

Lesson 3

The Persian Period

Introduction

The Persian Empire—a realm that stretched from the Indus Valley to the fringes of the Aegean Sea profoundly and forever influenced the course of Jewish history. The empire was established by Cyrus the Great. His rise to power not only involved conquest and empire-building; it also brought sweeping cultural change and enlightened leadership that reshaped the ancient world. His policies and decrees set in motion events that would fulfill biblical prophecies and alter the destiny of the Jewish people, leading to their return from exile and the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem.

During this time, the Old Testament books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi uncover the challenges and triumphs of the Jewish people as they navigated life under Persian rule. We'll see how their faith was tested and strengthened, how their identity was preserved amidst diversity, and how their experiences during this period laid the groundwork for future generations.

The Rise of the Persian Empire under Cyrus the Great

The Persian Empire, one of the most significant empires in ancient history, was founded by Cyrus the Great around 550 BC. Before his rise to power, the region was divided into various small kingdoms and city-states. Cyrus, a powerful military leader, and statesman, embarked on a series of conquests that dramatically expanded the borders of his kingdom. His initial success came from unifying the Medes and the Persians, two Iranian peoples, under a single rule. This consolidation provided a stable base for further expansion and set the stage for the creation of an empire that would dominate much of the Near East.

Conquests and Expansion under Cyrus

Cyrus the Great's reign was marked by a series of swift and strategic military campaigns. His first major conquest was the defeat of the Median Empire in 553 B.C., which not only expanded his territory but also significantly increased his resources and manpower. These became the backbone of his further campaigns. Following this, Cyrus turned his attention to Lydia (defeated in 546 B.C.). The conquest of Lydia and the wealthy King Croesus extended his reach into Asia Minor, a region rich in resources and influence. Cyrus's strategies in these campaigns were characterized by their precision and speed, swiftly overwhelming any opposition. Yet, it was his treatment of the defeated that distinguished his rule; he was renowned for sparing the lives of royal adversaries and their families. This clemency, far from a sign of weakness, was a tactic that fostered loyalty and pacified subjugated regions.

The fall of the Neo-Babylonian Empire (defeated in 539 B.C.) marked perhaps his most famed victory. By taking Babylon, Cyrus controlled a key cultural and economic center of the ancient world. The city's surrender was notably bloodless, and subsequent decrees by Cyrus, including the liberation of the Jewish

people from their exile, were met with widespread approval. His actions were strategic moves to integrate diverse peoples into his empire.

His policies towards the vanquished territories were revolutionary. Instead of imposing Persian culture, Cyrus displayed respect for local traditions and religions. This approach facilitated the smooth integration of conquered peoples into his empire and minimized resistance. Temples were restored, and religious practices were supported, earning Cyrus the respect and even reverence of those he ruled over. In biblical narratives, Isaiah identifies Cyrus as a chosen instrument of God, an anointed leader who helped restore the Jews to their homeland, Isaiah 44.28-45.6.

The Lord says this to Cyrus, his anointed, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and disarm kings, to open doors before him, and even city gates will not be shut: "I will go before you and level the uneven places; I will shatter the bronze doors and cut the iron bars in two. I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches from secret places, so that you may know that I am the Lord. I am the God of Israel, who calls you by your name, Isaiah 45.1-3.

Cyrus's reputation as a liberator rather than a conqueror was cultivated by acts of mercy and respect. His legacy was such that even Alexander the Great, who conquered the Achaemenid Empire two centuries later, admired Cyrus and sought to emulate his governance. The 'Cyrus Cylinder,' often considered the first charter of human rights, summarizes his enlightened approach to rule. By blending strategic military actions with a policy of cultural and religious tolerance, Cyrus the Great etched his name into history as a leader whose conquests were matched by his statesmanship.

