



Part Two
Old Testament Archaeology 5
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Post Exile and Second Temple

We come now to the Post-Exile and Second Temple periods in the Old Testament history of Israel. Cyrus the Great of Persia decreed in about 538 BC that Jews could return to their homeland from Babylonian exile. That is the beginning of what is called the Post-Exilic period where Jews lived under the rule of the Persians. Cyrus ordered that the Jews rebuild the Jerusalem Temple. After delays because of opposition, the temple was completed about 516 BC during the reign of Darius I of Persia.

That's a lot of history, so there should be at least "some" archaeological evidence for it. Right?

[I say "some" archaeological evidence because only a small number of archaeological sites have been discovered and excavated in the Middle East. Even the small number of sites that have been discovered and excavated have not been examined thoroughly and published.]

Let's see what evidence was available when I was investigating the Old Testament texts in 1971.

As I researched the Old Testament to see if it was a credible historical document, I came across the writings of Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai and Malachi. They all refer to a time following the forced exile of Jews to Babylon. According to the Bible that forced exile began

under Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar in 605 BC (Daniel 1) and ended when Persian King Cyrus the Great allowed Jews to return to Judah in about 538 BC.

The writings of Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai and Malachi deal with the life of Jews after that time: Ezra – 537 – 456 BC ... Haggai – 520 BC ... Zechariah – 520 BC ... Esther – 483 – 472 BC ... Nehemiah – 445 – 432 BC ... Malachi – 430 BC.

My interest at the time of my investigation was whether what was written in those writings was (1) Historically accurate, and (2) Evidentially supported. Here's what I discovered.

Evidence for Ezra

The Book of Ezra begins with these words –

“Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah. Who is among you of all His people? May his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel (He is God), which is in Jerusalem. And whoever is left in any place

where he dwells, let the men of his place help him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, besides the freewill offerings for the house of God which is in Jerusalem.” Ezra 1:1-4

As we have seen in [previous posts](#) there have been many archeological findings that support the existence of King Cyrus, his conquest of Babylon and orders that captive people return to their homeland (e.g. [Cyrus Cylinder \(article\)](#), [Cyrus Brick Inscriptions](#) , [Tomb at Pasargadae](#)).

Ezra 1 also mentions King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, Mithredath the treasurer and Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. While I found many archaeological evidences for King Nebuchadnezzar (e.g. [Babylonian Chronicles](#), [Ishtar Gate](#), [Behistun Inscription](#), [East India House Inscription](#), [Royal Brick Inscriptions](#)), I did not find as much for Mithredath and Sheshbazzar. That didn't surprise me given that Nebuchadnezzar was a powerful Babylonian king and Mithredath and Sheshbazzar had lesser positions with the Persian government.

Mithredath (Persian name meaning “given by Mithra” or “dedicated to Mithra) is mentioned in Ezra 1 and 4 and may be different people. Mithredath is listed in Ezra 1:8 as being treasurer to King Cyrus. Mithredath is listed in Ezra 4:7 as being an officer who joined with others in protesting Nehemiah's rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem in a letter written to King Artaxerxes of Persia. Given that Mithredath received a direct order from King Cyrus to bring out articles from the Temple in Jerusalem for the rebuilding the house of the Lord, it would

seem odd that he would be part of a group opposing the rebuilding of the Temple during the reigns of King Cyrus, King Ahasuerus (Xerxes I) and King Artaxerxes.

Archaeological finds for King Xerxes I include – Silver Bowl of Artaxerses I, Tomb at Persepolis, Elephantine Papyri, and Palace wall relief in Persepolis. Archaeological finds for King Artaxerxes I include – Silver Bowl Inscription, Elphantine Papyri, and Tomb at Persepolis.

Ezra 4:7 states that Mithredath, Bishlam, Tabel and other men wrote to King Artaxerxes asking him to stop the Jews from rebuilding the city. Artaxerxes became King of Persia in 465 BC, which would have made Mithredath a very old man if he was the same treasurer of Persia who served King Cyrus in 538 BC (73 years difference). It seems reasonable to conclude that the two mentions of Mithredath in Ezra may have been different men.

