

Background to Ezra and Nehemiah

After the 70 years of Babylonian captivity Zerubbabel was authorised by Cyrus to return and rebuild the "house of God" at Jerusalem. When the decree was made known, 49,697 Jews joined him and they took horses, mules, camels and asses in great numbers. In addition, approximately US\$1.5 million worth of silver and US\$5.3 million worth of gold was donated (Ezra 2:64-69).

Construction of the Temple proceeded until the death of Cyrus in 530BC but when his evil son Cambyses (Ahasuerus) (Ezra 4:6) began to reign the Samaritans made accusations to the King and the work on the Temple was ordered to cease.

According to Josephus, Zerubbabel then returned to Susa in Persia, to his friend Darius, and was employed as a bodyguard. Darius had made a vow that if ever he became king he would order the Temple at Jerusalem to be rebuilt. Zerubbabel was elevated to the first of three bodyguards because he excelled in wisdom.

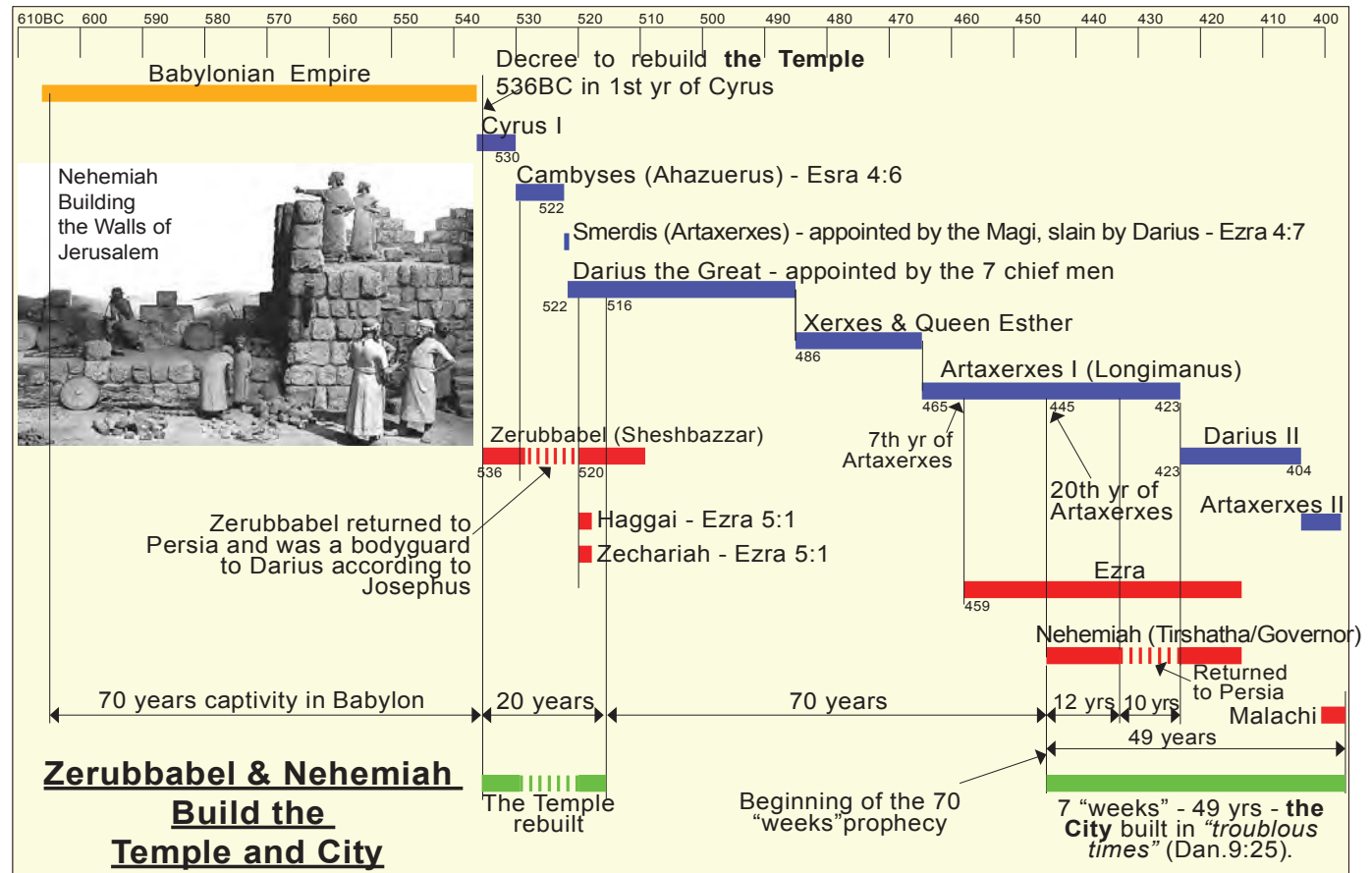
After Cambyses committed suicide at Damascus on his way home from a war with Egypt a usurper named Smerdis, called himself Artaxerxes (Ezra 4:7) and took the throne with the support of the Magi.

