

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

CHAPTER 83

The Latter Achemenians,
Approaching the End

The reign of Darius II was one of intrigue and corruption. Although no battles were fought with the Greeks, Persian gold was used to incite Athens against Sparta in the Peloponnesian War. Persian influence over the Greek cities of Asia Minor was thus strengthened.

Minor successes did not change the pattern of history, however. Revolts continued throughout the Persian Empire. The Medes rebelled. Egypt was restive. The Jewish temple at Elephantine was destroyed, but Persia was unable to punish the insurgents.

Artaxerxes II barely missed being killed by his brother Cyrus during his coronation ceremony at Persepolis. At the intreaty of his mother, Artaxerxes pardoned Cyrus. Returning to his satrapy, Cyrus again plotted rebellion. He raised an army and came close to winning a decisive battle near Babylon. Cyrus was a man of courage. He might have arrested the decline of the dynasty had he occupied the throne. But he was killed in battle, and the dreams of his followers were dissipated.

The story of the Greek contingent in Cyrus' army was immortalized by Xenophon. After the disastrous battle of Cunaxa (401 B.C.), the Ten Thousand, as the Greeks were called, fought their way back home, passing through hostile territory and harried by the Persians under Tissaphernes. After the Greek generals had been killed by the Persians, Xenophon was chosen as one of the leaders of the retreat. He led the Ten Thousand up the Tigris, past the ruins of Nineveh (now a forgotten city), to the Black Sea and Byzantium. Xenophon's account of this famous retreat in *The Anabasis* became one of the great books of military science in the ancient world.

Although Persian arms were weak, Artaxerxes was able to maintain some prestige at home and abroad by the use of Persian gold. In Greece, Athens and Sparta were played off against one another to the benefit of Persia. The Greek cities of Asia Minor were subject to

Artaxerxes, and opposition found a quick response. Persian forces on land and sea maintained control over the Ionian Greeks, although the glory of Persia was a thing of the past.

Within Persia new problems arose. A number of the satrapies had become powerful, hereditary offices. High taxes were imposed on the native population, with the result that revolt was fomented. Egypt had declared its independence at the accession of Artaxerxes and had never been reconquered. Cyprus, Phoenicia, and Syria took advantage of Persian weakness to follow suit. Revolts of peasants and artisans were savagely repressed, but the disintegration of the empire continued. One after another the western satrapies all fell away from the empire. They formed a coalition and issued their own coinage.

When Egypt, allied with Sparta and the rebel satraps, marched against Artaxerxes, the empire seemed doomed. A reprieve came, however, when a revolt against Pharaoh Takhos made it necessary for Egypt to abandon its plans and surrender. The threat against Persia was relieved for the time being, but disturbances continued until the death of Artaxerxes II.

Before its downfall, the Achaemenian Persian Empire was to enjoy one more period of power. Artaxerxes III determined to rule with the strength of a Darius the Great. He began his reign by murdering all his brothers and sisters -- several dozen in all. Sidon, which had sympathized with rebellious Egypt, was burnt and left in ruins. Egypt was reconquered, its cities taken, and their walls razed. Persia was again in a position to menace the Greeks.

Hellenism existed as a cultural if not a political force. Patriotic Greeks urged all who shared Greek culture to unite against the Persians. The mainland Greeks lacked the unity which could accomplish such a mission. To the north, however, Macedon was ruled by an energetic leader who became the dominant personality among the Greeks.

Prodded by the oratory of Demosthenes, Athens concluded an alliance with Persia. Philip of Macedon interpreted this as an unfriendly gesture. In 338 B. C. Philip and his son Alexander won a decisive victory over Athens. The Persian threat was removed, but Greek independence was also destroyed. Philip of Macedon and his son Alexander (later "the Great") now held the destiny of Greece. In the same year Artaxerxes was poisoned.

The murderer of Artaxerxes was Bagoas, a eunuch who had political ambitions of his own. Bagoas spared the life of Arses, the youngest son of Artaxerxes, expecting to use him as a puppet ruler. When Arses showed evidence of having a mind of his own, Bagoas poisoned him also.

In looking for someone whom he might trust, Bagoas chose a cousin of Artaxerxes III who had distinguished himself in battle and had become satrap of Armenia. Bagoas had chosen unwisely again, however. The new monarch took the name of Darius III. Fearing the

power and treachery of Bagoas, Darius had him poisoned.

Darius III became king of Persia in 336 B.C. The same year twenty-year-old Alexander ascended the throne in faraway Macedonia with a commission from his father to make war upon Persia. The tide of empire moved toward Alexander and away from Darius. In 333 B.C. Darius was defeated in the battle of Issus. Two years later the center of the empire was pierced by Alexander's victory at Gaugemela, or Arbela. Darius fled to Ecbatana, and then on to Bactria, where he was murdered by his cousin Bessus who took command of the unsuccessful opposition to Alexandria in Bactria.

It is probable that Darius III is the "Darius the Persian" mentioned in Nehemiah 12:22. According to Josephus,¹ Jaddua, who is listed as a contemporary of "Darius the Persian," was also a contemporary of Alexander the Great.

With the death of Darius III the empire founded by Cyrus the Great came to an end. The dynasty is named after Achemenes, a minor ruler of a mountainous district in southwestern Iran. The period of ancient Persia's greatness extended from about 550 B.C. to 330 B.C.

1 *Antiquities* xi. 8. 4.