

The Persian Kings

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[0 : 00] We see in this chapter, in Ezra chapter 5, the situation for the Jewish exiles who have returned where having been stopped from building the house of God at Jerusalem and having stopped for a while.

Then we read at the beginning the prophets, Haggai the prophet, Zechariah the synodal prophesied unto the Jews that they should basically begin to build the temple again.

This corresponds to what we have in Haggai chapter 1 where you've got the opening nine verses for example. The second year of Darius the king, the sixth month, the first day of the month, came the word of the Lord by Haggai the prophet unto Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Josedek the high priest, saying, Thus speaketh the Lord of hosts, saying, and so on.

And basically the prophets, the Lord through his prophets, the saints of the people, look, enough is enough. You've not been building the temple long enough. Yes, okay, you're prevented for a while. But then obviously the people just got into the way of just not building anymore.

They just got into the way of just letting it go. And the problem is, as in Haggai's day, as we see, is this people say the time has not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built.

[1 : 19] Then came the word of the Lord by Haggai the prophet, saying, Is it time for you, all ye, to dwell in your sealed houses, and this house lie waste? Now therefore thus saith the Lord of hosts, Consider your ways.

And then he says, I give so much, you bring in little, you eat, but you haven't got enough, you earn money, you put it into a bag with holds. Go up to the mountain, bring wood, build the house, and I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified, saith the Lord.

You looked for much, and lo, it came to little, and when you brought it home, I did blow upon it.

Why, saith the Lord of hosts? Because of mine house there is waste, and ye run every man unto his own house.

Now, nobody is pretending, of course, that the Israelites or the Jews had stopped building the temple of their own free will. They had started, their progress had been slow, but their enemies, of course, had then discouraged them.

And they had complained to successive kings of the Persians to try and get the work stopped. And it can be a little bit confusing going through the different kings that I mentioned.

[2 : 24] If we were to look back in chapter 4, we'd see reference to the reign of Ahasuerus in chapter 6, and then we'd see the reign of Artaxerxes in verse 7, and so on, and how that he's the one that stopped them building.

It's necessary, probably, to trace the order of the kings. And it can be difficult because so many of them have the same names, but they're not the same people.

Now, as we've mentioned many times in the past, of course, that this is something which was the case in our own country, in our own kingdoms. You know, in Scotland, there were umpteen King Jameses for hundreds of years, and one followed the other.

In England, there was lots of King Edwards one after the other, or Henry's or whatever. Or in Great Britain, King George's there were for about 120 years. All the kings were called George.

So it can be confusing in biblical terms as well, because the same names crop up lots of different times. But they're not necessarily the same people.

[3 : 24] The earliest one of whom we have a reference for definite, we would find in the book of Daniel. We have reference in chapter 5, at the end of that chapter, verse 31, there's a reference to Darius the Median, who took over the kingdom of Babylon.

After the kingdom of Babylon fell, we read, And that night, Belshazzar, the king of the Chaldeans, was slain, and Darius the Median took the kingdom, being about three-score and two years old. He was about 62 years old. And he took over the running of the kingdom of Babylon. But he took it over as part of the empire of the Medes and Persians.

And we know that his father was called Ahasuerus, because we read in chapter 9 of Daniel, in the first year of Darius, the son of Ahasuerus, of the seed of the Medes.

To have made king over the realm of the Chaldeans, and so on. So, we can go back as far as Darius' father, to find out the first of these Ahasueruses, and other kings, and so on.

[4 : 27] But, that's only some of the help. Darius the Mede was ruling over Babylon on behalf of the Persians. And his sister, called Mandini, was married to the king of Persia, who was called Cambyses.

It's almost a bit like Coronation Street, or whatever. You know, all the complexities of the different families, and who's married to who. But the point is, that Darius' sister, who was married to the Persian king, had a son.

And that son became Cyrus the Persian. That is the king who sent the Jews back from exile, and ordered them to begin building the temple again.

Having taken over the kingdom of Babylon, he had already ruled the kingdom of Persia for 22 years. When he became king of Babylon as well, that's what is counted as the first year of his reign. It means the first year of his reign over the kingdom of Babylon. That's what's relevant to the Jewish exiles. When he becomes king of Babylon. When they become liberated from the yoke of the Babylonians by the Persians who take over Babylon.

