

## NEBUCHADNEZZAR II AND THE PERSIAN KINGS

### **Discoveries Involving King Nebuchadnezzar II**

Several excavations during the past two centuries have yielded enough archaeological data to construct an accurate portrayal of the Babylonian Empire in general, and of the life of Nebuchadnezzar II in particular. These finds have all but silenced the critics' claim that the history described in Scripture is in conflict with actual ancient Near-Eastern history.

### *Background and Setting*

As the Assyrian Empire began to weaken in the late seventh century BC, the Babylonians (also called the Chaldeans or Neo-Babylonians) increased in strength through their many successful military campaigns in the west. By 626 BC, the Assyrians were fighting a losing battle with the seminomadic Scythians and Cimmerians from the north, who were successful in wresting vast western regions from Assyrian control. In that same year, Nabopolassar (626–605 BC) captured Babylon and all its territories in southern Mesopotamia. By 612 BC, the Chaldeans under Nabopolassar had allied with the Medes (north of the Tigris River) to defeat the Assyrians at Nineveh and bring an end to their empire (see Nahum 1:1–3:19).

By the late seventh century BC, the fall of Assyria had left a power vacuum that several of the surrounding nations sought to fill, including Egypt. Even before Nabopolassar's death in 605 BC, his son Nebuchadnezzar II (605–562 BC) had ambitiously moved his armies to the west in an attempt to establish his Babylonian kingdom as the new world power. In 609 BC, Nebuchadnezzar defeated Pharaoh Necho's Egyptian army at Carchemish near the Euphrates River (see Jeremiah 46:1-2). In pursuit of the Egyptians, Nebuchadnezzar had to travel through Israel toward Egypt, thus he swept into Jerusalem, making its king, Jehoiakim (also known as Josiah's son Jehoahaz), a vassal leader. At this time, Daniel, along with many other Judeans, was deported to Babylon where he and his people would spend the next 70 years in captivity.

In the first decade in the sixth century BC, Jehoiakim rebelled against Babylon and

stopped paying tribute, which only invited a siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar's army a short time later. Upon Jehoiakim's death during the siege, Jehoiachin was established as the new king; he offered his surrender to Nebuchadnezzar three months later. As a result, Jehoiachin and his family, royal officials, and 7,000 craftsmen, as well as some 10,000 captives, were deported to Babylon (2 Kings 24:1-17). (After he had spent 37 years in a Babylonian prison, Babylonian king Evil-merodach [562–560 BC] would release Jehoiachin from prison to sit at the king's table and provide him with an allowance of rations according to his needs for the rest of his life—2 Kings 25:27-30.)

Nebuchadnezzar installed Josiah's son Zedekiah (597–586 BC, also known by his Hebrew name Mattaniah) as his new vassal king. Zedekiah reigned nine years before he rebelled against Babylon, thus provoking Nebuchadnezzar to bring his armies west to Jerusalem for a third time (2 Kings 25:1-7). On his way, Nebuchadnezzar had to decide whether to attack the rebellious Ammonites or to proceed to Jerusalem; thus according to Ezekiel (21:21-29), Nebuchadnezzar consults the divining power of his gods by "shaking the arrows" and "reading the liver," a common occult practice in Babylon. It then becomes clear he must proceed to Jerusalem first. En route, he overruns Lachish, Azekah, and the Judean military outposts along the way (Jeremiah 34:7), finally coming to Jerusalem where he will besiege the capital for nearly 18 months (Jeremiah 52:4).

In 586 BC, Zedekiah's refusal to heed the words of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 27; 34:2-7) brought a fiery destruction upon the city, the execution of his own sons at Riblah (2 Kings 25:7), and the destruction of the Jerusalem population and Solomon's temple. The rule of the Davidic dynasty and the Hebrew nation had come to an end. Nebuchadnezzar looted Jerusalem of its valuables, including the precious vessels from the temple, which he carried back to Babylon (2 Kings 25:13-17).

Prior to his death in 562 BC, Nebuchadnezzar had engaged in a massive building campaign that is preserved in the archaeological record—features that today are spread over several hundred acres (Daniel 4:30). The city of Babylon is said to have covered an area of over 3,000 acres, with defensive walls wide enough for at least two chariots to travel side by side. Its splendor is reflected in the Ishtar Gate (entrance to the city) and the city's architecture, which are unrivaled in detail and beauty; the supporting walls that ringed the city were an impressive ten miles long! The city was divided in half by the north-south flow of the Euphrates River. The outer walls of the inner city were circled by a moat that was filled from the Euphrates, making its defensive fortifications even more difficult for a potential enemy to penetrate.

