

## Lesson 5

# The Jews Under Persian Rule (2)

420-329 B.C.

## Introduction

Artaxerxes I had a successful reign, having made peace with the Greeks, maintained his power over Egypt, and put down several rebellions. He was a noted cultural leader and successfully completed several projects inside the Empire that benefitted infrastructure and other needs. He died in December 424 B.C., and his son, Xerxes II took over. Just 45 days into his reign, he was assassinated by his brother, Sogdianus. Another brother, Ochus, secured power in February 423 B.C., taking the name of Darius II. Upon assuming power, Darius II was confronted with more internal conflict, as well multiple external threats. He dealt with rebellion in Egypt (410 B.C.), the Medes (409 B.C.), and the Kadousians (404 B.C.). Darius II was successful in repelling these, but there were signs that Persian dominance was beginning to wane.

## Judah After Nehemiah

Information regarding Israel between Nehemiah and the end of the Persian empire is scarce. This has led to its being characterized as a blank or 'dark age' in the history of the Jews. The Jewish state became used to living under foreign domination under the Persians. The Jews paid tribute, Nehemiah 9.37, but they were also allowed religious freedom. According to Artaxerxes' decree for Ezra, Ezra 7.11–26, only the priests and in general those affiliated with the Temple, Ezra 7.24, were exempt from paying taxes.

Nehemiah's exact date of death is unknown, but many place it sometime in the 420's. The governor who replaced him was Bagohi (a.k.a Bagoas or Bigvai). Some have tied him to the civic leader and supporter of Nehemiah mentioned in Nehemiah 9.38; 10.16. Bagohi reversed some of Nehemiah's policies as he maintained a much more favorable status with the Samaritan leadership (Sanballat's two sons, Delaiah and Shelemiah).

Serving as high priest at the time of Bagohi was Johanan, the son of Joiada. His older brother, Jeshua, had been expelled from Jerusalem by Nehemiah years before for marrying the daughter of Sanballat, Nehemiah 13.28. Now that Nehemiah was out of the picture, Jeshua returned to Jerusalem to try to steal the high priesthood from his brother, as he believed it was rightfully his, being the older brother. Jeshua and Bagohi were close friends and Bagohi put his weight and influence behind him. This posed a serious threat to Johanan, who was installed by Nehemiah decades earlier. Questions about his legitimacy would have fueled a crisis. When Jeshua arrived on the temple grounds, Johanan killed him. Of this Josephus writes:

In confidence of whose support, (Jeshua) quarreled with (Johanan) in the temple, and so provoked his brother, that in his anger his brother slew him. Now it was a horrible thing for (Johanan) when he was high priest, to perpetrate so great a crime, and so much the more horrible, that there never was so cruel and impious a thing done, neither by the Greeks nor Barbarians. However, God did not neglect its punishment; but the people were

on that very account enslaved, and the temple was polluted by the Persians. Now when (Bagohi) the general of Artaxerxes' army, knew that John, the high priest of the Jews, had slain his own brother Jesus in the temple, he came upon the Jews immediately, and began in anger to say to them, "Have you had the impudence to perpetrate a murder in your temple?" And as he was aiming to go into the temple, they forbade him so to do; but he said to them. Am not I purer than he that was slain in the temple?" And when he had said these words, he went into the temple. Accordingly, (Bagohi) made use of this pretense, and punished the Jews seven years for the murder of (Jeshua).

## ***Other Jewish Communities in Persia***

### **The Jews at Elephantine**

In 722 B.C., the Assyrians captured the northern kingdom of Israel. Some of these refugees moved to the south where they would become mercenaries for the king of Judah. After the Babylonian invasion, they eventually would up in Egypt, where they were known collectively (along with other refugees from Babylon and Hamath) as the "Arameans." The Samaritans settled on a Nile River Island known as Elephantine. Many of them were military contractors for the Persians. In the early 520's B.C., they built a temple to Yahweh at Elephantine for worship. There they made animal, bread, and incense offerings. They observed the Passover and the Feast of the Unleavened Bread. They also recognized other deities.

In 410 B.C., the temple at Elephantine was attacked by the rulers of an Egyptian temple devoted to the god Khnum, which was literally located across the street from the Jewish temple. The Egyptian deity was fashioned into the image of a goat and the priests had serious difficulties with the Jews using goats for sacrifices. The attack inflicted serious damage on the temple, so much so that worship was unable to continue there. The leader of the Elephantine Jews, Jedaniah petitioned Johanan in Jerusalem for assistance in rebuilding the temple. Johanan did not reply. It is thought that by ignoring the request that he was trying to send a message about the superiority of the temple in Jerusalem, etc. After three years, Jedaniah wrote to the governor of Judea, Bagohi, as well as Sanballat's two sons, Delaiah and Shelemiah, co-governors over Samaria. They immediately petitioned the satrap of Egypt to assist in rebuilding the temple at Elephantine. By 402 B.C., it appears it was functional again. However, by 400 B.C., Persian power was overthrown in Egypt and the temple was destroyed again. The latest document from those at Elephantine dates to around 399 B.C. and notes how Egypt was in the middle of an immense power struggle. What happened to the Jews at Elephantine is unknown as we never hear from them again.

