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THE CHRONOLOGY OF EZRA & NEHEMIAH (III)

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We have looked at the prima facie evidence for a short chronology in Ezra-Nehemiah, a chronology that assumes ~~that the Artaxerxes of Ezra 7ff. and Nehemiah is in fact Darius.~~ This month we examine the argument against the short chronology. There is only one argument, and that is that the Artaxerxes referred to must be Artaxerxes Longimanus, who lived after Xerxes, who followed Darius. If this is true, then the data that seems to indicate a short chronology must be reinterpreted along the lines of all modern commentaries.

Though we know little about the Persian empire, culture, and history, the chronology of the early emperors seems fairly well established. Cyrus was succeeded by his son Cambyses in 529 B.C. (I shall use conventional B.C. dates in this essay), who reigned for seven and a half years. Cambyses had apparently put his brother Smerdis to death in order to secure the throne, but upon Cambyses' death, a certain "Smerdis" claimed the throne. Evidently this Pseudo-Smerdis was a Magian priest named Gomates or Gaumata. He reigned for half a year until being deposed by Darius.

Darius reigned 36 years (521-486 B.C.) and was followed by Xerxes, who reigned for 21 years (485-465 B.C.). He was followed by Artaxerxes Longimanus ("the Long-Handed"), who reigned for 40 years (464-423 B.C.). His successors, according to secular sources, were Darius II, Artaxerxes II, Artaxerxes III, Artabanus, and Darius III.

Most expositors of Ezra and Nehemiah take it that Haggai, Zechariah, Jeshua, and Zerubbabel rebuilt the temple and altar in the early years of Darius I's reign, as recorded in Ezra 1-6. This carries us down to 515 B.C., the sixth year of Darius. Then we skip 57 years down to 456 B.C., the seventh year of Artaxerxes Longimanus (Ezra 7:1, 8). The events of Nehemiah take us down to the 33d year of Artaxerxes (Neh. 13:6), 431 B.C.

Bible chronologists such as Lightfoot, Anstey, and Faulstich and some of the older commentators (like John Gill), have criticized this approach. First, it looks a bit suspicious to move from the sixth year of Darius to the seventh of Artaxerxes Longimanus (Ezra 6-7). Second, names like Ahasuerus and Artaxerxes were held by more than one person.

What's In a Name?

Beyond this, third, we don't know that the Jews called these rulers by the same names the Greeks did. After all, the Israelites called Tiglath-Pileser (a formal name) by his personal name Pul (2 Ki. 15:19, 29). The Israelite king called Uzziah by Isaiah and the Chronicler is called Azariah in 2

Names are frequently used significantly in the Bible. For instance, the name Melchizedek, king of Salem (Gen. 14:18-20), is explained and exegeted by the author of Hebrews: "first of all, by translation [of 'melchi-zedek'] King of Righteousness, and then also King of Salem, which means King of Peace." The use of various names on different occasions would be for literary and theological reasons. Thus, it is possible that the Jews called Darius by the name Artaxerxes on some occasions, and indeed possible (yea, likely) that they also called him Ahasuerus.

These names are not necessarily personal names, but are most likely throne names or even titles. It used to be thought that Xerxes means "king" and Artaxerxes means "high king." This is based on a statement in Herodotus, "In Greek, the name Darius means the Doer, Xerxes means the Warrior, and Artaxerxes means the Great Warrior" (Herodotus, *The History* 6:98; trans. David Grene; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987; p. 448). The Persian for Xerxes is *Khshayarsha* or *Ksharsa*, "which seems to correspond to the modern Persian *shyr-shah, lion-king*" (McClintock and Strong, *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* 1:116). Artaxerxes "is a compound, the first element of which, *arta* - found in several Persian names - is generally admitted to mean *great*; the latter part being the Zend *Khshethro, king*" (*ibid.*, 1:440).

J. M. Cook, *The Persian Empire* (New York: Schocken, 1963; p. 45), says that Xerxes perhaps means "hero among kings," clearly a throne name. Artaxerxes means "kingdom of justice," again clearly a throne name (*idem*). We can compare this word "Artaxerxes" with the Egyptian "Pharaoh," which means "great house."

Darius (Persian *Dareyavesh*) means "he who holds firm the good" (Cook, *idem*). Others give something like "he who enjoys good things" (Richard Frye, *The Heritage of Persia*; New York: World, 1963; p. 92).

According to Carey Moore (*Esther, Anchor Bible* 7B, Garden City: Doubleday, 1971; p. 3), Ahasuerus means "chief of rulers." Ahasuerus is generally thought to be the same word as Xerxes. Thus, it is very likely that Darius could have been called Artaxerxes and also Ahasuerus (Xerxes).