The Impact on the Near East

The rapid expansion of the Persian Empire under Cyrus had a profound impact on the Near East. It brought a vast region, spanning from the Indus Valley in the east to the Aegean Sea in the west, under a single administrative framework. This unification led to increased trade and cultural exchange, as well as political stability in many previously war-torn areas. The Persian system of satrapies, or provincial governorships, allowed for a degree of local autonomy while maintaining overall cohesion of the empire. This system was revolutionary in its ability to manage diverse cultures and peoples effectively.

Cyrus an astute administrator. His policies were marked by wisdom and tolerance, particularly in his approach to governance and religion. Unlike many conquerors of his time, Cyrus allowed the peoples he conquered to retain their customs and religious practices. This is exemplified in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah, where Cyrus is noted for allowing the Jewish people to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple.

Cyrus' Legacy

The legacy of Cyrus the Great and the empire he founded is significant in world history. The Persian Empire, under his rule, became a model for later empires in terms of its administrative techniques, tolerance of diverse cultures and religions, and its approach to governance. The influence of the Persian Empire extended far beyond its territorial conquests, affecting the development of subsequent political thought, administrative practices, and cultural exchanges in the Near East and beyond. Cyrus's vision

and his methods of empire-building left an indelible mark on the history of civilization, setting standards that were emulated by many who came after him.

Key Events

The Edict of Cyrus; Rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple

The Edict of Cyrus in 539 BC stands as a pivotal event in Jewish history. As recorded in the Book of Ezra, this proclamation marked the end of the Babylonian captivity, allowing the exiled Jews to return to Jerusalem and signaling the beginning of the Second Temple period.

In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken through Jeremiah, the Lord roused the spirit of King Cyrus to issue a proclamation throughout his entire kingdom and to put it in writing: This is what King Cyrus of Persia says: "The Lord, the God of the heavens, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and has appointed me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of his people among you, may his God be with him, and may he go to Jerusalem in Judah and build the house of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem. Let every survivor, wherever he resides, be assisted by the men of that region with silver, gold, goods, and livestock, along with a freewill offering for the house of God in Jerusalem," Ezra 1.1-4.

Cyrus' action was not only significant from a political standpoint, as it demonstrated the extent of Persian authority, but it also had deep religious and cultural implications. The edict allowed the Jewish people to re-establish their religious institutions, which were central to their identity and faith.

For the Jews, the return to Jerusalem under this edict was a momentous journey, one laden with both hope and hardship. The Jews who returned faced the daunting task of rebuilding their city and its Temple amidst the ruins left by the Babylonian destruction. The completion of the Second Temple in 516 BC, under the reign of Darius I, marked the end of a significant chapter in the restoration efforts. Ezra describes the celebration that accompanied the Temple's dedication, Ezra 6.13-22, underscoring the Temple's central place in the religious life of the Jewish community. Darius's support for the completion of the Temple also exemplifies the continuity of Cyrus's policy of religious tolerance and support for local customs within the empire. The Persian kings, by supporting the restoration of the Temple, ensured the loyalty of their Jewish subjects and strengthened the administrative stability of their western provinces.

The Story of Esther

Esther's story offers a more personal and dramatic glimpse into the lives of Jews in the Persian Empire. It showcases the complex web of court intrigue and the vulnerable position of the Jewish exiles within the empire. Her bravery and the resulting decree which protected the Jews from persecution underscore the precarious nature of life for minorities in the empire, as well as the potential for influence and protection under Persian rule.

The festival of Purim, which commemorates the events described in the Book of Esther, remains a lasting testament to the Jewish experience under Persian rule. It celebrates not only the deliverance of the Jewish people from a genocidal threat but also their courage and resilience in the face of adversity. The book of Esther sheds light on the dual reality of the Persian period for the Jews: as subjects of a vast

empire, they were afforded protection and the ability to thrive, yet they also had to navigate the complexities of imperial politics and cultural tensions.

Cultural and Religious Influence

The Persian period was a time of great transformation for the Jewish people, not only in Judea but also across the sprawling diaspora. The cultural and religious influences of this era were profound, leaving an lasting mark on Jewish religious practices and thought. During the exile and subsequent return, the Jews were exposed to a variety of Persian religious concepts, such as angelology and eschatology, some of which may have influenced post-exilic Jewish theology. The unification of cultures under the vast umbrella of the Persian Empire encouraged a cross-pollination of ideas, which is reflected in the evolution of Jewish religious literature and practices during and after this period.