After the brief reigns of Evil-merodach (2 Kings 25:27), Nergal-Sharezer (Jeremiah 39:3), and Labashi-Marduk (556 BC), in 556 BC a high royal official known as Nabonidus (and his co-regent son Belshazzar) came to the throne (Daniel 5:1,22). According to historical records, Nabonidus was driven by his desire to rebuild the temple of his god Sin in Haran, thus he was most often away from Babylon, leaving his son Belshazzar as king. The more aggressive and strengthened Persian army under Cyrus II (559–530 BC) was slowly capturing more territory in southern Mesopotamia and eventually claimed Babylon itself in 539 BC. Herodotus explains that the capture of Babylon occurred with little violence because the Persians diverted the Euphrates and entered through the

riverbed. The well-known story recorded in Daniel 5 of Belshazzar's banquet feast, and the mysterious writing on the wall, is said to occur on the same night the city fell to the Persians and Belshazzar was killed (Daniel 5:30). Because of Daniel's interpretation, he was promoted to third ruler in the Babylonian kingdom (Daniel 5:29). As a result of the fall of the city, the Babylonian Empire came to an end.

There are good reasons to accept the biblical account of Nebuchadnezzar II and his dealings with Israel during the late seventh and early sixth centuries BC. The following discussion includes several of those reasons.

### *The Babylonian Chronicles*

First, support for Nebuchadnezzar's existence and military exploits in Israel and Mesopotamia can be seen in both Babylonian and Israelite extrabiblical records. The series of cuneiform tablets known as the Babylonian Chronicles describe the principal events each year from 747 BC to about 280 BC. One of these tablets (pictured) recounts Nebuchadnezzar's first decade as king along with his second siege of Jerusalem in March 597 BC (Isaiah 39):

He [Nebuchadnezzar] camped against the city of Judah [Jerusalem] and on the second day of the month of Adar he took the city and captured the king [Jehoiachin]. He appointed a king of his own choice there [Zedekiah], took its heavy tribute and brought them to Babylon.

The chronicles speak of Nebuchadnezzar's replacement of King Jehoiachin and the establishing of his vassal king, Zedekiah. These activities correspond to the prophecies and histories recorded about him in the book of Jeremiah, 2 Chronicles 36, and 2 Kings 24. The tablets themselves are straightforward historical accounts that do not employ a mythical tone or grandiose inflations; therefore, there is no reason to believe that embellishments have been introduced into the texts.

Unfortunately, not all of Nebuchadnezzar's exploits in Jerusalem have been recovered through the chronicles, though several other related finds offer us confirmation of the biblical record, especially that of his final invasion of Jerusalem (587 BC) and destruction of the temple in 586 BC. These include 21 hastily scribbled letters that record brief lists of names and correspondence between Judean military outposts and the city of Lachish immediately prior to Babylonian invasion of Judea (589 to 588 BC). The first 18 of the 21 letters were discovered in 1935 by J.L. Starkey in the gate tower at Tell ed-Duweir (Lachish); three more were discovered in 1938. The more legible letters were first published in 1938 by Harry Torczyner as *The Lachish Letters*; the rest of them



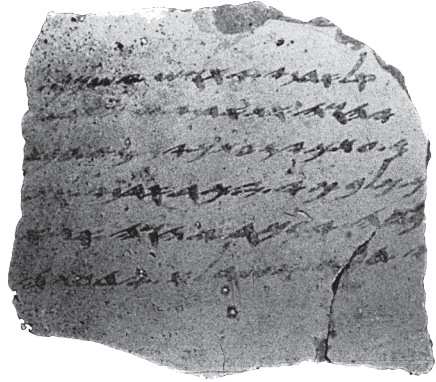
This cuneiform tablet is part of the series of Babylonian Chronicles that detail Nebuchadnezzar's exploits from 605–594 BC. It records his siege of Jerusalem in 597 BC and is currently displayed at the British Museum. (Photo by Todd Bolen/BiblePlaces.com.)

are not legible enough to translate. The notes themselves are inscribed on small pieces of pottery (ostraca). One such letter shows that, among the cities still withstanding Nebuchadnezzar's armies were Lachish and Azekah, the same two cities attested in the words of Jeremiah the prophet (Jeremiah 34:7). The desperate tone contained in Letter IV reads in part:

I have written on the door according to all that my lord hath written to me. And with respect to what my lord hath written about the matter of *Beth-haraphid*, there is no one there.