[5 : 36] So that's their first year, as it were, as far as they are concerned with Cyrus. Although he's been king for 22 years before that. Now, Cyrus then had other children who became kings after him.

There was one called Smerdas, who then was murdered by his brother, another Ahasuerus, and so on. And this is the one that's referred to in chapter 4 and verse 6 of Ezra.

In the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, wrote they unto him an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. It doesn't say that they got anywhere with it. But that's the first letter to this next Ahasuerus.

And he reigned for seven years. Whilst he was away on campaign, another king came up who claimed to be his dead brother, Smerdas, who he, Ahasuerus, had murdered.

But not too many people knew about this murdered brother. And not too many people knew who was responsible. So when somebody claimed to be the murdered brother, who had appeared out of presumably exile or something, a lot of people were taken in.

[6 : 46] And this imposter, who wasn't the dead brother, of course, but who claimed to be the one who was the rightful king, whilst Ahasuerus was away campaigning and fighting Egypt, he seized the throne and reigned as Artaxerxes for six or seven months.

And whilst he was there in place, the enemies of the Jews took the opportunity to get, all right, new regime, new king, let's appeal to him and say, oh, king, you know, look forever and so on.

Look, there's all these people that are causing trouble in Jerusalem. Why don't you get the work stopped? So they wrote to him. And him looking for new friends, looking for people who would acknowledge his kingship, he, of course, is very keen to please those who have appealed to his royal authority.

So he stops the work. That's what you find in chapter four. And so the work stops. And then people get into the way of not having to do the work. And for about 15, 16, 17 years, the work stops until he himself is removed.

Ahasuerus, likewise, comes back and then dies. And then we have the reign of Darius the Persian, as opposed to Darius the Mede. And this is the Darius in whose second year we read of at the end of chapter four, until the second year of the reign of Darius, king of Persia.

[8 : 11] Not the Darius, the king of the Medes, who we read of it in Daniel, of course. This is another Darius, Darius the second. He is reasonably well disposed towards the Jews.

And it's him who then goes and makes investigation and finds out, well, did Cyrus actually command this? Or didn't he? And he goes and he finds, sure enough, Cyrus did command them to build the temple, taking an awful long time to do it.

But yes, he'd done it. He was reasonably well disposed towards the Jews. So he's the one you read of at the end of chapter four and throughout in chapter five and into chapter six. And he is probably the father of the Ahasuerus, who became the husband of Queen Esther.

Now, it doesn't quite end there. It ends there in terms of the Jews rebuilding the temple. But then after the Ahasuerus, who's the husband of Queen Esther, then you've got Ezra himself enters the scene in chapter seven of Ezra.

If you turn the page, you'll find it says, now after these things in the reign of Arctic Cercise, king of Persia, that's another Arctic Cercise, just to be confusing. That's the one who is now the son of Queen Esther and Ahasuerus.

[9 : 23] And he takes over after his father dies. And what is interesting about this particular one is that it says, for example, in chapter seven, verse one, it says, you know, Arctic Cercise is king of Persia.

And that's when he asks for his permission to go back to the kingdom of Israel, the kingdom of the Jews. And then you read, for example, at verse seven, there went up some of the children of Israel in the seventh year of the reign of Arctic Cercise, the king.

And he's going back during this king's reign. In the book of Nehemiah, then this is the king that is likewise the one that sends him back.

Chapter two of Nehemiah, the 20th year of Arctic Cercise, the king. It's much later on. A lot of years have passed. But if you then go on to see what it says in verse six, the king said unto me, the queen also sitting by him, how long shall thy journey be?

So this king, Arctic Cercise, the second, is pro-Jewish. He's sympathetic to the Jews. And almost certainly the queen sitting by him is almost certainly Esther.

[10 : 34] It is, in other words, the queen, not in terms of the king's wife, but rather the king's mother. When these ancient pagan kingdoms talked about the king or the queen, it usually meant the mother of the reigning king.

Why would that be? Well, for one thing, Persian kings didn't have their wives sitting with them when they did affairs of state. Secondly, he had umpteen wives.