Moreover, the experience of living in the diaspora under Persian rule sparked a transformation in Jewish community organization. With the Temple in Jerusalem no longer the singular focus of religious life, local synagogues began to emerge as centers of worship and learning, serving as the community gathering point in disparate regions of the empire. This decentralization of religious practice allowed for a certain democratization of worship, making religious experience more personal and accessible. In this way, the dispersion brought about by the Persian Empire inadvertently spawned the development of a more communal and portable form of Judaism.

The legal and social status granted to Jewish communities by Persian authorities also played a pivotal role in shaping their religious identity. The relative autonomy allowed to Jews under Persian rule, including the right to enforce their own laws and the recognition of their leaders, led to the strengthening of Jewish institutions and the development of a distinct religious identity that could operate within a broader imperial framework. This period saw the rise of the Jewish sage or scholar, figures who would come to play a crucial role in interpreting Jewish law and tradition, laying the groundwork for later rabbinic Judaism.

Lastly, the Persian Empire's policy of religious tolerance provided a template for Jewish thought on governance and coexistence with other cultures and faiths. This exposure to a variety of religious practices under a single imperial system contributed to a broader understanding of the world beyond the borders of Judea. It also presented the Jewish people with the challenge of maintaining their distinctiveness while participating in the larger cultural and political world, a balancing act that would continue to characterize Jewish history in the centuries leading up to the New Testament period.

Intersection with the Old Testament

Cyrus

The intersection of Persian history with the Old Testament is deeply woven into the story of the Jewish people, particularly through the fulfillment of prophecies and the chronicling of their return from exile. Cyrus the Great is notably mentioned in the Book of Isaiah as the Lord's anointed, or 'messiah', who would decree the return of the Jews to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of their temple, Isaiah 45.1. This served as validation for the Jewish people, as it presented Cyrus's actions as part of God's divine plan,

and it reinforced their trust in God directing the course of history through the actions of even non-Jewish rulers. The identification of a foreign emperor as a messianic figure is unique in the Hebrew scriptures.

Ezra and Nehemiah

The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah offer detailed accounts of the period following the edict of Cyrus, focusing on the challenges and triumphs of the Jewish people as they endeavored to rebuild their society. These books serve as historical records of the restoration of the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem, pivotal events that marked the reconstitution of Jewish national and religious life. They also provide insights into the re-establishment of the Torah as the foundation of Jewish law and identity, highlighting the reinstatement of religious customs and festivals. This period of reconstruction was critical in redefining Jewish self-understanding after the dislocation of the exile and in re-affirming their covenant relationship with God.

Esther

The Book of Esther presents a different facet of Jewish experience under Persian rule, one that unfolds in the heart of the empire rather than in the re-established community of Jerusalem. The story of Esther and Mordecai's courage and political astuteness offers a portrait of courage and survival, reflecting the broader themes of providence and deliverance that resonate throughout the Old Testament. Esther's story, while different from the themes of return and rebuilding found in Ezra and Nehemiah, complements them by showing the perseverance of Jewish faith and identity in difficult circumstances.

Conclusion

The Persian Empire under Cyrus the Great significantly shaped the cultural and religious landscape of the Near East and left a legacy on Jewish history. Cyrus's ascent to power marked the beginning of a new period of great change for the Jewish people, with his conquests and enlightened policies laying the groundwork for the re-establishment of their religious and national life. His strategic military successes expanded the empire's reach, while his respectful approach towards the conquered territories set a precedent for a new kind of rule that valued cultural and religious diversity.

The Edict of Cyrus in 539 BC, fulfilled biblical prophecies and reinvigorated the Jewish faith and identity. The completion of the Second Temple and the walls of Jerusalem demonstrate the perseverance and faith of the Jewish people in reclaiming their homeland. The Book of Esther acquaints us with the Jewish experience in the Persian court, highlighting the complexities and challenges of life in the diaspora.