And as for Semechiah, Shemaiah hath taken him and brought him up to the city. And as for thy servant, I am not sending *anyone* thither, but I will send tomorrow morning.

And let (my lord) know that we are watching for the signals of Lachish, according to all the indications which my lord hath given, for we cannot see Azekah.



The Lachish Letter—sixth century BC. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

### ***King Jehoiachin's Ration Record***

Second, while excavating at Babylon near the Ishtar Gate in the early twentieth century, Robert Koldewey recovered an official Babylonian administrative document containing the food rations given to Judean prisoners, including King Jehoiachin and his sons. As mentioned earlier, according to 2 Kings 24 and 2 Kings 25:27-30, Jehoiachin was taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar and deported to Babylon, though some time later while in prison Nebuchadnezzar's son Evil-merodach had ordered the release of Jehoiachin and subsequently provided him with a daily allotment according to his needs. The Babylonian text is consistent with these passages when it records, "10 sila of oil to Jehoiachin, king of Judah...and to the sons of the king."

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The Jehoiachin Ration Record is a cuneiform document that dates from the period from 595 to 570 BC, spanning the time the Bible says Jehoiachin was taken captive to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar II.

### *Stamp Seals Found at the City of David*

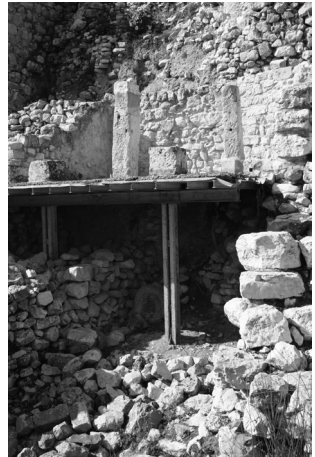
Third, dozens of stamp seals (*bullae*) discovered at the City of David near what is known as the stone House of Ahiel, and located through the antiquities trade, demonstrate the historicity of biblical figures mentioned during the time of Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Jerusalem<sup>2</sup> (see also the chart "Seal Impressions of People in the Old Testament" in chapter 19). For example, a seal was found at the City of David in a well-documented context (area G) that contains the paleo-Hebrew inscription "Belonging to Gemaryahu [Gemariah] [son of] Shaphan." Gemariah and Shaphan are both mentioned throughout the books of Jeremiah (36:10-12, 25-26) and 2 Kings (22:12). Shaphan was the scribe under King Jehoiakim, and Gemariah owned the home in which Baruch read the book of Jeremiah to the people of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 36:10). In addition, an unprovenanced seal (pictured) has emerged bearing the name "Belonging to Berekyahu [Baruch], son of Neriyahu [Neria], the scribe," who is none other than the prophet Jeremiah's personal scribe Baruch (Jeremiah 36:1-32).

Other biblical figures have been located such as "Jerahmeel, the king's son" (Jeremiah 36:26), who was the individual sent by King Jehoiakim to arrest Jeremiah and his scribe. Further, a seal impression that reads, "Belonging to Yehuchal [Jehucal] ben Shelemiyahu ben Shovi" identifies the person sent by King Zedekiah to ask Jeremiah for prayer (Jeremiah 37:3; 38:1). In addition, the sixth-century BC seal bearing the name of King Jehoiachin's son Pedaiah reads, "Belonging to Pedaiah son of the king" (1 Chronicles 3:18-19). Apparently, many of the stamp seals found at the City of David, the pie-slice-shaped piece of land that lies immediately south of the Temple Mount, were baked hard by the Babylonians' fiery destruction of Jerusalem (take, for example, the blackened King Hezekiah seal).

As noted in chapter 19, one such seal was discovered by archaeologist Gabriel Barkay during a sifting



The Baruch Seal (Photo by Zev Radovan.)



