

# BIBLICAL CHRONOLOGY

Vol. III, No. 5

©James B. Jordan, 1991

May, 1991

## THE CHRONOLOGY OF EZRA & NEHEMIAH (IV)

by James B. Jordan

We have seen that it is likely that the Artaxerxes of Ezra-Nehemiah is the same as Darius the Great. If this solution be correct, and I think it is, possibly there is another problem in Ezra that can be resolved by it. In Ezra 4:6 we are told that "in the reign of Ahasuerus, at the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem." Nothing more is ever said about this accusation. The next verse reads, "And in the days of Artaxerxes" they wrote a letter of accusation. A full discussion of this letter ensues in Ezra 4. There are several interpretations of these verses.

A. The current establishment interpretation says that Ahasuerus is Xerxes and Artaxerxes is Longimanus. It is held that the letters to these two later monarchs are mentioned here, out of chronological sequence, because the theme of this section of Ezra is opposition to God's work. Thus, we are shown two later instances of opposition.

B. The classical interpretation is that Ahasuerus is Cambyses and Artaxerxes is Pseudo-Smerdis. We know that, there are at least two Ahasueruses in the Bible (Dan. 9:1; Esth. 1:1), so why not a third? The value of the classical interpretation is that it does not wrench Ezra 4 out of chronological sequence, nor does it fall into the modern trap of assuming that the Jews called these monarchs by only one name each and that they used the same names the Greeks used. The problem with the classical interpretation is that Pseudo-Smerdis almost certainly did not reign long enough for a letter to have reached him and a reply to have been sent back.

C. Another view is that Ahasuerus is Cambyses, and Artaxerxes is Darius. This makes a lot of sense, since as we have seen it is likely that in Ezra-Nehemiah, Darius and Artaxerxes are the same king. The scenario presented is that at the beginning of Cambyses' reign, a letter of complaint was sent to him, which he ignored. Then again, at the beginning of Darius's reign, when he was threatened with insurrection on all sides, more letters were sent complaining about the Jews. Darius-Artaxerxes ordered work on the Temple stopped. In the second year of his reign, having received more information, Darius ordered the work resumed (Ezra 6).

D. Another twist on this is to see both Ahasuerus and Artaxerxes as Cambyses, so that Ezra 4:7ff. is simply filling out 4:6. This means, however, that within Ezra's book there are two Artaxerxeses (4:6 and 6:14), and that they are not distinguished by any indication – an unlikely thing for a writer to do. Another problem with this interpretation is that extra-Biblical evidence indicates strongly that

phantine (Elephantine Papyrus No. 30). Thus, it is not likely that Cambyses would have called a halt to the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple.

E. Finally there is the Jordan view. I suggest that the Ahasuerus of Ezra 4:6 and the Artaxerxes of 4:7 are both Darius, and that the "and" of 4:7 should be translated "to wit." This means that the phrase "at the beginning of his reign" applies to Darius-Artaxerxes, and that the letter sent to Artaxerxes in Ezra 4:7 is the same as the one sent to Ahasuerus in 4:6. It also means that Ezra 4:5-6 are in chronological order. To wit: "They hired counselors against them to frustrate their counsel at the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius (Dogood) king of Persia. To wit, in the reign of Ahasuerus (Chief of Rulers, Darius-Artaxerxes), in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. To wit, in the days of Artaxerxes (King of Justice, Darius), Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, and the rest of his colleagues, wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the text of the letter was written in Aramaic and translated from Aramaic."

The letters of Ezra 4 complain that the Jews were rebuilding not the temple but the wall. The long chronology says that under Darius the temple was rebuilt, but that when the Jews began to rebuild the wall, stiff opposition arose against them. In the days of Xerxes (son of Darius) and in the days of Artaxerxes Longimanus they were prevented from rebuilding the wall. Finally, Nehemiah obtained permission to rebuild the wall, in the 20th year of Artaxerxes Longimanus.

I believe that there is internal Biblical evidence against this reconstruction. We have seen that it is most likely that the Artaxerxes of Ezra-Nehemiah is Darius. But if the wall was not rebuilt until Nehemiah came in Darius's 20th year, why were letters sent complaining about the wall at the beginning of Darius's reign? The answer is seen in Ezra 9:9, which says that the Jews had begun rebuilding the wall before Nehemiah, and indeed had erected some kind of a wall by the time Ezra arrived in Jerusalem.