Sheshbazzar (Persian name meaning “may Shamash [sun god] protect the father”) is mentioned in Ezra 1 and 5. [The Bible often lists the Babylonian names that Jews were given in captivity — e.g. Daniel’s Babylonian name was Belteshazzar, Hananiah was called Shadrach, Mishaël was called Meshach, and Azariah was called Abednego]. Ezra 1 says that Mithredath counted out thousands of articles from the original Jerusalem Temple (“thirty gold platters, one thousand silver platters, twenty-nine knives, thirty gold basins, four hundred and ten silver basins of a similar kind, and one thousand other articles”) to Sheshbazzar (called “the prince of Judah”) who

took the articles with him and the Jewish captives who returned to Jerusalem from Babylon. That would have been in 538 BC. Ezra 5 mentions Sheshbazzar again when a complaint against the Jews rebuilding the Temple was sent to King Darius. Darius was king of Persia from 522-486 BC. Ezra 6 includes the answer of King Darius to the complaint against the Jews. It was a decree to allow the Jews to complete the rebuilding of the Temple.

“Then Tattenai, governor of the region beyond the River, Shethar-Boznai, and their companions diligently did according to what King Darius had sent. So the elders of the Jews built, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they built and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the command of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia. Now the temple was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.” Ezra 6:13-15

The sixth year of King Darius would have been about 516 BC. Archaeological finds for King Darius I include – [Elephantine Papyri](#), [Behistun Inscription](#), and [Tomb at Persepolis](#).

Another king mentioned in Ezra is King Esarhaddon –

“Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the descendants of the captivity were building the temple of the Lord God of Israel, they came to Zerubbabel and the heads of the

fathers' houses, and said to them, "Let us build with you, for we seek your God as you do; and we have sacrificed to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here." Ezra 4:1-2

Archaeological finds for King Esarhaddon include – [Letters of Esarhaddon](#), [Stone Prism of Esarhaddon \(British Museum Photo\)](#), [Wall relief of Esarhaddon](#), [Esarhaddon Chronicle](#), [Royal Brick Inscription](#), and [Stone Lion's Head with Inscription](#).

Many people and people groups are mentioned in Ezra, including captives who returned to Jerusalem from Babylon (they are listed by name in Ezra 2). According to Ezra 3, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and the rest of the Jews who returned from Babylon began rebuilding the Temple by laying the foundation "in the second month of the second year of their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem." That would have been about 537-536 BC.

What archaeological evidence do we have for the ancient Temple Mount?

Temple Mount Archaeology

According to the Bible (Old Testament) King Solomon built the first Temple, the Babylonian Army destroyed it; Zerubbabel built the second Temple, the Hasmoneans refurbished the second Temple, King Herod expanded it, and the Roman Army destroyed it. Jesus

Christ prophesied in the early part of the 1st century AD about the destruction of the Second Temple.

“Now as He drew near, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, ‘If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation.’” Luke 19:41-44

About 40 years after Jesus spoke those words, the Roman General Titus (later became Emperor) led his soldiers to destroy Jerusalem and the Temple after a lengthy siege of the ancient city.

“Now as soon as the army had no more people to slay, or to plunder, because there remained none to be the objects of their fury: (for they would not have spared any, had there remained any other work to be done:) Cæsar gave orders that they should now demolish the intire city, and temple: but should leave as many of the towers standing as were of the greatest eminency, that is, Phasaelus, and Hippicus, and Mariamne: and so much of the wall as inclosed the city on the west side. This wall was spared, in order to afford a camp for such as were to lie in garrison: as were the towers also spared in order to demonstrate to posterity what kind of city it was, and how well fortified, which the Roman valour

had subdued. But for all the rest of the wall, it was so thoroughly laid even with the ground, by those that dug it up to the foundation, that there was left nothing to make those that came thither believe it had ever been inhabited. This was the end which Jerusalem came to, by the madness of those that were for innovations. A city otherwise of great magnificence, and of mighty fame among all mankind.” Josephus: Of the War, Book VII

[Read more about the Roman siege and destruction of Jerusalem in Josephus' Wars of the Jews]

So what about archaeological evidence for a “second” Temple in Jerusalem? Even though Muslims would not allow archaeological excavations on the Temple Mount, the Supreme Muslim Council published an account in 1925 that states — “The site is one of the oldest in the world. Its sanctity dates from the earliest (perhaps from pre-historic) times. Its identity with the site of Solomon’s Temple is beyond dispute. This, too, is the spot, according to the universal belief, on which ‘David built there an altar unto the Lord, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings.’”