The ruins of a typical Israelite four-room house known as the House of Ahiel lie opposite the Arab village of Silwan above the Kidron Valley in the City of David, where many stamp seals (*bullae*) were discovered. The home, named after a piece of pottery with the name "Ahiel" on it, was destroyed during Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem in 586 BC. Discovered by Yigal Shiloh of Hebrew University, it is the best preserved home from the First Temple Period.

project of precious Temple Mount soil discarded in a Jerusalem dump and later in the Kidron Valley as a result of renovations to the Al-Aqsa Mosque. The blackened seal contained wavelike lines on the back, implying it was attached to a bag or sachet of some kind, while the front gave an inscription that, though incomplete, can be confidently reconstructed as “Ga’alyahu [Gedaliah] son of Immer.” Jeremiah records that the name *Immer* belongs to a family of priests who had oversight of the temple (Jeremiah 20:1), and with whom the prophet was well-acquainted (Jeremiah 20:1-6). Pashhur the priest and son of Immer was responsible for the beating and imprisoning of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 20:2) immediately prior to Nebuchadnezzar’s invasion. Jeremiah prophesied that Pashhur would be taken captive and deported to Babylon, where he and his family would die (Jeremiah 20:6). Apparently, Gedaliah was Pashhur’s son (Jeremiah 38:1).

### *The Sarsekim Tablet*

Fourth, a small (about two-inch-long) cuneiform tablet discovered in the late 1800s near Baghdad, but only recently deciphered (2007) at the British Museum by Assyriologist Michael Jursa of Vienna, was found to contain the name *Sarsekim*.\*

Sarsekim was the *rab-saris* (chief officer and eunuch) to Nebuchadnezzar II during his siege of Jerusalem in 586 BC (Jeremiah 39:3) and was among the group of Babylonian officers who saw Zedekiah flee for his life toward the Arabah (Jeremiah 39:4). The Sarsekim Tablet dates to 595 BC and tells of Sarsekim giving a substantial amount of gold (about 1.5 pounds) to the temple of Esagila (the temple of the chief god Marduk in Babylon) in the tenth year of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign (595 BC). The tablet records his Babylonian name as *Nabu-sharrussu-ukin*, which becomes *Nebusarsekim* in English. This small relic’s testimony to the historicity of an insignificant figure in the Bible lends support to the historicity of the major biblical figures and events with whom he is mentioned. The deciphering of this tiny tablet led Irving Finkel of the Department of the Middle East at the British Museum to assert,

This is a fantastic discovery, a world class find. If Nebo Sarsekim existed, which other figures in the Old Testament existed? A throwaway detail in the Old Testament turns out to be accurate and true. I think that it means the whole of the narrative [of Jeremiah] takes on a new kind of power.<sup>3</sup>

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The sixth-century BC cuneiform Sarsekim Tablet confirms the historicity of Nebuchadnezzar’s chief officer who accompanied him at the siege of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 39:3). Josephus in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, VIII, mentions Sarsekim as one of Nebuchadnezzar’s generals who took Jerusalem in 586 BC.

\* The cuneiform East India House Inscription at the British Museum provides additional support, clearly expressing Nebuchadnezzar’s achievements and acknowledgment of the Babylonian god Marduk.

### *Nebuchadnezzar's Building Projects*

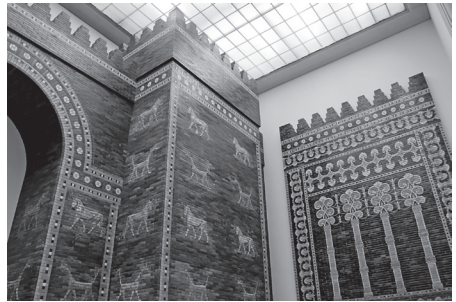
Fifth, ancient building materials that identify Nebuchadnezzar as the chief architect of Babylon have been identified. Immediately after the defeat of Nineveh in 612 BC, Nebuchadnezzar began large-scale building projects in order to beautify and fortify hundreds of acres of his capital city. Archaeologists have learned that Babylon contained magnificent gate structures, massive walls built in triplets, an impressive ziggurat, temples, the enduringly famous Hanging Gardens, administrative buildings, and palaces among others. Though the Euphrates River that originally bisected the city in Nebuchadnezzar's day has submerged one side of the city, remains from the other side leave a fingerprint unmistakably traceable to Nebuchadnezzar himself. It is estimated that more than 14 million baked bricks were made, many of them stamped (or hand-inscribed) with a cuneiform inscription that identifies Nebuchadnezzar. The mention of Esagila and Ezida on the brick is a reference to, respectively, the temple of the chief god Marduk and the temple of Nabu (the god of writing).