Here is the historical scenario, as I see it: Joshua and Zerubbabel and their associates returned to Jerusalem in the first year of Cyrus. They built the altar, and began rebuilding the temple (Ezra 3). Soon, however, they encountered opposition, which "discouraged the people of Judah and frightened them from building" (Ezra 4:4). The people left off working on the temple and devoted themselves to building nice homes for themselves and working on the wall (Haggai 1). God in His mercy raised up adversaries

not having finished the temple first (Haggai 1). No longer able to work on walls and houses, the people devoted themselves to rebuilding the temple. This aroused more questions, and another letter was sent to Darius asking about the temple (Ezra 5). Darius gave permission to rebuild the temple, which was completed in the 6th year of Darius (Ezra 6). The next year Ezra arrived, and noted that both the temple and a rudimentary wall had been completed.

This scenario does better justice to the information contained in the texts of Ezra-Nehemiah and Haggai, and does not require that Ezra 4 be yanked out of historical context.

### Daniel's 70 weeks Revisited

One thing that emerges from these four studies in the chronology of Ezra and Nehemiah is that Calvin and other older students of the Word may well have been right to challenge the Ptolemaic chronology and the existing system of B.C. dates (see *Biblical Chronology* 2:12). It is entirely possible that Daniel's 70 weeks are weeks of real chronological years, beginning with Cyrus's decree and ending with the crucifixion.

The short chronology of Ezra-Nehemiah clarifies the meaning of Daniel 9:25, "So you are to know and discern that from the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince: seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; it will be built again, with plaza and moat, even in times of distress." The seven weeks, or 49 years, extend from the decree of Cyrus until the 34th year of Darius Artaxerxes, which takes us down to the end of the book of Nehemiah. (7 years for Cyrus, 8 for Cambyses and pseudo-Smerdis, 34 for Darius.) During those 49 years the city was indeed rebuilt, and in times of distress.

If the 49 years (7 weeks) prove to be literal years, as we have seen they likely are, then the remaining 63 weeks would also be literal years. In that case, the entire B.C. system of dating is off, and a great deal of revisionist labor lies before us.

### Bibliography

As we have stated oft along, modern unbelieving and evangelical commentators are agreed on two points that we are cutting into dispute. The first is that the Ptolemaic B.C. dates are correct, and that the Persian Empire lasted 205 years. The second is that the Artaxerxes of Ezra-Nehemiah is not Darius the Great (as we have argued) but is Artaxerxes Longimanus, who came to the throne 57 years later than Darius. We have not discussed this (yet), but it is also agreed that the Ahasuerus of Esther is Xerxes

he is again Darius the Great.

The two most significant critics of this scheme are Anstey and Faulstich. Martin Anstey, *Chronology of the Old Testament* (originally *The Romance of Biblical Chronology*), is published by Kregel Publications (Grand Rapids: [1913] 1973). Anstey provides a full and persuasive discussion of all the chronological materials from the ancient world, and provides many sound arguments in favor both of the short chronology for Ezra-Nehemiah and also in favor of taking Daniel's 70 weeks literally. He concludes that the Persian Empire actually lasted 123 years. Unfortunately, Anstey believed in the postponement theory regarding Daniel's 70th week (p. 277). If we place the crucifixion of Christ in the middle of the 70th week, which is the best interpretation, then we must subtract 3 years from Anstey's calculation. In that case, the Persian Empire lasted 120 years.

Anstey's many pages of discussion must be taken seriously by any student of Biblical chronology. He surveys all the ancient literary sources for chronology (pp. 16-33), discusses the history of Biblical chronological study and shows its dependence on questionable pagan sources (pp. 35-57), provides telling arguments in favor of identifying Darius as the Artaxerxes of Ezra-Nehemiah and the Ahasuerus of Esther (pp. 240-274), and reviews numerous inconsistencies and impossibilities in the Ptolemaic understanding of the chronology of the Persian Empire (pp. 275-293). I believe Anstey to be in error in a few places, but his massive revisionist study is compelling and needs to be reviewed by someone with the time and expertise to make a thorough study of the matter.

Less useful but still of value is E. W. Faulstich, *History, Harmony, the Exile & Return*, published by Chronology Books, Box 3043, Spencer, 1A 51301 (1966). I have had occasion in the pages of this newsletter to criticize Faulstich for some of his absurdities in the past, and the present volume contains many such. Faulstich is committed to the Ptolemaic B.C. dating system, and also is committed to a bizarre prophetic scheme involving modern-day Israel. All the same, in this book he provides many good arguments for identifying Darius the Great with the Artaxerxes of Ezra-Nehemiah. Unlike other chronologists, he identifies the Ahasuerus of Esther with Darius the Made (whom he identifies as Astyages), son of the Ahasuerus of Daniel 9:1. I find his arguments heretofore involve a great deal of supposition and guess-work, and prefer Anstey's work at this point. Faulstich's discussion of the Elephantine Papyri is useful.