

Who was Artaxerxes in the Bible?

Artaxerxes was king of Persia from c. 464 to c. 425 BC. He was a son of King Xerxes (Ahasuerus) and is often referred to as Artaxerxes I Longimanus. Ezra and Nehemiah both traveled from Persia to Jerusalem from the court of Artaxerxes. Although he saw several insurrections over the course of his reign, Artaxerxes' rule is generally regarded as a peaceful one. Due to his tolerant policy toward the Jews in his realm, Artaxerxes played a key role in the rebuilding of the temple and the wall of Jerusalem.

As God's judgment for Judah's idolatry and rebellion, Judah was attacked by the Babylonians in 589 BC. The city of Jerusalem was destroyed. The Jews were held captive for 70 years in Babylon and, after Babylon's fall, in Persia, but God had promised that His people would be restored to their homeland. So in 539 BC, by God's leading, Emperor Cyrus the Great of Persia decreed that the Jews be allowed to return to Jerusalem. Many Israelites returned immediately, but, as they had been all but assimilated into the Babylonian and Persian societies, some stayed behind. Cyrus returned the articles Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had stolen from the temple, and he also decreed that the Israelites be given generous gifts from their Persian houses (Ezra 1:4-11). When the Israelites arrived in Jerusalem, led by Zerubbabel, they immediately began to rebuild the temple and surrounding city (Ezra 3).

While the Israelites worked on the repairs, they faced great opposition from people in the surrounding lands (Ezra 4:1-5). This adversity continued even to King Artaxerxes' reign (Ezra 4:5-6). At that time, dissenters by the names of Bishlam, Mithredath, and Tabeel wrote a letter to Artaxerxes, leveling accusations against the Jews and claiming that the Jews would no longer pay taxes to the Persian Empire. Concerned, Artaxerxes immediately ordered that the repairs be halted and allowed the dissenters to send their

forces to Jerusalem to stop the work (verse 23).

In the seventh year of his reign, Artaxerxes allowed Ezra the priest to take as many Israelites as he wished back to Jerusalem, even providing gold and silver for the people to purchase offerings and whatever else was needed for the temple (Ezra 7:11-20). In addition, he decreed that it was unlawful for anyone to levy any taxes on the Levites, priests, or any others serving in the temple.

The fact that Artaxerxes first obstructed and then aided the rebuilding of the temple has caused some commentators to assume the Artaxerxes mentioned in Ezra 4 was actually a different person from the Artaxerxes mentioned in Ezra 7. According to this theory, the first Artaxerxes was a usurper to the Persian throne and identified in other historical records as Smerdis, who only ruled for eight months. The main problem with this theory is that there is no known historical document that identifies Smerdis with Artaxerxes. A more likely explanation is that Artaxerxes simply had a change of heart toward the Jews, based on evidence of the Jews' peaceful intentions in Jerusalem.

In the twentieth year of his reign, Artaxerxes noticed that his trusted cupbearer, Nehemiah, was downcast. Servants were to maintain a pleasing countenance in the king's presence, and so Nehemiah was technically breaking the law by looking sad. But Artaxerxes was merciful and asked Nehemiah to explain why he was troubled (Nehemiah 2:2). Nehemiah may have been born in Persia, but his heart belonged in his homeland, and he was grieved when a report reached him saying that Jerusalem's walls were still in rubble almost 100 years after Cyrus had allowed the Israelites to return to their land (Nehemiah 1:1-4). After consulting the Lord, Nehemiah spoke to King Artaxerxes and requested leave to go repair the walls. Artaxerxes not only granted Nehemiah's request,

but he also wrote letters to ensure Nehemiah's safe passage.

Because the Lord had inclined Artaxerxes' heart toward the Jews, they were able to repair the walls in record time: a total of 52 days (Nehemiah 6:15). God's people were officially reestablished in the land God had given them so long ago. Artaxerxes' decree to rebuild Jerusalem fulfilled part of Daniel's "70 Weeks" prophecy and set the prophetic clock ticking down to the time of the Messiah (Daniel 9:25).