In addition to this, the Cylinder of Nebuchadnezzar II (British Museum), recovered from the ruins of Babylon, describes him as the builder and renovator of three palaces in the city, including his father's (Nabopolassar's) older palace and a summer palace along the Euphrates River. These kinds of cylinders were usually buried underneath the foundations of buildings as records and testimony (for future kings) of a particular structure. A similar record known as the Barrel Cylinder of Nebuchadnezzar II (Israel Museum) was written in the first person to commemorate the rebuilding of the Lugal-Maradda temple in central Babylonia. It boasts of the discovery of inscriptions within the foundations of the temple itself identifying Naram-Sin (king of Akkad), who reigned some 1,600 years prior to Nebuchadnezzar.

Babylon's famous and beautiful Ishtar Gate (600 BC), located during excavations

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Nebuchadnezzar brick identifying the king as the builder. The brick reads, "Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, who cares for Esagila and Ezida, eldest son of Nabopolassar, king of Babylon."



The Babylonian Ishtar Gate, reconstructed of blue-glazed brick, at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. The ornamented gate contains an inscription written in the first person by Nebuchadnezzar taking credit for its building. (Photo © Fotolia.)

conducted at Babylon from 1899 to 1914, has preserved 60 lines of dedicatory inscription that identifies Nebuchadnezzar as its builder. According to most scholars, the Ishtar Gate was the eighth gate that provided northern access to the inner city of Babylon. The Akkadian cuneiform text is written in the first person and reads in part,

Therefore, I [Nebuchadnezzar] pulled down these gates and laid their foundations at the water-table with asphalt and bricks and had them made of bricks with blue stone on which wonderful bulls and dragons were depicted. I covered their roofs by laying majestic cedars length-wise over them. I hung doors of cedar adorned with bronze at all the gate openings. I placed wild bulls and ferocious dragons in the gateways and thus adorned them with luxurious splendor so that people might gaze on them in wonder.<sup>4</sup>

The gate provides solid historical confirmation of Nebuchadnezzar's title as king, his historical existence, Babylon as the place of his reign, and his architectural affinities.

The collective archaeological records and inscriptions are in accord with the prophet Daniel's account of Nebuchadnezzar's boast: "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?" (Daniel 4:30 ESV). It was during this prideful moment (see verse 31) that Nebuchadnezzar heard a voice from heaven telling him that his kingdom had been taken from him and that he had been afflicted with the disorder known as *boanthropy* (verses 32-33—the belief that one is an ox and must conduct one's life accordingly). Apparently, Nebuchadnezzar later came to his senses and acknowledged the sovereignty of the Most High God (verses 34-37).

### *Confirmation of the Existence of the Babylonian King Belshazzar*

Sixth, while inspecting the ancient ruins at Ur (Tell el-Muqayyar), J.E. Taylor (the British Consul in Basra) discovered four cuneiform capsules known as the *Cylinders of Nabonidus* (554-540 BC).<sup>\*</sup> These important records not only confirm the historicity of Belshazzar, the king of Babylon who had Daniel interpret the writing on the wall, they also added historical details that help explain Daniel's rise to third-highest rank in the Babylonian kingdom (Daniel 5:29).

Critics had long dismissed the book of Daniel as mythological embellishment since he had recorded the name *Belshazzar* as the reigning king of Babylon (5:1); however, there were no extrabiblical records or Babylonian kings lists that reflected Belshazzar as being part of the Chaldean dynasty. In fact, critics claimed Belshazzar did not exist—that is, until a similar discovery was made, bolstering Taylor's earlier find.

<sup>\*</sup> Interestingly, an Aramaic document was recovered from among the Dead Sea Scrolls (4Q242). Known as "The Prayer of Nabonidus," it was most likely copied from an older version of the prayer sometime during the first century BC. It is written in the first person and tells of Nabonidus's affliction with an ulcer for seven years while he was at Tema. The prayer mentions that it was an exorcist Jew from among the exiles of Judah who ultimately forgave his sins. He begins to recount the story of his approach to the gods and then the rest of the text is missing. At very least, we see here an independent corroboration of the books of Daniel (Daniel 9:2) and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 29:10-12) when they affirm that the Jews were in Babylonian captivity during the sixth century BC.



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The Cylinder of Nabonidus contains the name of King Belshazzar, mentioned in Daniel 5.