Jews were able to gain access to the southern end of the western and southern walls of the Temple Mount because of the Six-Day War in June 1967. Israeli archaeologist, historian and professor Benjamin Mazar (Institute of Archaeology at Hebrew University of Jerusalem) was already well-known in his field when he began a ten-year excavation of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem’s “Old City” in 1968. Many of the finds dated from the Iron Age and included fortifications

believed to be the “Solomonic wall of Jerusalem, and royal buildings of the Israelite city of the First Temple period.”

Other archaeological evidence available during my investigation in 1971 included Edward Robinson’s research in 1838 (e.g. identified remains of arch on southwest corner of Temple Mount, “Robinson’s Arch,” and discovery of Hezekiah’s Tunnel), Charles Wilson and Charles Warren research of the Temple Mount beginning in 1864 (map collection with notes), R.W. Hamilton excavation in 1930, and Ze’ev Yeivin’s identification in 1970 of the Temple’s eastern wall.

Roman archaeology also supports the conquest of Jerusalem. The Arch of Titus, located on the Via Sacra in Rome, was built about 81 AD to commemorate Titus’ victory. One of the depictions shows Roman soldiers carrying treasures from the Temple.

Roman Emperor Hadrian wanted to build a new military colony on the site of the destroyed city (called Aelia Capitolina) and had held out some hope to Jews living in the region that he would restore the city and Temple to them. However, Hadrian changed his mind and proceeded to build the colony about 131 AD. Jews who were still living in Jerusalem and the surrounding region revolted against Roman rule. That revolt is known both as the Bar Kokhba Revolt and Second Jewish Revolt. It lasted for about three years before the Roman Army defeated the Jews in 135 AD, killing hundreds of thousands of people and destroying all Jewish villages in the region. It led to a Roman ban on Jews in Jerusalem and renaming

the province from Iudaea to Syria Palaestina. [More about archaeological discoveries concerning Aelia Capitolina [here](#)]

Church historian [Eusebius](#) (4th century AD bishop of Caesarea Palestine) wrote about what resulted from the Bar Kokhba Revolt –

“When the siege had lasted a long time, and the rebels had been driven to the last extremity by hunger and thirst, and the instigator of the rebellion had suffered his just punishment, the whole nation was prohibited from this time on by a decree, and by the commands of Adrian, from ever going up to the country about Jerusalem. For the emperor gave orders that they should not even see from a distance the land of their fathers. Such is the account of Aristo of Pella. And thus, when the city had been emptied of the Jewish nation and had suffered the total destruction of its ancient inhabitants, it was colonized by a different race, and the Roman city which subsequently arose changed its name and was called *Ælia*, in honor of the emperor *Ælius* Adrian.” Eusebius Pamphilius: Church History, [Book IV, Chapter VI](#)

Aelia Capitolina continued as a Roman military colony and pagan city for many years. Roman rule changed the design of the city into four quarters along with other construction. However, the conversion of [Constantine the Great](#) from paganism to Christianity in the early part of the 4th century AD brought changes to Jerusalem. Macarius was the Christian Bishop of Aelia (Jerusalem) during the early 4th century and accompanied Constantine’s mother [Helena](#) on a search for ancient Christian sites in Jerusalem. The demolition of pagan

buildings led to a variety of religious discoveries and the construction of Christian facilities (e.g. Church of the Resurrection – Church of the Holy Sepulcher).

The structures of the Temple Mount and old city walls were in ruins until the early part of the Islamic era. The 7th century Umayyad Caliphate caliph Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan built a large Islamic shrine on the Temple Mount known as the Qubbat As-Sakhrah (Dome of the Rock). It is located on the Haram al-Sharif (The Noble Sanctuary) that houses the Al-Aqsa mosque, madrasas and other Islamic buildings. This is the spot, according to the Qur'an, where Muhammad stepped before taking his night journey to heaven to meet Allah and receive the commandment to pray five times a day. Muslim tradition states that the Dome of the Rock restored Solomon's Temple.