There's so many wives and so many concubines and goodness knows what. So whoever became king after his father, there would be lots of royal brothers scrolling for the prize of the throne, remember?

So whoever became king, then his mother only had that status of queen and sort of top female in the entire empire when her son became king.

There were lots of wives of the previous king, lots of concubines, lots of royal children, but once somebody was the king, the guaranteed place of position was not to his many wives or concubines, but to his mother.

[11 : 39] So when it says in Nehemiah 2, verse 6, the queen also sitting by him, this implies the queen mother, as we would know it as. And this is almost certainly Esther.

Other instances of this happening, or of this usage, we find, for example, in 2 Kings, chapter, sorry, pardon, in 2 Chronicles, we find it chapter 15, at verse 16, where it says, concerning Macha, the mother of Asa the king, he removed her from being queen, because she had made an idol in a grove.

And Asa cut down her idol and stamped it and so on. So again, the idea of the king's mother having the status of queen, as opposed to the king's wife. Likewise, in Daniel chapter 5, where, remember, the writing appears on the wall and nobody can understand it, nobody can read it.

And then we read it, verse 10 of Daniel 5, now the queen, by reason of the words of the king and his lords, came into the banqueting house, and the queen spake and said, O king, live forever. Let not thy thoughts trouble thee, nor let thy countenance be changed.

There is a man in thy kingdom in whom is the spirit of thy holy gods. And in the days of thy father, light and understanding and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods were found in him, whom the king, Nebuchadnezzar, thy father, the king, I say thy father, made master of the magicians, astrologers, Chaldeans, and soothsayers.

[13 : 07] Now again, we know that this definitely does not refer to the king's wife because, in verse 2 of chapter 5, in Daniel, it said that he tasted the wine, he commanded to bring the gold and silver vessels, which his father, Nebuchadnezzar, had taken out of the temple between Jerusalem, that the king and his princes, his wives, and his concubines might drink therein.

But this queen who comes in clearly is not drinking in the party with the king. She is not one of the wives. She is not one of the concubines. The queen is effectively what we would call the queen mother.

And so here we have a Nehemiah, the queen, sitting by the king. The queen, if she is Esther, remember, is Jewish. So of course the king in this second Arctic series is going to be sympathetic to the Jews.

Of course he's going to be positive towards Nehemiah. Of course he's going to be kindly disposed towards Ezra when he wants to go back to the land of Judah. But before all that, there is the different regimes.

There are those which are pro-Jewish and those who are anti-Jewish. Those that listen to the Jews' enemies and those that listen to the Jews themselves in terms of whether or not the temple should be built.

[14:25] But we have to remember that all of these different reigns and kingdoms and kings, of course they are all under God. And as the generations and the kings rise and fall, whether it's Ahasuerus and Artaxerxes or Darius, whatever it happens to be, these are under God.

And their authorities ultimately subject to that of God. And the point that we need to recognise here in this chapter 5 is that whilst the Jews have not been in any way untruthful, they have to an extent, you might say, in political terms, to use the modern phrase, they're economical with the truth.

Because they have not made any reference to the fact that they were prevented from building by a previous command of a previous Persian king. that just simply gets written out of the history, as it were.

Even if they had made reference to it, the fact that the king who stopped them was himself an imposter and was then done away with after a few months probably wouldn't have done their case any harm.

But that's not the point. The point they are referring to is that in the days of Silas the king, Silas, acting under God, gave them the authority in political terms.

[15:42] But it is from God that they take their authority in divine terms. The powers that be are ordained of God, Paul tells us in Romans.

And the word of God, the command of God, as Haggai gives them, as we see at the beginning of the prophecy of Haggai, this being under God is always authoritative.

The kings come and go. One Ahasuerus and then another one, one Arctic Serbs, then another one, one Demias, and then another one, and so on. And they all alternate and some are pro-Jewish and some aren't and so on, but it doesn't really matter because God is the one who is in control of all these things.

There is no doubt that if the Jews had perhaps gone on with the job well and truly in the reign of Silas the king, they wouldn't be in the situation they're found to be in later on.

They wouldn't have a half-finished temple. They wouldn't have let it go to Rack and Boon. They'd have done the job quickly while the political regime was favorable towards them.