The prevailing critical belief was overturned when excavations led by Hormuzd Rassam (1826–1910) at the temple of Shamash in Sippar (southern Iraq) recovered a mid-sixth-century BC cylinder that describes Nabonidus’s reconstruction of pagan temples in Harran (for example, that of the moon god Sin) along with his discovery of ancient Mesopotamian kings’ inscriptions, including those of Naram-Sin (2254–2218 BC) and Shagaraki-shuriash (1245–1233 BC). It is from this text that we understand that Belshazzar (*Bel-shar-usur*) was the son and co-regent of the Babylonian king Nabonidus. Apparently, when Nabonidus was away from Babylon on various expeditions and temple renovation projects he left his son in charge as king. Support for this is found in the cuneiform Nabonidus Chronicle (dated to about 530 to 400 BC) that records the events in Babylon from 556 to the 530s, telling of Nabonidus’s hiatus for at least ten years in Arabia (he established a base at the Oasis of Teima) in his effort to forge trade alliances with the Arabs. It further explains why Belshazzar could offer Daniel only the third-highest position in the kingdom after he had interpreted the writing on the wall. Since Nabonidus was the king and Belshazzar his co-regent, Daniel could naturally occupy no greater than the “third ruler” position.

### *The Biblical Significance of Discoveries About Nebuchadnezzar*

There is very little doubt among scholars today about the existence and exploits of Nebuchadnezzar II. This is primarily due to the growing body of material evidence that has been accumulated from more than 150 years of research in Mesopotamia and Israel. The Bible has accurately recorded the events relating to the final days of the Davidic dynasty and the destruction of Solomon’s temple. In addition to its rich commentary

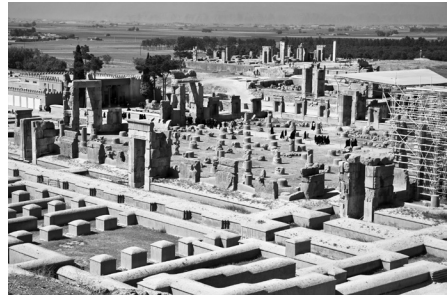
on the seventh and sixth centuries BC, the Bible has helped to fill in gaps in the archaeological record with data that are not supplied in any extrabiblical source. In fact, the material data have vindicated those who had placed their trust in the historical record the Bible contains, especially as it pertains to the historicity of King Belshazzar and the exploits of Nebuchadnezzar II.

## The Persian Kings

Persia and its kings figure prominently in the Bible. The books of Esther, Ezra, and Nehemiah offer a glimpse into this time period and the Hebrews' dealings with the Persian kings and culture. Since several key discoveries are related to Persia and its kings it seems best to discuss this information as we address those discoveries below.

### *Background and Setting*

The Persians and their territory (modern Iran) developed late relative to other surrounding countries. We learn from cuneiform texts found in Mesopotamia dating to the third millennium BC that northeast of the Tigris River various groups (Elamites, Kassites) engaged in trade. By the late second millennium BC, European tribes began migrating into the area, two of which were the Medes and the Persian tribes. The Medes eventually allied with the Chaldeans (Babylonians) to the south to make war on the mighty Assyrian empire, defeating Assyria at Nineveh in 612 BC. By the eighth century BC Medes and Persians had consolidated their strength in the area known as Media and Elam. Media lay northeast of Assyria while Elam resided in the south, immediately north of the Persian Gulf.



The ruins of Persepolis (in modern-day Iran) date from the late sixth century BC and attest to the power and wealth of the Persian Empire. The name *Persepolis* (in Old Persian the name is *Parsa*) literally means "The City of the Persians;" its name today is *Takht-e Jamshid*. (Photo © Fotolia.)



The Cyrus Cylinder. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

## *Cyrus the Great*

By the late seventh century BC, the Persians' close alliance with the Medes resulted in a marriage between the royal families of the Medes and Persians. Cyrus II (559–530, also known as Cyrus the Great) was born of this union between the two royal households. After becoming king, Cyrus II forged alliances to consolidate his power and developed Persia into the stronger of the two tribes. It was in the northern Media territory that the biblical city of Ecbatana (Ezra 6:2—the modern city at the site is Hamadan) was founded as the capital of the Medes until Cyrus conquered it in the mid sixth century BC. Soon after his conquest of Ionia, a Greek-speaking region on the Aegean Sea in Asia Minor, Cyrus established the Persian city of Pasargadae in the southeast region of Persia. Other Persian cities would also be established, such as Persepolis (pictured on previous page) and Susa. Scholars are convinced that Pasargadae was not used much after Cyrus's death. Cyrus's ambition and military savvy stretched his kingdom to what is now western Turkey (Anatolia) and east into India.