Darius slew Smerdis and the Magi and was crowned king by the heads of the seven families that ruled Persia (Esther 1:14). Zerubbabel would have had a vital role in the overthrow of Smerdis.

Meanwhile the prophets Haggai and Zechariah had urged the people to continue building the Temple and when this came to the notice of Darius he confirmed the decree of Cyrus in the 2nd year of his reign. Zerubbabel returned and the Temple was finished in the 6th year of the reign of Darius (516BC) (Ezra 6:15). Zechariah confirms it was Zerubbabel who finished the Temple and for this reason he must have returned to Jerusalem (Zech.4:9).

Seventy years later in 445BC, Nehemiah received a decree from King Artaxerxes I to rebuild the city of

Jerusalem (Neh.2:8) which was still uninhabited (Neh.7:4). This decree was the commencement date for the 70 "weeks" prophecy of Daniel (Dan.9:24-27) and dates its beginning from the month Abib in the 20th year of Artaxerxes. Nehemiah returned to Persia after 12 years, in the 32nd year of Artaxerxes (Neh.5:14; 13:6). He returned to Jerusalem (Neh.13:7) about 10 years later after Artaxerxes died to find that Jews had intermarried with the heathen, their children could not speak Hebrew, Tobiah the Ammonite had been given a room in the Temple and some Jews did not keep the sabbath. Nehemiah took firm action to correct the errors. Josephus says that Nehemiah died at an old age which would be only a few years before the prophet Malachi brought the Old Testament to a close.