### **The Jews in Babylon**

The Mesopotamian Judeans were well assimilated into their surrounding society. Evidence from sixth century B.C. cuneiform documents reveals this started with Judeans relocated by the Babylonians, including in a settlement named Al Yahudu. This integration extended beyond Zerubbabel's return to Jerusalem. The fifth century B.C. Murashu family archives, belonging to a Babylonian family from Nippur, further highlight this. The family, involved in real estate in Babylonia, had numerous Judean clients with Hebrew names. These Judeans owned property, worked as tenant farmers, and were employed in various sectors, including royal estates. For instance, a Judean named Hanani ben-Menahem managed birds for Darius II's kitchens.

The names of Judeans in fifth century BC Mesopotamia offer insights into their diaspora life. Their Hebrew names indicate a continued connection to Yahwism. However, some names in the Murashu archives were Babylonian or Persian, often including foreign deities' names. Without their relatives' Hebrew names, identifying them as Judeans would be challenging. These diverse names reflect a common cross-cultural naming practice. This is exemplified in the Book of Esther: Mordechai's name derives from Marduk, and Esther's name, Hadassah, has Hebrew origins, while Esther could be linked to an Old Indian term, the goddess Ishtar, or the Greek "astēr." Such names indicate significant cultural assimilation. The possibility of the blending of Jewish and Persian cultures and religious practices, like that at Elephantine and in Judah and Samaria, cannot be ruled out among the Mesopotamian Judeans. Names like Haggai and Shabbetai, linked to Hebrew words for "festival" and "Sabbath," suggest some observance of religious practices.

Did the Jews have a place to worship in Mesopotamia? Some think Ezra 8.15-20 provides a clue. There Ezra recruited personnel for the temple in Jerusalem from the Levites and others who lived in Casiphia. Some think Ezra 8.17 may be pointing to some kind of priestly organization in Casiphia. Some have gone so far as to assume that a full-fledged temple was located there. Others believe it may have been a levitical school and nothing more. Whatever it was, it was home to a group of Levites whose skills were needed in Jerusalem.

## **Weakening Persian Power**

After the loss of Egypt around 400 B.C., Persia spent more than 25 years fending off the Greek threats to the west before being ready to try to retake it. When they did try to invade in 373 B.C., the Egyptians were able to successfully turn them back. Artaxerxes II was now in trouble. His armies decimated, and the treasury emptied, he had a very hard time managing the western parts of the empire. The Greeks and Egyptians continued to strengthen their power and influence. Throughout the 360's Artaxerxes II constantly fought off difficulties in Asia Minor. Meanwhile in Judea, the region was under constant pull from the waxing and waning of both Persia and Egypt. For most of the final days of the Persian empire, Judea and Samaria remained under Persian influence, while entertaining hopes of gaining independence that was never realized.

### ***The Jews During This Time***

After the death of Jerusalem's high priest, Johanan (~370 B.C.), his son Jaddua assumed the role. With Johanan having acted effectively as Judah's governor, his death likely led the Persians to appoint a new secular leader to strengthen their local control. Around 370 B.C., as Jaddua began his priestly duties, a Judean named Hezekiah was named provincial governor. Coins inscribed with "Hezekiah" and "governor" in Hebrew, closely resembling those of Johanan, indicate Hezekiah's swift assumption of governance. Hezekiah was to be the last Persian-appointed governor in Judah. The Hebrew on Hezekiah's coins reflects Judah's increasing self-governance, despite being under Persian rule. This period also saw the emergence of distinctly local symbols on Judean coins, like the lily, a prominent motif in temple decorations (as referenced in 1 Kings 7:19, 22, 26).

Concerning Jaddua, it is said that he was a man of spotless integrity. Josephus is the sole source of a reported meeting between Alexander the Great and Jaddua. Alexander demanded Jaddua's allegiance or threatened destruction, to which Jaddua responded he would have agreed if not bound by a treaty with Darius. Consequently, Alexander prepared to attack Jerusalem.

Josephus narrates that on the eve of the assault, Jaddua received a divine message in a dream, directing him to open Jerusalem's gates and honor Alexander<sup>9</sup>. Jaddua complied, and Alexander, to everyone's surprise, showed deep respect to the God of Israel by bowing before "the Name"<sup>10</sup>.

Of this Ironsides<sup>11</sup> writes:

... Jaddua is said to have put on his pontifical garments, and with the Scriptures of the Prophets in his hand, to have gone forth to meet the conqueror, attended, not by armed men, but by a body of white-robed priests. As they drew near the army of Alexander, the latter is said to have hastened to meet them, prostrating himself on the ground before Jaddua, declaring he had but recently beheld the venerable pontiff in a vision, and recognized him as the representative of the God of heaven, who would show him what would be greatly to his advantage. Jaddua opened the prophetic roll and had one of the scribes in his company read the visions of Daniel and their interpretation. Alexander saw the undoubted reference to himself, and declared he would never permit Jerusalem to be touched nor its temple polluted and sent the high-priest back laden with gifts.