Eventually, Cyrus pushed his armies west into Chaldean territories; in 539 BC the Persians conquered Babylon itself without a battle while the Chaldean king Nabonidus (556–539 BC) was away, having left his co-regent and son Belshazzar in charge (Daniel 5:1-30). The Bible mentions a prophecy about King Cyrus in Isaiah 45:1-7, over 100 years prior to his birth. Cyrus did not appear to know the God of Israel (Isaiah 45:4) since his description of the victory over Babylon gave credit to the Chaldean god Marduk. However, Cyrus was indeed used by God to bring release to the Jews being held in Babylonian captivity for the previous 70 years (Daniel 9:2; Jeremiah 25:11-12).

The sixth-century BC Cyrus Cylinder, which many have recognized as the first charter of human rights, is a clay record written in Babylonian cuneiform of Cyrus's victory over Babylon. Worthy of note, the cylinder gives permission to worship freely and to rebuild destroyed cities and worship centers. Though the Jews were not mentioned by name in the cylinder, they were free to return to their homeland that lay in ruins. Later some did under Ezra, Nehemiah, and Zerubbabel, but many stayed and lived within Persian society (see the book of Esther). In addition to the Cyrus Cylinder, Ezra 1:2-4 and 6:3-5 state that Cyrus believed he had been charged and authorized by God to rebuild the ruined temple in Jerusalem, and that the Jews should return to pursue the endeavor. Cyrus lived nearly a decade longer, only to be killed in a battle he personally led in 530 BC. His stone tomb pictured here, which was looted prior to its discovery, resides about one mile outside the palaces at Pasargadae.\* It stands over 30 feet tall; its



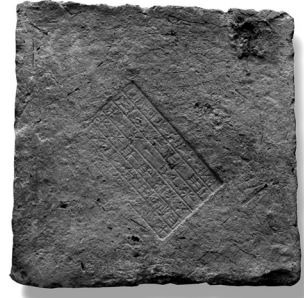
Tomb of Cyrus in Pasargadae (Iran). (Photo © Fotolia.)

\* The tomb of Cyrus is mentioned by Strabo (15.3.7) in the first century BC and Plutarch (Alexander 69.4) and Anabasis of Arrian (6.29) in the second century AD. Strabo mentions that Alexander the Great visited the tomb prior to his death in 323 BC.

interior measures only 80 square feet. Cyrus as a historical figure has been confirmed through a variety of material remains, including palace wall reliefs, his tomb, and building bricks that bear his name.

### *The Reign of Darius the Great*

After Cyrus died, his son Cambyses II (529–522 BC), who reigned only seven short years, failed to realize his plan of adding Egypt to the Persian Empire. After his death, the biblical king Darius the Great (522–486 BC) occupied the throne for 36 years. Ezra 6:1-13 tells of Darius and his search for the royal document that authorized the Jews to rebuild their temple and city. Ezra tells us that Darius not only gave permission to continue the building, but that he also gave aid to the restoration project. Several monuments have been discovered that attest to the historicity of this biblical king. First, the Behistun Relief was found carved into the side of a high rock face near Ecbatana and the Zagros mountains. It depicts Darius and his soldiers leading his defeated enemies by a rope. Fortunately for archaeologists and epigraphers, the relief was accompanied by Akkadian, Elamite, and Persian inscriptions that chronicle Darius's achievements and ascendancy to power, which helped scholars eventually read the cuneiform language. Moreover, excavations at Susa have revealed that Darius is attested in palace wall reliefs and inscriptions; one that is housed at the Louvre Museum reads, "This palace which I built at Susa."



This clay brick from the sixth century BC bearing Cyrus's name was discovered in Ur and is written in Babylon cuneiform (Ezra 6:14). It reads, "Cyrus king of the world, king of Anshan... the great gods delivered all the lands into my hands and I made this land dwell in peace." (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

### *Xerxes I and Artaxerxes I*

Upon Darius's death in 486 BC, his son Xerxes I (486–465 BC) quickly put down revolts in Egypt and Babylon and set his sights to subdue the rebellious Greeks in 480 BC. This unsuccessful campaign led to the complete loss of control of Greece itself and eventually western Asia Minor.