The many cultural and religious influences of the Persian Empire on Judaism spawned the growth of Jewish religious thought, the development of community life outside Judea, and the emergence of synagogues as centers of worship. The autonomy granted to Jewish communities allowed them to flourish under Persian rule, solidifying their identity and setting a foundation for future developments in Jewish law and scholarship.

For Class Interaction and Discussion

Lesson Outline

1. Historical Context

- The rise of Cyrus the Great
- Conquests and policies
- The Persian system of governance and its impact

2. The Edict of Cyrus and its Fulfillment of Prophecy

- Isaiah 45.1; Ezra 1.1-4
- The significance of the Edict for the Jewish people
- The return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the temple

3. The Jewish Experience Under Persian Rule

- The Book of Esther and the Jewish diaspora
- Jewish life and religious practice during the Persian period

4. Cultural and Religious Influence

- The impact of Persian culture on Jewish thought
- Changes in Jewish religious practices

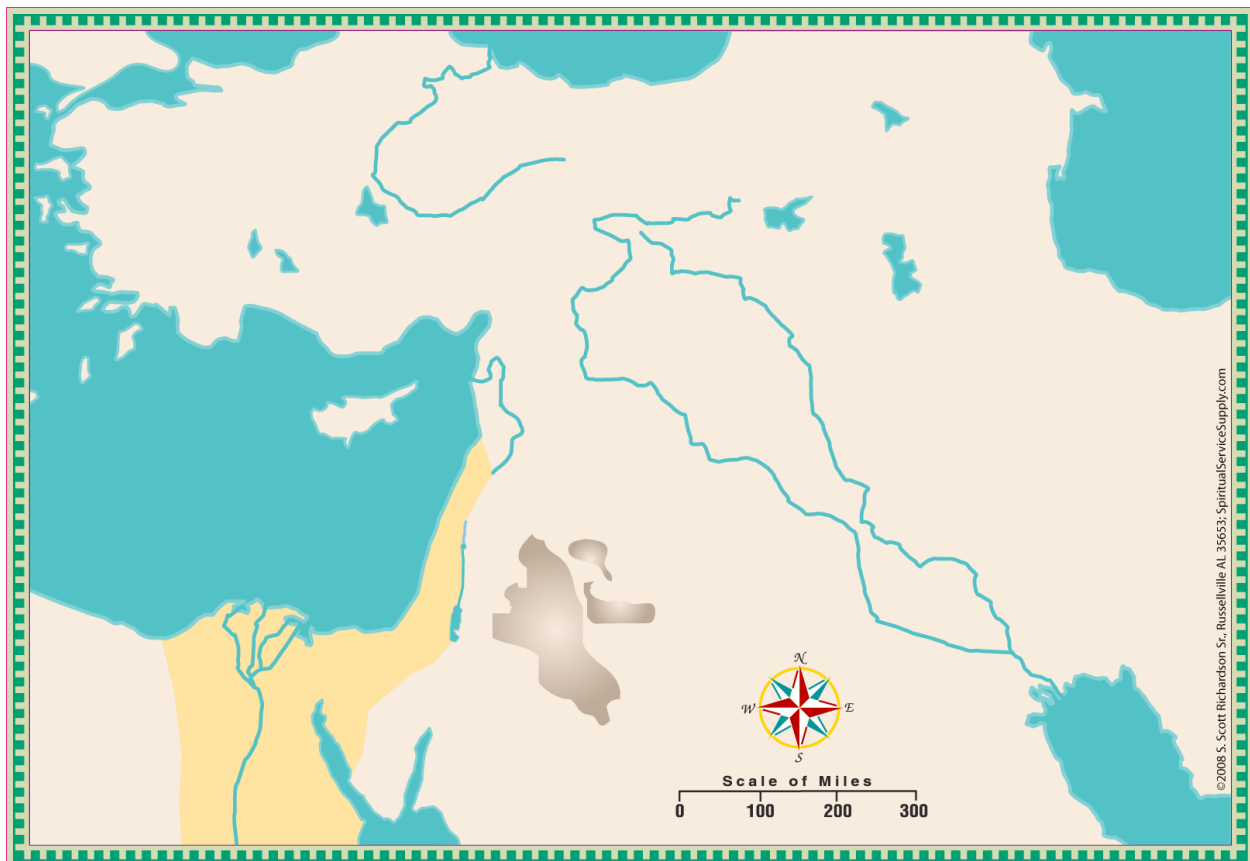
For Thought and Discussion

1. How did Cyrus the Great's policy of religious tolerance impact the Jewish people both politically and spiritually?
2. In what ways did the Persian Empire's approach to governance differ from other empires of the time, such as Babylon?
3. Reflect on the significance of the Edict of Cyrus in relation to the prophecies found in Isaiah 45:1. Why is it important to understand this historical context?
4. Discuss the challenges faced by the Jewish community in rebuilding the Temple and Jerusalem. What spiritual lessons can we learn from their experience?

5. How do you think the experience of living in the diaspora under Persian rule influenced Jewish religious practices?
6. Consider the story of Esther. What does her narrative tell us about the lives of Jews within the Persian Empire?
7. In what ways did the Persian period prepare the Jewish people for future challenges and changes?
8. How can we apply the principles of leadership and tolerance exhibited by Cyrus the Great to today's society?

Group Activities

1. **Map Exploration:** Break into small groups. Using a map of the Persian Empire, assign each group to trace the expansion of the empire and mark the significant locations mentioned in the Old Testament.



2. **Group Discussion:** Discuss the themes of leadership, faith, and resilience seen in the story of Esther.