The Grecian Empire of Alexander the Great

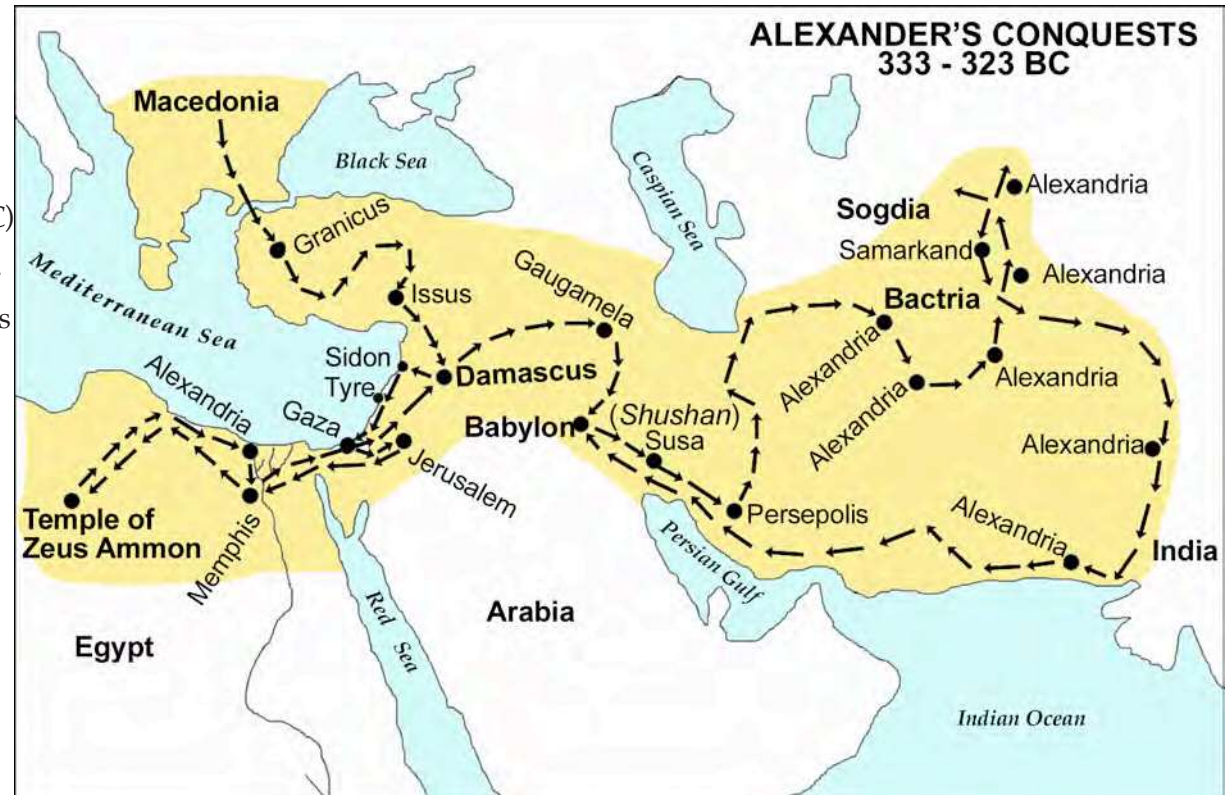
Daniel prophesied during the reign of Darius the Mede, while Cyrus was King, that there would be “yet three kings of Persia; and the fourth shall be far richer than they all: and by his strength through his riches he shall stir up all against the realm of Grecia” (Dan.11:2). The four kings after Cyrus were as follows: (1) Cambyses (Ahasuerus 530 - 522BC), (2) Smerdis (Artaxerxes, 522BC), (3) Darius the Great (522 - 486BC), and (4) Xerxes (486 - 465BC) the husband of Esther, who in 480BC led a vast army against Greece and defeated the Greeks in August 480BC. However, in September of that year, the Greeks won a decisive naval battle at Salamis and Xerxes withdrew with most of his army.

It was this Persian attack on Greece that, in 334BC, stirred Alexander the son of King Philip of Macedonia, to cross into Asia to engage the Persian forces at the river Granicus with a force of 30,000 foot soldiers and 5,000 horsemen, defeating the Persians. Darius III gathered another army but was defeated at Issus where Darius fled leaving his wives behind. Alexander continued south to the island city of Tyre which he besieged, scrapping the debris from the coastal city which Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed in 586BC into the sea in fulfilment of Isa.23:1-18. Alexander formed a causeway to the island city one kilometre offshore.

After Tyre fell in fulfilment of Ezekiel’s prophecy (Ezek.26:14) Alexander captured Gaza and determined to take vengeance on Jerusalem for not providing supplies for his troops during the siege of Tyre. On arrival at Jerusalem he was met by the high priest and the priests. Josephus records that Alexander demounted from his white horse and bowed before Jaddua the High priest and said,

“I saw this very person in a dream, in this very habit, when I was at Dios, in Macedonia, who...exhorted me to make no delay, but boldly to pass over the sea thither, for that he would conduct my army, and would give me the dominion over the Persians...and remembering that vision ...I believe that I bring this army under the divine conduct, and shall therewith conquer Darius, and destroy the power of the Persians” (*Antiquities* Book 11, ch.8, para. 334-335).