Though religious and political struggles continue to oppose excavations on and near the Temple Mount, many discoveries have helped archaeologists in their quest to find the truth about the First and Second Temples. Here are some of those discoveries:

Double Gates

Huldah Gates

Southern Wall

Western Wall Tunnels

[Triple Gates](#)

[Stones of Herod's Temple](#)

[Herod's Temple Mount Revealed in Al-Aqsa Mosque Restoration](#)

[Temple Mount Sifting Project](#)

[Ancient Temple Mount 'Warning Stone'](#)

[Bar Kochba Revolt Coinage](#)

[Trumpeting Place Inscription](#)

[Herodian Jerusalem in the Light of the Excavations South and South-West of the Temple Mount](#)

[Temple Mount of Herod](#)

[Ashlar Stones of Herod's Building Projects](#)

[Hasmonean Walls and Towers](#)

[Robinson's Arch](#)

[Mount Zion Excavation](#)

[Temple Mount](#)

[Uncovering Jerusalem's History in the Rubble of Temple Mount](#)

[Second Temple-Period Monumental Podium](#)

[Solomon's Stables and the Southern Gates](#)

[Ga'alyahu Son of Immer Stamp Seal](#)

Evidence for Haggai and Zechariah

As I researched the Old Testament as an atheist to see if it was a credible historical document, I came across the writings of Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. They all refer to a time following the forced exile of Jews to Babylon. According to the Bible that forced exile began under Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar in 605 BC (Daniel 1) and ended when the Persian King Cyrus the Great allowed Jews to return to Judah in about 538 BC.

We have previously looked at evidence for Ezra, so let's look next at archaeological evidence for Haggai and Zechariah.

Haggai and Zechariah are listed as being Hebrew prophets at the end of the 6th century BC, several decades before Ezra. Both played an important role in calling the people of Israel to rebuild the Temple.

“In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, saying, ‘Thus speaks the Lord of hosts, saying: ‘This people says, ‘The time has not come, the time that the Lord’s house should be built.’ Then the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet, saying, ‘Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this temple to lie in ruins?’ Now therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘Consider your ways! You have sown much, and bring in little; You eat, but

do not have enough; You drink, but you are not filled with drink; You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; And he who earns wages, Earns wages to put into a bag with holes.' Thus says the Lord of hosts: 'Consider your ways! Go up to the mountains and bring wood and build the temple, that I may take pleasure in it and be glorified,' says the Lord. 'You looked for much, but indeed it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why?' says the Lord of hosts. 'Because of My house that is in ruins, while every one of you runs to his own house. Therefore the heavens above you withhold the dew, and the earth withholds its fruit. For I called for a drought on the land and the mountains, on the grain and the new wine and the oil, on whatever the ground brings forth, on men and livestock, and on all the labor of your hands.'" Haggai 1:1-11

"In the eighth month of the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to Zechariah the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo the prophet, saying, 'The Lord has been very angry with your fathers. Therefore say to them, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts: 'Return to Me,' says the Lord of hosts, 'and I will return to you,' says the Lord of hosts ... On the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month, which is the month Shebat, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to Zechariah the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo the prophet ... Then the Angel of the Lord answered and said, 'O Lord of hosts, how long will You not have mercy on Jerusalem and on the cities of Judah, against which You were angry these seventy years?' And the Lord answered the angel who

talked to me, with good and comforting words. So the angel who spoke with me said to me, 'Proclaim, saying, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts: 'I am zealous for Jerusalem And for Zion with great zeal. I am exceedingly angry with the nations at ease; For I was a little angry, And they helped—but with evil intent.' 'Therefore thus says the Lord: 'I am returning to Jerusalem with mercy; My house shall be built in it," says the Lord of hosts, 'And a surveyor's line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem.' 'Again proclaim, saying, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts: 'My cities shall again spread out through prosperity; The Lord will again comfort Zion, And will again choose Jerusalem.'" Zechariah 1:1-2, 7, 12-17

The Book of Ezra, which we have already seen, mentioned Haggai and Zechariah as being the prophets God used to speak to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem about rebuilding the Temple.