Final Encouraging Word

The Jewish community's experience under Persian rule demonstrates God's providence and the importance of righteous leadership. May we also trust in God's plan throughout the courses of our lives.

Timeline of the Persian Period with Key Events

550 BC: Rise of Cyrus the Great

- Cyrus II unites the Medes and Persians, beginning the formation of the Persian Empire.

539 BC: Conquest of Babylon

- Cyrus the Great captures Babylon, ending the Neo-Babylonian Empire.

538 BC: The Edict of Cyrus

- Cyrus issues a decree allowing the Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple.

537-516 BC: Rebuilding of the Second Temple

- Jewish exiles return to Jerusalem and lay the foundation of the Second Temple.

530 BC: Death of Cyrus the Great

- Cyrus dies in battle, and his son Cambyses II succeeds him.

522 BC: Accession of Darius I

- Darius I becomes king after a period of unrest and consolidates the empire.

520 BC: Ministry of the Prophets Haggai and Zechariah

- Haggai and Zechariah encourage the Jews in Jerusalem to continue rebuilding the Temple.

516 BC: Completion of the Second Temple

- The Second Temple is completed and dedicated during the reign of Darius I.

486 BC: Reign of Xerxes I (Ahasuerus)

- Xerxes I comes to power; his reign is traditionally associated with the events in the Book of Esther.

465 BC: Accession of Artaxerxes I

- Artaxerxes I becomes king; under his rule, Ezra and Nehemiah lead reforms in Jerusalem.

458 BC: Mission of Ezra

- Ezra arrives in Jerusalem with a group of exiles and implements religious reforms.

445 BC: Nehemiah's First Term as Governor

- Nehemiah travels to Jerusalem and begins rebuilding the city walls.

432 BC: Nehemiah's Second Term as Governor

- Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem for a second term to reinforce the reforms.

423 BC: End of the Achaemenid Dynasty

- Darius II dies, and Artaxerxes II ascends to the throne, continuing the Persian dynasty beyond the biblical narrative.

This timeline covers the major events during the Persian period that intersect with the Jewish history as recounted in the Old Testament. It represents a time of major transition and development for the Jewish people, accentuated by the rise and fall of kings, the fulfillment of prophecy, and the rebuilding of the Temple, which would stand as the center of Jewish worship until its destruction in 70 AD.