[16:48] But it's not untrue what they say in verse 16. Since that time, even until now, hath it been in the building, it's been in the process of being built, and yet it is not finished.

All of that is true. But they didn't manage to mention him for 17 years. We were sitting there doing nothing and we weren't actually building it. But nevertheless, such a great, wonderful building would take time to do.

When they built the medieval cathedrals, of course, up and down our own country, people recognized that being on the architects and the builders who began it almost certainly would not see its completion because it would take decades, perhaps as much as a century, to complete or to finish.

People recognized that, but the work of the temple, they could have got on with it a lot faster. But the point is that the authority that they had, God's authority is always final.

Whatever the issues or whatever the proclamations of the kings or Persia or the Medes or whatever the case may be, God's authority is always ultimate. And God's word is always authoritative.

[18:02] Now, one example we could take of that is, or two examples we could take of that is that in, for example, the latter part of the 19th century, when all the all the fuss of laws about Darwin and the origin of species and so on, because of one or two little things that Darwin observed and the theory that he constructed upon such observations as he had, everybody said, ooh, ah, this must be the new scientific fact and a whole basis of flimsy theory was built upon very few actual facts.

But it was assumed that the more people found out and the more science expanded and the more knowledge increased, this would be found to be the nutrient and the Bible, of course, well, it wasn't really feasible at all.

And creation? Come on, nobody serious and modern and knowledgeable would believe in that nowadays. But of course, the more they discovered as the decades and the centuries unfolded, the more science expanded our knowledge of fossils and of the age of the earth and the layers of sediment and so on, the more the Darwinian theory of so-called evolution was found to be flawed and found to be empty.

God's word is always authoritative. Man thinks, oh, I've got a new fangled idea, oh, I've got a new proposition, I've got a new scientific idea. But if it goes against the Lord and his word, it will be found to be flawed in the fullness of time, just as the Darwinian theory of so-called evolution is now seen not to stack up with the facts.

The facts are far more in line with the immediate sudden appearance of completed, fully formed species. However, that supposedly came into being, well, the Bible tells us God created it.

[20 : 00] He created it in six days and they won't say, oh, no, we can't accept that, but the scientific evidence appears to be all these species appear to have suddenly appeared in the fossil record, fully formed without any kind of descent of, you know, growth from a simple life form to a more complicated one.

The evidence for that just isn't there. The evidence backs up what God already states. Likewise, at the same period in history, there was the idea that, well, of course, the Bible isn't authoritative. When we look at all the ancient scripts and scrolls, we see that, well, it's written in different kinds of Hebrew and different sorts of Greek and Chaldea and so on and all these like, they were unknown in the days of Moses and the heroes, so of course they couldn't possibly have been written the way the Bible actually suggests it is.

And when we look at the best scrolls and the newest scrolls and so on and we discover a whole lot of new like them, all of these scrolls that were supposedly the new sources of enlightenment and knowledge had already been known about hundreds of years before and dismissed because they were reckoned to be unsound and incomplete and insufficient in their provenance and where they came from and shot through with errors and with heresies and so on.

They had already been dismissed by serious scholars, but somehow, a couple of centuries, they said, ooh, look at all this new discovery, this new knowledge. It wasn't new. It was old and had been ruled out by those who were serious and devout in their attention to the ancient scrolls and the scriptures and the translation of them.

[21 : 44] That was, oh yes, well no, this is new life, this is new knowledge, and of course again, as time and knowledge increases, these so-called scrolls and sources are found to be full of errors, even inconsistent with themselves.

God is way ahead of us. God's authority is always in time. God's source of ultimate truth is always authority.

You see, the proclamations of the Persian kings, some were against, some were for the Jews, some allowed them to build, some sought to prevent them, but they managed to get the task accomplished when?

Not when they said, oh, let's go cap in hand back to the Persian kings. Let's ask for new permission. Let's ask for a special deal. No, they didn't source their authority in the kings of this world.

Cyrus had allowed them to go home and build the temple so many years before, but they didn't ask him to do that. The Lord moved his heart to do it. The Lord moved him to send lots of different exiled peoples back to their homelands, and he authorized them to reestablish, yes, their own religions and gods and so on, but amongst them, he enabled the children of Israel to go back to the promised land and to rebuild the temple of the living God.