"Then the prophet Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophets, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them. So Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak rose up and began to build the house of God which is in Jerusalem; and the prophets of God were with them, helping them." Ezra 5:1-2

"Then Tattenai, governor of the region beyond the River, Shethar-Boznai, and their companions diligently did according to what King Darius had sent. So the elders of the Jews built, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and

Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they built and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the command of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia. Now the temple was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.” Ezra 6:13-15

So, the question is what archaeological evidence might exist that supports Haggai and Zechariah being involved in prophesying to the Jews living at the end of the 6th century BC about rebuilding the Second Temple in Jerusalem?

Evidence for Haggai and Zechariah would include much of the same evidence we've seen for the writings of Ezra. If Ezra is a credible history of the Jewish people, so then would be Haggai and Zechariah since Ezra attributes to both the calling of God as prophets in Judah and Jerusalem at the end of the 6th century BC.

Haggai and Zechariah both include specific dates about God's Word to them that can be compared to Ezra and the reigns of King Ahasuerus, King Artaxerses, and King Darius.

“In the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. In the days of Artaxerxes also, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabel, and the rest of their companions wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the letter was written in Aramaic script, and translated into the Aramaic language. Rehum the commander and Shimshai the

scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to King Artaxerxes.” Ezra 4:6-8

“Now when the copy of King Artaxerxes’ letter was read before Rehum, Shimshai the scribe, and their companions, they went up in haste to Jerusalem against the Jews, and by force of arms made them cease. Thus the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem ceased, and it was discontinued until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.” Ezra 4:23-24

“Then the prophet Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophets, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them. So Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak rose up and began to build the house of God which is in Jerusalem; and the prophets of God were with them, helping them. At the same time Tattenai the governor of the region beyond the River and Shethar-Boznai and their companions came to them and spoke thus to them: ‘Who has commanded you to build this temple and finish this wall?’ Then, accordingly, we told them the names of the men who were constructing this building. But the eye of their God was upon the elders of the Jews, so that they could not make them cease till a report could go to Darius. Then a written answer was returned concerning this matter. This is a copy of the letter that Tattenai sent: The governor of the region beyond the River, and Shethar-Boznai, and his companions, the Persians who were in the region beyond the River, to Darius the king ...”
Ezra 5:1-6

“Then King Darius issued a decree, and a search was made in the archives, where the treasures were stored in Babylon. And at Achmetha, in the palace that is in the province of Media, a scroll was found, and in it a record was written thus: In the first year of King Cyrus, King Cyrus issued a decree concerning the house of God at Jerusalem: ‘Let the house be rebuilt, the place where they offered sacrifices; and let the foundations of it be firmly laid, its height sixty cubits and its width sixty cubits, with three rows of heavy stones and one row of new timber. Let the expenses be paid from the king’s treasury. Also let the gold and silver articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took from the temple which is in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be restored and taken back to the temple which is in Jerusalem, each to its place; and deposit them in the house of God’—Now therefore, Tattenai, governor of the region beyond the River, and Shethar-Boznai, and your companions the Persians who are beyond the River, keep yourselves far from there. Let the work of this house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews build this house of God on its site ... Then Tattenai, governor of the region beyond the River, Shethar-Boznai, and their companions diligently did according to what King Darius had sent. So the elders of the Jews built, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they built and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the command of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia. Now the temple was finished on the third day of the

month of Adar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.” Ezra 6:1-7, 13-15

“In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, saying, ‘Thus speaks the Lord of hosts, saying: ‘This people says, ‘The time has not come, the time that the Lord’s house should be built.’” Haggai 1:1-2

“So the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people; and they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month, in the second year of King Darius.” Haggai 1:14-15

“In the seventh month, on the twenty-first of the month, the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet, saying: ‘Speak now to Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, saying: ‘Who is left among you who saw this temple in its former glory? And how do you see it now? In comparison with it, is this not in your eyes as nothing? Yet now be strong, Zerubbabel,’ says the Lord; ‘and be strong, Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; and be strong, all you people of the land,’ says the Lord, ‘and work; for I am with you,’ says the Lord of hosts. ‘According to

the word that I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt, so My Spirit remains among you; do not fear!” Haggai 2:1-5

