the hands of the Persians to such an extent that the consequences were felt for two centuries.

Since the revolt of the Ionians had been encouraged by the European Greeks, Persia decided it must take action against the continent. A fleet of 600 ships left Asia Minor with the avowed purpose of strengthening the pro-Persian elements in Greece by a show of force. Half the ships and about 20,000 men were lost in a severe storm off Mt. Athos. A second attempt was more successful. Datis, the Median admiral, besieged the Greek city of

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8 Aristotle refers to an account of his experiences written by Scylax (*Politics* VII. 14. 2). In modern times it has been questioned by many competent scholars and the episode simply ignored by others. Meyer, *Geschichte des Altertums*, III, p. 90 ff, and Rogers, *op. cit.* p. 119, accept it as true.

9 Diodorus, i. 33.9, claims that the canal was not completed because the king was told that the level of the Red Sea was higher than that of the Nile, and therefore Egypt would be flooded if the canal were actually opened.

Eretria. When it was betrayed into his hands, Datis made the mistake of burning the temples, destroying the town, and selling its inhabitants as slaves to Susa. This served to unite the various factions of Greeks against Persia. They saw clearly that the Persians would show no mercy toward the conquered Greeks.

When Darius landed at Marathon, he was met by the Athenian army. Before reinforcements could arrive from Sparta, the Athenians met the Persians and won a resounding victory. Seven Persian ships were captured by the Greeks, and the remainder withdrew. Troubles in Egypt demanded the attention of Darius, and he gave up his plans for resuming his operations against Greece.

Shortly after Marathon, Egypt was in open revolt against Darius. The heavily garrisoned troops living off the land, and the heavy tribute and taxes demanded by Darius, proved too much for the Egyptians. The Greeks had probably encouraged revolt in Egypt and other trouble spots in the Persian Empire.

## 7. The End of Darius

Before the Egyptian revolt was ended, Darius had died. As an organizer of the civil government he has seldom been equaled. The royal palace which he built at Persepolis was one of the great structures of antiquity. Darius could be cruel. He ruled as an absolute monarch. Organizationally, the Persian Empire reached its peak of efficiency under Darius, but decay had already begun to set in.