

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

CHAPTER 81

Xerxes and the Attempted Conquest of Greece

Xerxes had been carefully groomed as successor to Darius. If some question exists concerning the right of Darius to the throne, the line of Xerxes cannot be challenged. He was the son of Darius by Atossa, a daughter of Cyrus. For twelve years he served under his father as viceroy of Babylon before succeeding to the throne at the death of Darius. The Persian form of the name Xerxes is Khshayarsha, which, in Hebrew, is rendered Ahasuerus (Ezra 4:6 and the Book of Esther).

1. Revolts in the Empire

When, at the age of thirty-five, Xerxes succeeded his father as king, the land of Egypt was in rebellion and the Greek problem had not been resolved. Xerxes acted promptly. Egypt was made submissive to the Persian crown, and Achemenes, a younger brother of Xerxes, was placed in charge.

Babylon next rebelled, with several claimants assuming the royal title "King of Babylon and of the Lands," but Xerxes decided to act. Zopyros was appointed Satrap by Xerxes, only to be slain by the rebellious Babylonians. Megabysos, the son of the slain satrap, was appointed in his stead, and Xerxes determined to thoroughly humble the Babylonians.

The walls of the city were razed by the Persians, and the ornate temples of Babylon were destroyed. The famous temple, Esagila, was demolished, and the golden statue of Bel-Marduk was melted down. Every king who claimed to be the legitimate ruler of Babylon was required to take the hands of this statue of the god of Babylon every New Year's day. In destroying the statue, Xerxes attempted to end the very concept of a continuing Babylonian Empire. The title "King of Babylon," which had been part of the royal title of the Persian kings since Cyrus, was dropped. Xerxes simply called himself "King of Persia and Media," with Babylon continuing as a part of the Persian Empire.

2. Xerxes and Greece

After successfully resolving the problems within the empire, Xerxes turned his attention westward. Careful preparation was made for a simultaneous land and sea attack on Greece, a project attempted but not successfully executed by Darius.

For three years Xerxes planned for the impending invasion. A canal was built to avoid the tempestuous cape of Athos, where Darius had lost a large portion of his fleet. Bridges were erected and provisions were assembled at strategic places in preparation for the attack.

Xerxes recruited his army from forty-six nations. Twenty-nine Persian generals commanded the army, with Xerxes as commander-in-chief. The straits which separate Asia Minor from Europe were spanned by a bridge of boats built by the Phoenicians. Xerxes made a libation to his gods, and cast a cup, a sword, and a bow into the waters to insure success.

Our information comes from the Greek historians, and we suspect that some of their figures are exaggerated. The importance of the invasion, and the subsequent withdrawal of Xerxes, can hardly be exaggerated, however.

The fleet of Xerxes numbered, we are told, 1,207 fighting vessels with additional large ships driven by as many as fifty oars. The number of transports -- 3,000 -- is almost certainly an exaggeration. The ships were manned by the Phoenicians, but among the navigators were also Cypriots, Ionians, Cilicians, and Hellespontese. Four hundred and seven Greek ships are said to have been enlisted in Xerxes' navy.

After spending the winter in Sardis, the armies of Xerxes crossed the bridge from Asia to Europe in May or June, 480 B.C. The fleet then sailed to Sarpedon. In the meantime Xerxes sent heralds to the Greek cities to give them an opportunity to submit voluntarily. They were asked to send back earth and water in token of their submission.

While Xerxes was temporarily encamped at Therma, the heralds made their reports. A few brought earth and water, but most of Greece was determined to fight for its independence. Early in August, Xerxes began to move forward.

Athens and Sparta resolved their own differences and formed a coalition to fight the Persians. They appealed to all the Greeks to join them in fighting for their liberty. They met with considerable, but not universal, success. Argos and Crete adopted a policy of neutrality.

The early battles were disastrous for the Greeks. Thessaly was lost in spite of the valiant fighting of ten thousand heavily armed infantry who had been sent to guard the vale of Tempe. The middle of Greece was next under attack and the Greeks determined to hold Mt. Oeta, which was flanked on the right by the Euboean Straits and the Gulf of Malis. Ten

thousand men under the Spartan, Leonidas, determined to defend the only road through the pass at Thermopylae. A Greek fleet was sent to meet the Persian navy at Artemisium.

A storm destroyed three of the Greek ships sent to Artemisium, but the Persians lost, according to Greek figures, four hundred ships of war, and a larger number of transports off the Artemisium promontory. Fifteen Persian ships seeking refuge from the storm were captured by the Greeks.