“On the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet, saying, ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘Now, ask the priests concerning the law, saying, ‘If one carries holy meat in the fold of his garment, and with the edge he touches bread or stew, wine or oil, or any food, will it become holy?’ Then the priests answered and said, ‘No.’” Haggai 2:10-12

“Consider now from this day forward, from the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, from the day that the foundation of the Lord’s temple was laid—consider it: Is the seed still in the barn? As yet the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree have not yielded fruit. But from this day I will bless you.” Haggai 2:18-19

“In the eighth month of the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to Zechariah the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo the prophet, saying, ‘The Lord has been very angry with your fathers.’” Zechariah 1:1-2

“On the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month, which is the month Shebat, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to Zechariah the son of Berechiah, the son of Iddo the prophet.” Zechariah 1:7

“Now in the fourth year of King Darius it came to pass that the word of the Lord came to Zechariah, on the fourth day of the ninth month, Chislev, when the people sent Sherezer, with Regem-Melech and his men, to the house of God, to pray before the Lord, and to ask the priests who were in the house of the Lord of hosts, and the prophets, saying, ‘Should I weep in the fifth month and fast as I have done for so many years?’” Zechariah 7:1-3

These words read clearly like history, so we can put all of this to a historical test. Haggai and Zechariah are believed to have prophesied at the end of the 6th century BC. How do those dates compare to the information ascribed to them?

Achaemenid Dynasty

As we saw in earlier studies, the Persian defeat of Babylon in the 6th century BC is well-documented. The empire had its humble beginnings in the 7th century BC with Achaemenes and grew through the leadership of Teispes into two lineages that included Ariaramnes, Cyrus I, Cambyses I, Cyrus II, and Cambyses II, Darius I, Xerxes I, Darius II, Artaxerses II, and Darius III. Knowing the ruling dates of these Persian kings will help us date and test several Old Testament writings.

Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar II conquered Judah, destroyed the capitol city of Jerusalem, and took Jews captive to Babylon during the early part of the 6th century BC. The Jews remained in captivity until the Persians defeated the Babylonians at the Battle of Opis in 539 BC.

Cyrus II

Ezra mentioned in the first few sentences of the writing that bears his name that the Persian King Cyrus made a special proclamation during his first year that would have an amazing impact on the Jewish people who had been in Babylonian exile for several decades.

“Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a

proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah.” Ezra 1:1-2

Which King Cyrus was Ezra referencing? Cyrus I was king of Anshan and reigned during the end of the 7th century and/or early part of the 6th century BC. Cyrus II was king of Persia and reigned during the middle of the 6th century BC.

Archaeologists discovered a clay cylinder in Babylon in 1879 AD that is known as the Cyrus Cylinder. It is currently housed at the British Museum. The cylinder dates from the 6th century BC and identifies the king as Cyrus II –

“I am Cyrus, king of the universe, the great king, the powerful king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four quarters of the world, son of Cambyses, the great king,, king of the city of Anshan, grandson of Cyrus, the great king, ki[ng of the ci]ty of Anshan, descendant of Teispes, the great king, king of Anshan, the perpetual seed of kingship, whose reign Bel and Nabu love, and with whose kingship, to their joy, they concern themselves ... From [Shuanna] I sent back to their places to the city of Ashur and Susa, Akkad, the land of Eshnunna, the city of Zamban, the city of Meturnu, Der, as far as the border of the land of Qutu – the sanctuaries across the river Tigris – whose shrines had earlier become dilapidated, the gods who lived therein, and made

permanent sanctuaries for them. I collected together all of their people and returned them to their settlements, and the gods of the land of Sumer and Akkad which Nabonidus – to the fury of the lord of the gods – had brought into Shuanna, at the command of Marduk, the great lord, I returned them unharmed to their cells, in the sanctuaries that make them happy. May all the gods that I returned to their sanctuaries, every day before Marduk and Nabu, ask for a long life for me, and mention my good deeds.” Cyrus Cylinder, Translation by Irving Finkel, Curator of Cuneiform Collections at the British Museum

