

What is the significance of the Medo-Persian Empire in biblical history?

The Medo-Persians, led by King Cyrus II, invaded Babylonia from the east in June of 539 B.C. and captured its capital, Babylon, in July of the same year. In biblical chronology, this occurred near the end of the Babylonian exile. Within a short time, Daniel became a trusted adviser to the new Medo-Persian Empire. This kingdom of the Medes and the Persians was later ruled by Artaxerxes II, or Ahasuerus, who married Esther.

Today, Persia is essentially synonymous with modern Iran, and this was not so different in ancient times. However, Persia as an ancient kingdom, especially when referenced along with Media, encompassed Egypt in the west to parts of India in the east, and included Asia Minor from the eastern border of Greece to Tajikistan.

The Medo-Persian Empire Foretold

Isaiah, Jeremiah and Daniel all prophesied that the Medes and the Persians would overtake the Babylonian Empire. Isaiah quoted God as saying, “See, I will stir up against them the Medes. . . . Their bows will strike down the young men” (Isaiah 13:17-18). Another prophecy said that the Medes would expand beyond Babylonia and affect all nations (Jeremiah 51:28). Jeremiah also provides the reason for the Medo-Persian ascendancy: “to destroy Babylon” and gain “vengeance for [God’s] temple” (Jeremiah 51:11). Daniel interpreted a dream which also foretold the fall of Babylon.

The Writing on the Wall

Daniel also warned of Babylon’s demise on the eve of its fall, as recorded in Daniel 5. King Belshazzar, called “king” because he was left in charge of political affairs while his father was away at war, was using the gold and silver utensils from the temple as

drinking vessels in a night of debauchery. “Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall” (Daniel 5:5). The frightened king summoned Daniel to the banquet hall to interpret the writing. Daniel’s inspired interpretation was dire: God had pronounced judgment on Babylon, and the kingdom would be divided. By morning, “Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom” (Daniel 5:30-31).

End of the Exile

Before the Babylonian exile even began, God told Jeremiah that Judah would “become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years” (Jeremiah 25:11). Ezra and others recorded that “in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia [539 B.C.], in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus” (Ezra 1:1), and Cyrus allowed all the Jews to return to Judah. Not only did Cyrus release the Jews, but he also returned the stolen temple articles and paid for the Jews’ rebuilding efforts from the royal treasury (Ezra 6:4-5). This was a monumental time in Israel’s history, as Jerusalem and the temple were rebuilt and the Law was reinstituted.

Daniel

Daniel was prominent in the Medo-Persian Empire and a trusted adviser to King Darius. However, after being placed as head of the satraps (governors, of sorts), Daniel was hated by some of them for his quick ascent. They laid a legal trap for Daniel that should have gotten him killed, for he was thrown into the infamous lions’ den. He survived, however, by God’s intervention, and he continued to prophesy, rule, and provide counsel in that foreign land (Daniel 6:28).

Mordecai and Esther

Another key event in the history of Israel also occurred in Persia. The book of Esther describes the origin of the Feast of Purim and how the Jews were spared mass destruction. When Cyrus released the Jews to their homeland, not all of them elected to return to Judah (Esther 3:8). King Xerxes (or “Ahasuerus,” as he is called in Esther) reigned from 404-359 B.C. and likely had little background on his government’s history with the Jews. So, when his top adviser, Haman, accused the Jews of being routinely disobedient to the king’s laws, Xerxes believed him and agreed to Haman’s plan of genocide against the Jews. Queen Esther, herself a Jewess, had been chosen queen of the empire without disclosing her origin. In a series of remarkable events, plainly evincing God’s providence, Esther was able to expose Haman’s vile motives. Not only were the Jews spared destruction, but Esther’s cousin Mordecai was given Haman’s place of honor.

Conclusion

God uses individuals and empires to accomplish His will. Certainly, the Medo-Persian Empire is a case in point. God used this empire to set His captive people free, fund the rebuilding of the temple, and encourage His children that they are never forsaken.