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Esther: Historical & Chronological Comments (III)

by James B. Jordan

2. The Setting of the Book of Esther

Up to now we have assumed what we must prove, that the king in Esther is Darius the Great. While Biblical chronologists have usually taken this position, commentators on the book of Esther have often taken others as the king. One view, which as far as I know has never had very many advocates and has none now, is that Esther's king was Artaxerxes Longimanus. Another, which also has few advocates, is that the king is Cambyses. The most popular view is that he is Xerxes.

The reason Xerxes is favored is that Ahasuerus is thought to be the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek Xerxes, both corruptions (in different directions, obviously) of the Persian Khshyarsha. Yet the Xerxes position encounter insuperable obstacles when the text is taken seriously, as we shall see, and the fact is that more than one Persian monarch was called Khshyarsha, for it is more of a title (like Pharaoh) than a name.

After Cyrus took Babylon, he ruled for about 8 years. Following him was Cambyses, who ruled for about 8 years also. This by itself makes him problematic for the book of Esther, because Esther runs down to the 12th year of Ahasuerus. Darius followed Cambyses, after a brief time of chaos, and ruled 34 years. Then came Xerxes, for 21 years, and Artaxerxes the Long-handed, for 41 years. Such, at least, is the current reconstruction of the early Persian imperial reigns.

A. Xerxes

As noted, the Hebrew word Ahasuerus is the same as the Greek word Xerxes. This link has led many commentators to assume, simplistically I'm afraid, that they must be

the same man. By itself, this is not enough, though, because Daniel 9:1 says that "Darius" was the son of Ahasuerus, and this Darius is Cyrus. Thus, there was more than one Ahasuerus.

Other arguments favoring Xerxes, are these:

1. The period during which Xerxes was occupied with his Grecian campaign seems to correspond to the four-year gap in the book of Esther (1:3; 2:16).

2. The banquet held in Ahasuerus' third year seems to correspond to that held at Xerxes' great council (Herodotus 7:8).

3. The palatial details attested to in Esther seem identical to those archaeologically uncovered at Susa, Xerxes' capital.

These arguments, and other lesser ones, are, however, far from decisive:

1. Darius also was involved in campaigns in the early years of his reign.

2. There were rebellions at the beginning of Darius's reign, which took him a couple of year to put down, after which we can expect that he held a festival.

3. Susa was a capital city of Persia under Cyrus and Cambyses, but particularly under Darius, who built his palace there. The palace in Esther 1, however, is almost certainly not the one Darius built, for it was evidently built later in his reign. Susa, though, had been an important city for a long time, and there unquestionably was a palace of some sort there already.

Evidence in the Bible, however, makes the Xerxes identification impossible. To understand this, we must first make a detour into the book of Ezra-Nehemiah (which is really one book). I shall review here material initially presented in my earlier study of this subject, published in *Biblical Chronology* 3:2-5.

The chronological problem in Ezra-Nehemiah boils

down to this: On the one hand, the name lists in these two books lead us to expect that all the events in them took place in the reign of Darius; while on the other hand, the text calls the Persian emperor under whom Ezra and Nehemiah lived by the name "Artaxerxes," and Artaxerxes I (Artaxerxes Longimanus) reigned many years after Darius. We can resolve this problem one of two ways. The first is to strain the information given in the name lists in order to make it fit, this approach being the common one today. This gives us a long chronology for Ezra. The other way of resolving the problem is to hold that "Artaxerxes" in Ezra-Nehemiah is simply another name for Darius, giving us a short chronology. The long chronology is the establishment view today among both unbelieving and evangelical commentators. The short chronology has always been favored by Biblical chronologists.

In Ezra 1-2, we read that immediately after Cyrus's decree (536 B.C.), a group of exiles returned from Babylon to begin work on the Lord's Temple. Among these were "Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai" (Ezr. 2:2). Nehemiah 7:7 gives the same list: "Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Azariah, Raamiah, Nahamiah, Mordecai." Who is this Nehemiah who returned with the first group of exiles? Most expositors hold that he cannot be the same as the Nehemiah who wrote Nehemiah, because the latter Nehemiah was still alive over 100 years later. We must ask, however, if this interpretation makes sense. Was Ezra trying to confuse his reader by mentioning some other Nehemiah in Ezra 2:2? More, was Nehemiah trying to confuse us by mentioning some other Nehemiah in Nehemiah 7:7?

If we look at Nehemiah 3:16 we read about "Nehemiah the son of Azbuk, official of half the district of Beth-zur." This is clearly another Nehemiah, and that is why we are told who his father was. Nehemiah the governor carefully distinguishes this Nehemiah from himself. Surely he would have done the same in Nehemiah 7:7, if that Nehemiah had been someone other than himself.

We ought to assume that the Biblical writers were trying to communicate, not confuse. The reference to "Nehemiah" in Ezra 2:2 and Nehemiah 7:7 should be taken as strong evidence that the short chronology is correct. Nehemiah returned with the exiles and was present for the initial altar building under Joshua and Zerubbabel. At some later date he returned to Persia to serve King Darius/Artaxerxes.