This is similar to what Ezra wrote about King Cyrus –

“Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah. Who is among you of all His people? May his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel (He is God), which is in Jerusalem. And whoever is left in any place where he dwells, let the men of his place help him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, besides the freewill offerings for the house of God which is in Jerusalem.” Ezra 1:2-4

And in Chronicles –

“Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a

proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah. Who is among you of all His people? May the Lord his God be with him, and let him go up!” 2 Chronicles 36:22-23

King Cyrus II ruled from about 549–530 BC. His famous edict on the Cyrus Cylinder dates the writing to about 539 BC, which concurs with the dating of the event written in Ezra and Chronicles.

Ezra recorded that the children of Israel who returned from captivity in Babylon gathered together in Jerusalem “when the seventh month had come” and built the altar of the God of Israel and offered burnt offerings on it in obedience to the Law of Moses (Ezra 3:1-2).

“From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the Lord, although the foundation of the temple of the Lord had not been laid. They also gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the people of Sidon and Tyre to bring cedar logs from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the permission which they had from Cyrus king of Persia.” Ezra 3:6-7

Ezra wrote that Zerubbabel, Jeshua and the the priests and Levites who came out of the Babylonian captivity began rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem in the second month of the second year of their coming to Jerusalem (Ezra 3:8). That would have been about 537 BC. It was

an emotional moment for the Jews, especially for those who remembered the first temple.

“But many of the priests and Levites and heads of the fathers’ houses, old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this temple was laid before their eyes. Yet many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard afar off.” Ezra 3:12-13

Many of the people who lived in the region and were “adversaries of Judah and Benjamin” attempted to get involved in the rebuilding of the temple. However, Zerubbabel and Jeshua told them they couldn’t be involved. So, the people who lived in the region tried to discourage the people of Judah. “They troubled them in building, and hired counselors against them to frustrate their purpose all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.” (Ezra 4:4-5)

Darius I

Cambyses II became king after his father, Cyrus II, died, but his rule was only about seven years (529-522 BC). Cambyses did not have a son, so Darius I became king and ruled the Persian Empire for 36 years (522-486 BC). Darius was one of Cambyses’ generals and a member of the Achaemenid family. He is believed to be the King Darius in Ezra 6 – “Then King Darius issued a decree, and a search

was made in the archives, where the treasures were stored in Babylon.” (v. 1)

The reason Darius searched the archives was because of a letter sent to him by Tattenai who was governor of the region that included Jerusalem. Tattenai opposed the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. Zerubbabel and Jeshua were leading the rebuilding of the temple because of the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah. This is how the Hebrew elders responded to Tattenai –

“We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the temple that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and completed. But because our fathers provoked the God of heaven to wrath, He gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this temple and carried the people away to Babylon. However, in the first year of Cyrus king of Babylon, King Cyrus issued a decree to build this house of God. Also, the gold and silver articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple that was in Jerusalem and carried into the temple of Babylon—those King Cyrus took from the temple of Babylon, and they were given to one named Sheshbazzar, whom he had made governor. And he said to him, ‘Take these articles; go, carry them to the temple site that is in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be rebuilt on its former site.’ Then the same Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundation of the house of God which is in Jerusalem; but from that time even until now it has been under construction, and it is not finished.” Ezra 5:11-16

Tettnai asked Darius to search for proof of what the elders claimed – “Now therefore, if it seems good to the king, let a search be made in the king’s treasure house, which is there in Babylon, whether it is so that a decree was issued by King Cyrus to build this house of God at Jerusalem, and let the king send us his pleasure concerning this matter.” (Ezra 5:17)

Ezra wrote that King Darius found a scroll at Achmetha that King Cyrus had decreed many years earlier and instructed Tettnai to allow the rebuilding in Jerusalem to continue. Tettnai did as he was told and Ezra recorded that the temple was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, “which was in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius” (Ezra 6:15). That would have been about 516 BC.

