

What's the Message – Lesson 87

Today we begin our study of the years between the Testaments.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Lord, we pray that You would open our minds to see Your hand at work, guiding the momentous events that took place during this period to the fulfillment of Your eternal plan. Amen.

For many of us, the four centuries between the Old and the New Testaments are silent and unknown. Oh, there will be a name or two that rings a bell of recognition, but even then we may still wonder how these people fit into the historical picture. So we will attempt to bring the highlights into a clearer pattern in order that you may see how God was controlling events for the coming of His Son. This was the age of great empires, and the first of these was Persia.

Cyrus, a name you heard in Lesson 80 – our first lesson on the reconstruction of Jerusalem – was the king of the Persians when Babylon was overthrown and the Assyrian empire came to its end. Cyrus had come from obscurity out of a minor district in the north of the territory of the Medes, an area that we know today as western Iran. He began his rise to prominence by capturing the capital of the Medes, and then expanded westward all the way to the kingdom of Lydia, which today is the western third of Turkey. This gained him the trade markets of Ionia. Moving to the east, he drove into what is now Afghanistan. With all this under his belt in just a few years, he was ready to move against Babylon, and captured it with little opposition. Then Darius, his son and successor, took the obvious next step and added Egypt to the realm. Now the Persian empire extended from Egypt to India, and west to the edge of Greece.

Darius was the man on the throne of Persia at the time Haggai and Zechariah were trying to push the Jews along in the building of the temple, but he had far greater things on his mind than just a building in a minor province of the kingdom. He had his eyes on Greece, and in the year 513 B.C. had his engineers erect two pontoon bridges across the Hellespont, the narrow strip of deep water between Asia Minor and Europe that we know today as the

Dardanelles. His plan was to march in and take control of the Greek trade routes.

But the Greeks not only resisted, they struck back, and years went by with the Greeks and Persians at an impasse. In the year 490 B.C., Darius aimed his army at Athens, determined to break the resistance. But it was the Greeks who were victorious in the battle at Marathon, and the Persians were driven out, for a while. Ten years later, they were back again, this time under the most powerful emperor yet, Xerxes. This time the Persians were successful and won the battle at Thermopylae, defeating Leonidas and his Spartans, and destroying Athens. Then the unexpected happened, and the Greek navy so overwhelmed the Persian navy in Salamis Bay below Athens, that the Persians had to retreat in defeat, never to return again.

This Xerxes – called Ahasuerus in the Bible – was the same Persian king who made Esther his queen. Her story, and how she defeated the plot of the prime minister who wanted to kill all the Jews is told in the book of Esther. But the historical picture on the larger scale showed that under Xerxes the Persian empire had reached its peak, and it began its inevitable decline. Xerxes was followed by his third son, named Artaxerxes, the man who was king at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. And over in Macedonia, in what we think of as the northern part of Greece today, a man named Philip brought new organization to the army of Macedonia and over the next 20 years brought an end to the rivalry of the Greek city states – particularly Athens and Sparta – by conquering them all.

The Greeks celebrated this accomplishment by electing Philip to be the commander of the allied Greek forces that were preparing to invade Persia and take revenge for what they considered crimes committed by Xerxes years earlier. But Philip was assassinated, depriving him of the possibility of achieving that goal. It was now up to his twenty-year old son to carry out the task. This young man we refer to today as Alexander the Great. Alexander had been under the tutelage of no less a teacher than Aristotle, and at age 16 had been made a regent of Greece.

In the year 334 B.C. Alexander crossed the Hellespont with some 30,000 foot soldiers and about 5,000 cavalry. The Persian army, under the leadership of its newest king, Darius III, was no match for the Greeks.

The Persian army was destroyed so completely that Darius III took to his heels fleeing for his life, leaving his harem and many wives behind. Alexander proceeded quickly to subdue Syria, then headed for Egypt, conquering everything in his path.

The Egyptians received Alexander warmly, as their liberator from the rule of the now hated Persians. Alexander responded by founding the city of Alexandria in the delta of the Nile, a city that was to become a center of art, science and learning with a great library. Before the year was out he overran the Persian capital at Persepolis and brought the Persian empire to its end.

But he did not stop with that. Soon he reached as far as the Indus River in India, but his troops refused to go any farther, fearing that they were nearing the edge of the world. Legend has it that Alexander wept . . . for there were no more lands for him to conquer, and they returned to Babylon. There, while he was making plans for further exploits, he fell sick with a fever, and died at the age of only 32.

This is a reasonable point for you to ask, “So what?” This is all interesting, even fascinating history, but what does it have to do with me today? My answer to you is to wait for another session so that you will see a bigger picture – a picture taking shape of God at work controlling the events of history for His purpose.

Next time we will see what happens to the empire of Alexander and how it affected the people of Judah.