Alexander also recounted a dream from three years earlier, where a figure resembling the high priest predicted his victory over the Persians. Recognizing Jaddua as the figure from his dream, Alexander believed that Israel's God would support his campaign against the Persians. At the temple, guided by Jaddua, Alexander made sacrifices to Yahweh<sup>12</sup>. He fulfilled the Jews' requests for a tribute exemption every seventh year and freedom for them and Babylonian Jews to observe their customs. Josephus notes these privileges motivated many Jews to serve as mercenaries for Alexander<sup>13</sup>.

## Conclusion

Artaxerxes I's reign marked a period of peace and the flourishing of culture, while his successors faced the persistent ebb of Persian influence. The narrative of the Jews during this era, from Nehemiah to Jaddua, reflects a community accustomed to foreign rule yet maintaining a distinct identity, balancing their religious traditions with the political demands of the time. The Jews' experiences in Elephantine and Babylon showcase their cultural integration and the complexities of diaspora life. Their efforts to preserve religious practices amid shifting powers highlight their commitment to faith and identity. The story of the Jewish community at Elephantine, in particular, reveals their struggle for religious expression against local resistance.

Jaddua's legendary encounter with Alexander the Great encapsulates the end of this era, blending the prophetic visions of Daniel with the unfolding historical events. Alexander's deference to the God of Israel and his subsequent actions towards the Jews suggest a recognition of their unique status and a strategic alliance that would impact the region's balance of power.

The Persian period's closing years, marked by internal strife and external pressures, set the stage for the Hellenistic influence that would follow. Jewish history during this time, while not fully known, reveals a people poised at the crossroads of empires, navigating the challenges of autonomy and influence. As we reflect on this period, we see the enduring themes of power, faith, and identity that continue to resonate

through history. The lessons learned from the Jewish experience under Persian rule remain relevant, reminding us of the persistent quest for self-determination and the intricate balance between cultural assimilation and the preservation of heritage.

## For Class Interaction and Discussion

### *Lesson Outline*

#### 1. Introduction

- Overview of the Persian Empire's influence on Jewish history.
- The significance of Artaxerxes I's reign.

#### 2. The Persian Kings and the Jewish High Priests

- Artaxerxes I's legacy and the transition of power to Xerxes II and Darius II.
- The role of the high priest in Jewish society and the significance of the priesthood.

#### 3. The Dark Age of Jewish History

- The period after Nehemiah and the scarcity of historical records.
- The impact of Persian policies on Jewish religious and civic life.

#### 4. Jewish Communities in Persia

- The Jews at Elephantine and their temple.
- The Judeans in Babylon and their assimilation into Persian society.

#### 5. The Encounter Between Alexander the Great and Jaddua

- The historic encounter and its implications.
- Symbolism and prophetic connections in the encounter.

#### 6. Weakening Persian Power and Jewish Hopes

- The decline of Persian power and the Jewish response.
- The dynamics between Persia, Greece, and the Jewish quest for autonomy.

### *Thought Questions for Discussion*

1. How did Artaxerxes I's reign impact the Jewish community, both positively and negatively?
2. What do the transitions of power following Artaxerxes I reveal about the stability of the Persian Empire?
3. How did the role of the high priest evolve during the Persian period?

4. Discuss the characterization of the period after Nehemiah as a 'dark age.' What might this imply about Jewish history during this time?
5. In what ways did the Jewish communities at Elephantine and Babylon maintain their identity?
6. What are the possible reasons Johanan chose not to assist the Jews of Elephantine in rebuilding their temple?
7. How did cultural and religious assimilation manifest among the Judeans in Babylon?
8. Why do you think Alexander the Great showed respect to Jaddua and the Jewish God?
9. How did the weakening of Persian power affect the Jewish people's aspirations for independence?
10. Reflect on the role of divine intervention in the stories of Jaddua and Alexander. How does this theme resonate with you personally?

### **### Group Activities**

1. Group Discussion: Divide into groups and discuss the challenges the Jews faced during the fourth century B.C.. Be prepared to have someone present a summary to the class.

### **Final Encouraging Word**

Despite the complexities of life under foreign rule, many of the Jews held fast to their identity and beliefs. This reminds us that even in times of darkness and uncertainty, hope persists, and new opportunities for growth and understanding can begin. We can learn from this spirit of perseverance and adaptability bringing it into our own lives, trusting that God is always with us.

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<sup>9</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities* 11.327–29; also see Kim's analysis in "The Dream of Alexander," pages 425–25.

<sup>10</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities* 11.331–32

<sup>11</sup> Ironside, H. A. *The Four Hundred Silent Years (from Malachi to Matthew)*. New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1914, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities* 11.334–36; see also Cohen's "Alexander the Great," page 42.

<sup>13</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities* 11.338–39.