The book of Esther (1:1-3) opens during the third year of the reign of Xerxes I while he was occupying the capital city of Susa northeast of Babylon and the Tigris River. The book of Esther uses the king's Hebrew name of Ahasuerus (from the king's Old Persian name, Khshayarsha) instead of his Greek name, Xerxes. Some have identified Esther through an examination of Persian archaeology and records as Queen Amestris, who was enthroned as a replacement of Queen Vashti during the seventh year (c. 479 BC) of Xerxes's reign (2:16-17). By and large, most scholars have accepted the historicity of the book of Esther. Its identification of a major Persian city (Susa) and king (Xerxes) as well as its familiarity with Persian culture and language (shown in the loan words used) has been verified through excavations at major Persian sites such as Persepolis, Susa, and Pasargadae.

When Xerxes was assassinated in 465 BC, his brother Artaxerxes I (464–424 BC) took the throne by force and reigned from Susa in the north. The Bible mentions that in the seventh year of the reign of Artaxerxes, Ezra the scribe was given a letter from the king authorizing him (and others) to return to Jerusalem with the king's silver, gold, and provisions (Ezra 7:1-26).

In addition, Nehemiah declares he was in the capital city of Susa in the twentieth year of the king's reign (Nehemiah 1:1; 2:1) when his burden for Jerusalem prompted him to pray and soon after petition the king. Nehemiah records that Artaxerxes granted him permission to restore and rebuild Jerusalem in the king's twentieth year (444 BC).\*

Artaxerxes was the last Persian king mentioned in the Old Testament. By the end of his 40-year reign in 424 BC, he had ruled longer than any Persian king who came before or would come after him. The Persian Empire would fall to the swift Greek armies of Alexander the Great just about 100 years later. There is little doubt among scholars of the historicity of Artaxerxes I. This is due to the multiple citations of his life and works we find in the historical record, such as his tomb at Persepolis, the palace wall reliefs, his role in the Bible, and his attestation in the fifth-century BC royal silver bowl/cup that bears his name. The bowl inscription reads,

Artaxerxes, the great king, king of kings, king of countries, son of Xerxes (who was) son of Darius the king, the Achaemenian, in whose house this silver drinking cup (was) made.

What is more, a collection of correspondence written on papyrus from the Jewish community at Elephantine Island in Egypt mentioned Darius, Xerxes, and



The rock-cut tombs of Persian kings Darius, Xerxes, and Artaxerxes are set in a row in Persepolis. (Photo © Fotolia.)

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The silver bowl of Artaxerxes I dates to the fifth century BC. The inscription around the rim of the bowl mentions three biblical kings of the postcaptivity era who are also mentioned in Esther, Ezra, and Nehemiah. They are Darius, Xerxes, and Artaxerxes I.

\* This event begins the countdown of Daniel's prophecy of 70 weeks (Daniel 9:24-27) decreed for the Jewish nation. The end of the sixty-ninth week would be marked by the Messiah's death, with the final week (seven-year period) to be fulfilled in the future.

Artaxerxes by name in association with the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the second Temple. For example, the Passover Papyrus mentions “the fifth year of king Darius”; the Settlement of Claim by Oath Papyrus mentions “in the year 25 of King Artaxerxes”; and the Petition for Authorization to Rebuild the Temple of Yaho Papyrus includes the phrases “...give you favor before King Darius...in the 14th year of King Darius...year 17 of King Darius.”\*



This massive limestone wall relief unearthed at the treasury in Persepolis pictures Darius seated on the throne speaking with a Median figure. Darius’s son Xerxes I is standing behind the throne. The cupbearer appears behind Xerxes (Nehemiah 2:1). On each end of the relief are the immortal guard troops. (Photo by Zev Radovan.)

### *The Biblical Significance of Discoveries About the Persian Kings*

The confirmation of the Persian kings is important to biblical studies since their existence and acts form the cultural and political background to the books of Esther, Ezra, and Nehemiah; knowledge about the kings adds information about what prompted the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple. In addition, the unambiguous confirmation of the decree of Artaxerxes to rebuild Jerusalem in 444 BC offers a clear historical beginning to Daniel’s prophecy of the 70 weeks. The date is easily confirmed by simply calculating (using the lunar calendar) backward from the time of Christ’s crucifixion.

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\* James Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 491-492. Also, the seal of Darius I, whose reign spanned the prophetic periods of Haggai and Zechariah, can be seen at the British Museum. The seal depicts Darius in his chariot (with a driver) shooting a lion with his bow and arrow. Above them is the winged Persian national god, Ahura Mazda.