The Spartans, under Leonidas, were prepared to check the advance of the Persians into central Greece, but Greece was betrayed by a Malian named Ephialtes. The Persians were shown a path over the mountain to the rear of the Greeks. The Spartans fought to the end, and Leonidas became a hero by dying at his post. The Persians, however, won an important objective, for mid-Greece had opened before them. By August Xerxes was in Athens. He burned the temples on the acropolis, allegedly in revenge for the burning of Sardis.

The goals of Xerxes appeared about to be realized. Xerxes hoped to complete the conquest of Greece by engaging the Greek fleet which was concentrated at Salamis. The Greeks had about 380 ships, only half the number the Persians could place in battle. Yet the Battle of Salamis, September 27th or 28th, 480 B.C., became one of the decisive battles of history. The destruction of Athens had shown the Greeks that their culture and civilization would not be respected by a conqueror like Xerxes. Fighting for their homes and their lives, the Greeks so thoroughly defeated the Persians at Salamis that the Persian fleet, with Xerxes, was forced to flee.

The Persians still had a large land army, and Xerxes entrusted the Greek campaign to Mardonius, one of his generals. First seeking success through diplomacy, Mardonius was unable to make any headway with the Greeks.

Mardonius next fought a series of battles designed to bring Greece finally to her knees before Persia. Much of Attica was despoiled and Mardonius moved on to Boeotia. The Greeks of the Peloponnesus took the offensive, however. Mardonius was defeated at Meggara. A defensive position was taken by Mardonius between Plataea and the river Asopus. With 50,000 Asiatic troops and 10,000 Greek allies he awaited attack. Twelve thousand Spartans, heavily armed, joined other Greeks to make a comparable army of 50,000 poised against the Persians. In cavalry, Mardonius had an advantage, but otherwise the armies were of comparable strength.

After ten days of waiting for favorable omens, Mardonius used his cavalry to attack the Greeks. The Persians were decisively defeated. The Greeks, who had been warned of the impending attack, were able to make the best use of their forces. Mardonius was slain and his army fled, leaving immense stores of provisions and booty in the field. Herodotus says that not 3,000 Persians remained alive, although this is considered to be an exaggeration.

At the same time the Athenians succeeded in conquering Persia's Greek allies. Before autumn the entire Hellespont area was in Greek hands. The following spring Byzantium, the last Persian stronghold in the Greek world, fell, and the bitter struggle between the Persians and the Greeks was ended.

3. The Close of Xerxes' Reign

After the Greek debacle, Xerxes was not to distinguish himself again on the field of battle. He lived fourteen years after the loss of Greece, but little is known about them. He was murdered by a usurper, Artabanus, who is said to have reigned seven months before being killed by Artaxerxes, the third son and legitimate heir of Xerxes. The first son born after the king's accession to the throne was regarded as legitimate successor.

4. Xerxes and the Bible

There is only one brief reference to Xerxes in the annals of Palestinian Judaism. Ezra 4:6 is the one Biblical reference which bridges the fifty-eight-year period between the dedication of the Temple and the arrival of Ezra in the seventh year of Artaxerxes. The only information we have states that "the people of the land," that is, the Samaritans, Edomites, and other enemies of Judah, in the beginning of the reign of Ahasuerus (Xerxes) wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.

Xerxes seems to have been too busy elsewhere to trouble himself with the problems of Judah. The period was one of frustration and disappointment for the Jews who were looking for deliverance from their foes.

The lot of the Jews who had chosen not to return to Judah is described in the Book of Esther. The virtuous Vashti was deposed by Xerxes who searched the realm for a suitable substitute. Esther, who was not known to be a Jewess, was chosen as the fairest maiden in the empire and brought to be a wife to Xerxes. When the royal favorite, Haman, determined to rid himself of the hated Mordecai, cousin and guardian of Esther, along with all the Jews of the realm, Mordecai urged Esther to intercede with Xerxes on behalf of her people. He was convinced that she had "come to the kingdom for such a time as this." She risked her life by seeking an audience with the king. Xerxes received her kindly, however. He determined to save the Jews from the annihilation that had been decreed. Haman was hanged on the gallows which he had prepared for Mordecai. The Jewish feast of Purim commemorates this deliverance of the Jews in the days of Esther.

Xerxes was reputed to act habitually like a spoiled child. The Esther episode agrees well with this description. He was given to ostentation and loved display, and appears to have been susceptible to the flattery and intrigue of fawning courtiers. Religiously he was a Zoroastrian, which may account, in part, for his willingness to destroy the Bel-Marduk

temple in Babylon. He was assassinated by the captain of his bodyguard, Artabanus, in the twentieth year of his reign.