[23 : 11] And the Lord moved Cyrus' heart to do that. But that was not the ultimate source of the Israelites' action. It was God, not Cyrus. Cyrus is under God.

Cyrus is the man that the Lord uses in this way. As you know, the prophet Jeremiah, Isaiah prophesies this way before it actually happens, way before Cyrus even comes into being. Isaiah 45, thus saith the Lord who is anointed to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holded to subdue nations before him, I will loose the loins of kings to open before him the two gates and the gates shall not be shut.

They anointed, the one used of the Lord. That's how God described Cyrus before ever he becomes the king that rules over the exiled Jews.

God is way ahead of us. God proposes, man disposes. Man, a big one, man proposes but God disposes all these things according to his greatness.

[24 : 17] The source of that which enables us to labour for the Lord is not man, it is God. And whilst we have the different kings, the different regimes that are either for or against the Jews, that's one thing, but God's word is always authoritative.

Whether it be in the late 19th century, whether it be in the early 21st century, the more man tries to say, oh, we've got new knowledge now, we now know that this is out of date and this is no longer fashionable or whatever.

After a little while, it soon becomes clear that what God's word said was true all along. That has been true in the case of so-called evolution, it has been the case of so-called higher criticism of the ancient scriptures as they have been found, the truth and solidity and faithfulness of them has been proved again and again.

And that which man skeptically suggests, oh, well, this can't be true and this really isn't silent and so what, there will always be those who are keen and ready to disparage that which God intends to do. Just as the Israelites here have their enemies who are trying to discourage them from building the temple, to try to stop them from re-establishing themselves as the people are, as we would see a little bit earlier, try to mingle in the false gods of the world along with the true God.

[25 : 46] This is what we see at the beginning of chapter four in Ezra, when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the children of the captivity built at the temple of the Lord, they came and said, oh, we'll build with you because we seek your God just as you do.

And to modern ears it seems a bit rough. Why did the Jews say, no, no, you've got nothing to do with us? Why did they say, yes, come and build with us? Because they acknowledged the God of Israel only as one God amongst many, only as the little local God of the land and they worshipped other gods as well.

We see that in 2 Kings chapter 17. I won't go through the references just now, but it says how they feared the Lord and they feared all their other gods as well. They set up all their pagan shrines and images and so on and they acknowledged the God of Israel as well.

So that kind of idolatry mixed in with a token acknowledgement of the living God is not the same as giving ourselves only to them which is what the Jews were seeking to do.

Yes, their enemies tried to use the politics of the day. Yes, they were partially successful. Yes, it worked for a little time. But the word of God is always authoritative.

[27 : 01] Say that again. The word of God is always authoritative. Generations of men rise and pass away. Kings come and go. Poplar nations fall ultimately on deaf ears.

But the Lord's authority is always that which will last. Always that which will count. And so we have the Jews saying here to people, go and look, did Sidus say this or didn't he?

In the meantime, we're going to keep on building because we have the authority of our God. And of course, when they did investigate, they found, yeah, right enough, there was this original command. They didn't pay any attention to any subsequent commands and any subsequent interviews and yes, you have the original authority, fine, go ahead. And so they did. And this of course was ultimately used of the Lord to reestablish his people in the promised land, with the temple, with the setup, into which ultimately the Messiah was birthed.

And the Messiah, when he came, came into a people prepared, a people expectant, a people waiting for the Messiah, with their temple, with all the priesthood in place, with the last vestiges, as it were, of the old dispensation, ready, prepared for the entry of God's own Messiah onto the stage of this day.

[28 : 28] Now, in order for that to happen, they had to be able to build. And in order for that to happen, they had to take God seriously, this word. That's what Haggai the Prophet and Zechariah are telling them.

Whatever the kings of this world may seek to do, whatever the authorities of parliaments of this world may seek to crush or silence the gospel or Christianity or whatever, they will do their worst. And for a while they will be successful. But God's word is always authoritative. And God's word will always be found to be true.

And ultimately the truth of God will always prevail. Let us pray.