Notice also that Mordecai is mentioned in Ezra 2:2 and Nehemiah 7:7. In the absence of any other qualifier, we should assume that this is *the* Mordecai, the great and renowned Mordecai of Esther 10:3. This identification would shorten the chronology as far as the book of Esther is concerned. If Mordecai were an adult when Cyrus came to the throne, Xerxes came to the throne about 52 years later, making Mordecai very old. As we shall see, however, Mordecai was alive when the initial exile took place.

In Nehemiah 10 we are given a list of the priests and Levites who signed the covenant renewal document prepared by Nehemiah (Neh. 9:38). The names on this list are identical with those who returned to Jerusalem at the time of Cyrus's decree. If the long chronology were correct, there would be a 91-year gap between these two events. According to the short chronology, there are only about 34 years between the two events.

Those who returned with
Zerubbabel in the
1st year of Cyrus
(Nehemiah 12:1-9)

Those who signed with
Nehemiah in the
20th year of Artaxerxes
(Nehemiah 10:1-12)

PRIESTS

1. Seraiah	Seraiah
2. Jeremiah	Jeremiah
3. Ezra	(Azariah)
4. Amariah	Amariah
5. Malluch (Malluchi)	(Malchijah)
6. Hattush/Hattush	
7. Shechaniah (Shebaniah)	Shebaniah
8. Rehum (Harim)	Harim
9. Meremoth	Meremoth
10. Iddo	-
11. Ginnetho	Ginnethon
12. Abijah	Abijah
13. Mijamin	Mijamin
14. Maadiah	(Maaziah)
15. Biglah	Biglai
16. Shemaiah	Shemaiah
17. Joiarib	-
18. Jedaiah	-
19. Sallu (Sallai)	-
20. Amok	-
21. Hilkiah	-
22. Jedaiah	-

LEVITES

1. Jeshua	Jeshua
2. Binnui	Binnui
3. Kadmiel	Kadmiel
4. Sherebiah	Shebaniah
5. Judah	(Hodijah, cp. Ezr. 2:40, 3:9)
6. Mattaniah	-
7. Bakbukiah	-
8. Unni	-
(and 12 others)	

Of the 8 Levites who are mentioned as returning with Zerubbabel, 5 are mentioned as signing the covenant with Nehemiah. Of the 22 priests who returned with

Zerubbabel, 15 signed the covenant with Nehemiah. It is quite natural that 20 out of 30 men who returned with Zerubbabel in the first year of Cyrus should still be alive 34 years later. It is not reasonable to suppose that they would be alive 91 years later.

Modern commentators get around this problem by saying that the names in Nehemiah 10 are family names, not personal names. That is, they are the names of the priestly courses established by the men living at the time of Zerubbabel, not the names of individuals. This is a wholly gratuitous assertion without any foundation in the text. First of all, a number of the names in Nehemiah 10:1-27 correspond to the personal names found in Nehemiah 3. Secondly, if family names or names of priestly courses are in view, then the two lists should be identical, which they are not. Of course, if it is a proven fact that the Artaxerxes of Nehemiah is Artaxerxes Longimanus, then some such explanation of Nehemiah 10 becomes necessary, but as we are seeking to show, there is good reason to suppose that the Artaxerxes in Nehemiah is in fact Darius. Therefore, Nehemiah 10 can stand without procrustean interpretations being forced upon it.

Moreover, the post-exilic Jewish community was very concerned with genealogy, as 1 Chronicles 1-8 shows. The lists of names in Ezra-Nehemiah make the same point. Additionally, this concern is shown in Ezra 2:62, where we read, "These searched their ancestral registration, but they could not be located; therefore, they were considered unclean and out of the priesthood." If genealogy is so important, why would there be "gaps" and mere "family names" included? Clearly, the concern was to establish who was who, generation by generation. The oft-heard assertion that there are gaps in the genealogies is offered far too glibly. The only reason we know of a few gaps is that they are filled in other places. (!)

In the essays mentioned above, I discussed the line of high priests from Jeshua forward, showing that the short chronology does far better justice to the information we are given than does the long chronology. I also discussed the genealogy of Ezra, and made the same point. I shall not repeat those extended discussions here.

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. There is only one argument against this evidence, 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, Artaxerxes IV, 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 458 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.

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 Kings 15. Darius king of Persia is called the king of Assyria in Ezra 6:22. Cyrus is called Darius in Daniel. All of this indicates a certain fluidity of identification, especially when it comes to royal figures.

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 *Khshyarsha* or *Ksharsa*,

"which seems to correspond to the modern Persian *shyr-shah*, lion-king" (McClintock and Strong, *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* I: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.*, I:440).

J. M. Cook, *The Persian Empire* (New York: Schocken, 1983; 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 great King, the King of kings, the King of the land where many languages are spoken; the King of this wide earth, far and near, the son of King Darius the Achaemenian. Says Xerxes the great King: By the grace of Ormazd I 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. 262.)

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 Old Testament*, pp. 263ff.) In the Apocryphal additions to Esther, her king is called "Artaxerxes."

What all of this shows can be summarized as three 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 lived 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.

(to be continued)

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