In summary:

Darius = The Doer of Good
Xerxes = Hero Among Kings
Artaxerxes = King of Justice
Ahasuerus = Chief of Rulers

It is interesting to note that the Inscription of Xerxes at Persepolis reads in part as follows: "I am Xerxes the

have made this portal. . . . Says Darius the King: May Ormazd protect me and my empire, and my work and my father's work" Here we see that Xerxes calls himself Darius. This proves that these Persian monarchs were sometimes called by different names. (Full inscription found in Martin Anstey, *Chronology of the Old Testament*; Grand Rapids: Kregel, [1913] 1973; p. 282.)

The fact that a given king called himself and was called by more than one name sheds light on the fact that the Apocrypha and Josephus call these kings by various names. Josephus calls the "Artaxerxes" of Ezra-Nehemiah "Xerxes," but says he reigned 28 years, which was not the case with the second Xerxes, who attacked Greece; he reigned only 21 years. Similarly, Josephus calls Esther's king "Artaxerxes." (Josephus, *Antiquities*, Book 11; for a full and helpful discussion, see Anstey, *Chronology of the O/d Testament*, pp. 263ff.) In the Apocryphal additions to Esther, her king is called "Artaxerxes."

What all of this shows can be summarized as five points:

1. The Persian monarchs used more than one name for themselves, and these were all throne-names having descriptive meanings.
2. The Greeks called these monarchs by one name each, but this is no reason to assume that anyone else did.
3. In interpreting the Bible, we have to be open to the fact that the Jews had their own names for these kings, and that the Jews fit much closer to Persian culture than did the Greeks. It is very likely that the Jews used these throne-names with the same kind of fluidity as the Persians.
4. Thus, it is simplistic to read Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther in the "light" of Greek historical records regarding the Persians.
5. We have to take the Biblical references in their *Biblical* contexts, and on that basis try to ascertain which monarch is in view.

Darius-Artaxerxes

Ezra 6:14 says that the Jews finished building "according to the command of the God of Israel and the decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia." The problem with this verse is that the only decree of "Artaxerxes" mentioned in Ezra to this point is in 4:7-23, which was a decree to stop building the temple! Moreover, if the Artaxerxes of Ezra 6:14 is Longimanus, it is curious that he is mentioned here because the rest of Ezra says nothing about any decree of his to rebuild the temple. Of course, if Nehemiah is considered part of Ezra, then we can say that this is a decree to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, but then the question is: Why is this mentioned here in Ezra 6:14?

self, which allows for "and" to mean "even" or "to wit." in that case, Ezra 6:14 would read, "according to . . . the decree of Cyrus and Darius, to wit: Artaxerxes." Here is Gesenius's explanation of this use of the connective "and" in Hebrew: "Frequently *vav copulativum* [the connective 'and'] is also explanatory (like *isque, et - quidem, and the German und zwar, the English to wit*), and is then called *vav explicativum* [the explicative 'and']." For instance, Isaiah 17:8 reads, "Nor will he look to that which his fingers have made, to wit: the Asherim and incense stands." Similarly, Nehemiah 8:13 reads, "the [people] gathered around Ezra the scribe, to wit: to give attention to the words of the Law." In Proverbs 3:12: "For whom the Lord loves He reproves, even [to wit] as a father the son in whom he delights." (See Gesenius's *Hebrew Grammar*, second English ed., Oxford U. Press, p. 484, note lb.)

This reading of Ezra 6:14 is not new. John Gill, in his commentary (late 18th c.) writes, "i am most inclined to think, with Aben Ezra [noted Jewish commentator], that he [Artaxerxes] is Darius himself; and the words to be read, Darius, that is, Artaxerxes, king of Persia; Artaxerxes being, as he [Aben Ezra] observes, a common name [throne name] of the kings of Persia, as Pharaoh was of the kings of Egypt . . . and i find Dr. Lightfoot [eminent chronologist] was of the same mind."

Remembering that the Bible often uses names meaningfully, we can interpret Ezra and Nehemiah in terms of the meaning of the names Darius and Artaxerxes. Ezra 6 would use the name Darius to focus on the fact that the king was doing good: "Then King Darius issued a decree" (Ezra 6:1). Ezra 7 would shift to the name Artaxerxes to focus on the justice and universality of the king's reign. Notice the end of Darius' letter in 6:12, "I Darius (the Doer) issue decree; let it be done diligently." Now compare the end of Artaxerxes' letter in Ezra 7:25-26, "Set magistrates and judges who may judge... all such as know the laws of your God. . . . Whoever will not observe the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily on him." The emphasis on justice is in keeping with the meaning of the name Artaxerxes (King of Justice).

Similarly, the use of Ahasuerus (Chief of Rulers = Xerxes, Hero Among Kings) is appropriate for Esther, because of the emphasis on his rule over 127 other lands (Esth. 1:1). As we have seen, since Mordecai was active already in the days of Joshua and Zerubbabel (Ezra 22), it is very unlikely that Esther's king was (the second) Xerxes. He almost certainly was Darius the Great.

Since the genealogical and name-list evidence strongly indicates a short chronology for Ezra and Nehemiah, there is every reason to assume that Darius and Artaxerxes are the same person.

(To be continued)