Alexander was shown the prophecies of the Book of Daniel and proceeded to offer sacrifices at the Temple, granting special favours to the Jews.



Egypt submitted to Alexander and he visited the Temple of Zeus Ammon where the priests declared he was a god.

The final victory over Darius was at Gaugamela after which Alexander marched through Central Asia to India where he defeated King Porus who came against him with an army on elephants. He returned to Babylon where he died in 323BC after a drunken feast a few weeks before he planned to march into Arabia.

After his death the Kingdom was divided between his four Generals and “not to his posterity” (Dan.11:4) fulfilling the prophecy of Daniel 7 which pictures the Grecian Empire as a Leopard with 4 wings and four heads. The focus of Daniel’s prophecy from Dan.11:5-35 is on the conflict between the Seleucids north of Israel, and the Ptolemys in Egypt. It concludes with Antiochus Epiphanes who died 163BC and who stands as a type of Antichrist.

The Grecian Era after Alexander - Dan.11:1-35

In Daniel chapter 11 the rise and fall of Greece as a world power is foretold by Daniel in remarkable detail, so much so, that critics has suggested that the Book of Daniel must have been written after the events described. The prophecy appears in chapters 8 and 11 where the overthrow of the Persian Kingdom is seen as the reaction of Alexander the Great to the invasion of Greece by Xerxes I the Persian king, in 480BC. At that time Xerxes crossed the Hellespont, capturing and burning Athens. After suffering defeat in the sea battle at Salamis he withdrew. Daniel wrote:

“Behold, there shall stand up yet three kings in Persia; and the fourth shall be far richer than they all: and by his strength through his riches he shall stir up all against the realm of Grecia” (Dan.11:2).

Daniel wrote in the reign of Cyrus the **first king of Persia** and the four kings who followed were Cambyses (Ahaseurus), Smerdis (Artaxerxes), Darius I and Xerxes who was married to Queen Esther. Xerxes was exceedingly rich and led the Persian armies in his unsuccessful campaign against Greece in 480BC. The prophecy looks forward to Alexander the Macedonian King, who in 334BC led his army into Asia Minor and three times defeated Darius II at Granicus, Isis, and Gaugamela before capturing the entire Persian Empire. He is described as a *“mighty king...that shall rule with great dominion”* (Dan.11:3).

When Alexander achieved dominion however, his kingdom was *“broken”* and in 323BC he died at Babylon leaving his kingdom to his four Generals and *“not to his posterity”* (Dan.11:4).

In Daniel Chapter 11 from verses 5 to 35 Daniel foretold the conflicts between the King of the North (of Israel), which was the **Seleucid Kingdom**, and the King of the South (of Israel), which was **Egypt**, down to 165BC when the Seleucid king, Antiochus Epiphanes desecrated the Temple, slaughtered the Jews, and caused Jewish sacrifices to cease.

Antiochus had invaded Egypt in 169BC but ambassadors from the Roman Senate arrived and ordered him out of Egypt. He had no option but to depart since his father **Antiochus the Great** had been defeated by the Roman Prince, Scipio, at the **battle of Magnesia (190BC)** and was compelled to withdraw from Asia Minor to east of the Halys River and pay tribute to Rome. In 167BC Antiochus Epiphanes returned and desecrated the Temple.

In this regard Antiochus stands as a ‘type’ of the future Roman prince, Antichrist, who is described in Daniel ch.11:36 to 45 as the King of the North. Just as Antiochus placed an idol to Jupiter (Zeus) in the Temple at Jerusalem, so Antichrist, at the mid-point of the 7-year Tribulation, will set up his image in the rebuilt Temple and will cause the Jewish *“sacrifice and oblation to cease”* (Dan.9:27). See 2Thess.2:4.

