

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

**CHAPTER 82**

***Artaxerxes I and the Loss of Persian Prestige***

The age of Artaxerxes is one of the best-documented periods of classical antiquities. Herodotus, the "father of history," was traveling throughout the world and writing his famous histories. Pericles was in power in Athens. The famous monuments of the Parthenon were built during the Periclean age, and Athens reached the zenith of its culture and influence.

Artaxerxes Longimanus (i.e., "the long handed" because his right hand was reputedly longer than his left hand) had the usual problem of putting down rebellions in various parts of the realm when he became king of the Persian Empire. The efficient governmental system of Darius had been weakened during the reign of Xerxes, with the result that rebellion was more likely to succeed. Hystaspes, a brother of Artaxerxes, attempted to assert independent rule in Bactria, but Artaxerxes acted quickly and forcefully to re-establish his own royal authority.

Disturbances in Egypt gave Artaxerxes more cause for concern. Familiar with Greek defiance of Persia, many in Egypt hoped for a similar position of independence. Inaros, a son of the Pharaoh Psammeticus, was recognized as king by a group of the nomes of the eastern Delta. Achemenes, son of Darius and brother of Xerxes, represented the Persian interests in Egypt. While Artaxerxes was putting down the Bactrian revolt, Achemenes appeared in Persia to seek help in bringing Egypt into submission. An army was raised, and Achemenes returned to Egypt.

Achemenes defeated Inaros in the initial battle. A Greek fleet of two hundred vessels subsequently came to the aid of the rebellious Egyptians, and most of the city of Memphis was lost to the Persians. Artaxerxes raised a new army under the leadership of Megabyzos and enlisted the aid of a Phoenician navy under Artabazos. A decisive battle was fought in the Delta, and Inaros was wounded. The Egyptians and their Greek allies barricaded themselves in Prosopitis for eighteen months. Unable to dislodge them by military attack, the Persians diverted the branch of the Nile in which the Greek fleet was anchored. The

desperate crew burned the ships before surrendering to the Persians. The Phoenicians sank a fleet of fifty Greek triremes which had been sent to reinforce the rebels. Thus the rebellion in Egypt was put down, but Persia had had to pay a large price to retain control over Egypt.

At this time Ezra "the scribe" requested permission of Artaxerxes to lead a fresh group of Jews back to Judea. Ezra was called "the scribe of the law of the God of heaven." Olmstead suggests that this would be equivalent to "Secretary of State for Jewish Affairs." Ezra would thus be responsible to the king for the Jewish community.

Jews had prospered in Babylonia during the Persian rule. Great business houses like that of the Murashu family of Nippur have left us cuneiform texts which describe the details of their extensive business enterprise.<sup>1</sup> While the more worldly minded would have little concern for the settlement which had been established in Jerusalem in the days of Cyrus, the spiritually minded knew that God was working out His purposes through that remnant that had returned.

Ezra gathered together 1,500 such Babylonian Jews as a group of colonists who would reinforce and assist the earlier settlers, and help accomplish the necessary rebuilding and defense operations. In the seventh year of Artaxerxes I the group organized at Ahava, a district in Babylonia. Bearing gold, silver, and Temple utensils, they started out on a journey which would take them over five months to complete.

Arriving safely on the twelfth day of the seventh month, Ezra lost no time in beginning his ministry. The reading and interpretation of the Law, and its enforcement, particularly in the matter of mixed marriages, occupied much of his time and energies. It should be remembered that he was acting on the authority of the Persian government, and that his decrees were binding in a political as well as in a religious sense.

Men who had returned from Babylon were frequently guilty of divorcing their lawful Jewish wives and marrying the women of the land. In Pre-Exilic days mixed marriages had been a temptation. Solomon was led astray by his foreign wives. The restored community must, according to Ezra's interpretation of Scripture, rid itself of the "daughters of the peoples of the lands." The people were ordered to assemble in Jerusalem, under penalty of the "devotion" (i.e., destruction) of their property and exclusion from the congregation. At the appointed assembly the divorce of alien wives was accepted in principle, with provision for detailed examination of individual cases.

Enemies of Judah sought to find some excuse to prevent the Jews from fortifying and protecting the city of Jerusalem. Ever since the first return the adversaries had been at work. In the days of Artaxerxes a letter of accusation was addressed to the Persian king in

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1 H. V. Hilprecht and A. T. Clay, *Business Documents of Murashu Sons of Nippur*.

which the Jews were accused of plotting rebellion against the crown. Artaxerxes, nervous at the thought of rebellion, ordered the Jews to stop their rebuilding operations until he should make a further decree (Ezra 4:1-21). The enemies of Judah used force (Ezra 4:23) to prevent the Jews from completing their work of rebuilding the city walls. It is this state of affairs that challenged Nehemiah.

In the court of Artaxerxes in Susa (or Shushan), Nehemiah was functioning as royal cupbearer. The exact nature of his work is not known, but his was a position of importance which brought him into close terms with the king. When the king learned of the distress of heart which plagued Nehemiah, he gave him a leave of absence to return to Jerusalem to assist in repairing the broken walls.

With an armed escort, Nehemiah reached Jerusalem and surveyed the needs of the city. He summoned the leaders of the city and assured them that God's hand was upon him. Unitedly they began to build. The old enemies of the Jews were as active as ever. A cry of rebellion was made. They attempted to lure Nehemiah to a conference in the valley of Ono. They charged Nehemiah with assuming royalty. Nehemiah disregarded the charges of the enemy and patiently continued his work.

In spite of opposition from without and from within, the walls went up, the gates were set in place, and the city was able to function once more. A city without walls was no city at all, according to ancient standards.

The completion of the work was enthusiastically celebrated. Ezra and Nehemiah headed processions which moved around the walls in opposite directions, meeting near the site of the Temple. Sacrifices were offered, and the sound of rejoicing was heard afar off.

With pomp and ceremony the populace gathered in the Temple courts to hear the reading of God's Word and to pledge their obedience to its precepts. It was probably the Pentateuch that Ezra had in his hands as he read the Law of the Lord. The Feast of Tabernacles was observed as the people rejoiced in the goodness of God.

After an absence of twelve years, Nehemiah returned to Susa to report to the king. He had no sooner left Jerusalem than the old problems began to reappear. The enemies came back on the scene to make trouble, the Levites did not receive the dues to which they were entitled, the laws of the Sabbath were forgotten, and foreign marriages became common again. The children were heard speaking the languages of their non-Jewish mothers (Neh. 13:23,24).

Nehemiah made a second trip to Jerusalem. Dependent on God to help him enforce the divine Law, Nehemiah accomplished a second reformation of the religious and civil life of Jerusalem. With this, both the Book of Nehemiah and the history of the Old Testament comes to a close.

Artaxerxes was not in the position to strengthen his holdings in the west, and the decline of the Persian Empire is usually dated from his reign. Egypt and Cyprus were still subject to Persia, but most of the rest of the west was gone. The Athenian fleet dominated the eastern Mediterranean. Thrace was self-governing. The conquests of Cyrus in Ionia were in Greek hands.