Achmetha was one of the capital cities of the ancient Median Empire. It was located in western Iran at the location of the modern city of Hamadan. Another spelling of the city is Ecbatana. Archaeological findings that confirm the reign of King Darius I include the Behistun Relief and Darius Stele (2016 discovery). The Behistun Relief was discovered in the early 19th century AD and led to the translation of the famous Behistun Inscription.

Xerxes (Ahasuerus)

Xerxes was the son of Darius II and ruled Persia from 486-465 BC. Jewish writers used the name Ahasuerus, which came from the Old Persian name Khshayarsha. Ezra mentioned him (Ezra 4:6) as did Daniel and Esther –

“Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus (this was the Ahasuerus who reigned over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, from India to Ethiopia), in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom, which was in Shushan the citadel, that in the third year of his reign he made a feast for all his officials and servants—the powers of Persia and Media, the nobles, and the princes of the provinces being before him— when he showed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the splendor of his excellent majesty for many days, one hundred and eighty days in all.” (Esther 1:1-4)

Esther, who was Jewish, became the wife of Ahasuerus “in the seventh year of his reign” (Esther 2:16). That would have been about 479 BC. Though nothing is written in the Book of Esther about the king’s direct involvement with Jerusalem, Esther played a pivotal role in foiling a plot intended to destroy all of the Jews in the Persian Empire. It happened “in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus” (Esther 3:7), which would have been about 474 BC. The decision of Ahasuerus to void his own decree saved all of the Jews, including those living in Jerusalem and Judah.

Artaxerxes

The next king mentioned in Ezra is Artaxerxes. Ezra was a priest and “skilled scribe in the Law of Moses” (Ezra 7:6) and wanted to take another group of Jews from Babylon to Jerusalem. Ezra’s desire was “to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel (Ezra 7:10). Artaxerxes

granted Ezra's request in the "seventh year" of the king's reign (Ezra 7:7).

Artaxerxes I ruled Persia after the death of his older brother Xerxes who ruled Persia 485-465 BC. Artaxerxes ruled from 464-424 BC. The "seventh year" of Artaxerxes would have been about 458 BC.

Artaxerxes gave Ezra a royal letter to take with him during his travel from Babylon to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:12-26). It gave Ezra and the Jews who traveled with him protection and provisions. After Ezra arrived in Jerusalem, he dealt with problems that had risen since the dedication of the temple many years earlier (e.g. intermarriage with pagan women).

Nehemiah was a cupbearer to Artaxerxes and lived in "Shushan the citadel" (Nehemiah 1:1), which was one of the residences of the Persian kings (also known as Susa). Nehemiah wrote that a man named Hanani brought "men from Judah" to him with news about Jerusalem –

"And they said to me, 'The survivors who are left from the captivity in the province are there in great distress and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem is also broken down, and its gates are burned with fire.'" Nehemiah 1:3

The news deeply troubled Nehemiah and he mourned for many days with fasting and prayer. King Artaxerxes saw that Nehemiah was sad and asked him why.

“So I became dreadfully afraid, and said to the king, ‘May the king live forever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers’ tombs, lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire?’ Then the king said to me, ‘What do you request?’ So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said to the king, ‘If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers’ tombs, that I may rebuild it.’ Then the king said to me (the queen also sitting beside him), ‘How long will your journey be? And when will you return?’ So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time.”

Nehemiah 2:2-6

Artaxerxes appointed Nehemiah to be governor in the land of Judah and traveled to Jerusalem in the 20th year of the kings’ reign (444 BC). Nehemiah began the process of acting as the governor of Judah and leading the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. He wrote this about the process –

“Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year until the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the governor’s provisions. But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people, and took from them bread and wine, besides forty shekels of silver. Yes, even their servants

bore rule over the people, but I did not do so, because of the fear of God. Indeed, I also continued the work on this wall, and we did not buy any land. All my servants were gathered there for the work.” Nehemiah 5:14-16

Nehemiah returned to see the king “in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon” (Nehemiah 13:6), but came back to Jerusalem a short time later to continue serving as governor of Judah. Nehemiah ended his book with these words –

“Thus I cleansed them of everything pagan. I also assigned duties to the priests and the Levites, each to his service, and to bringing the wood offering and the firstfruits at appointed times. Remember me, O my God, for good!” Nehemiah 13:3-31

More Archaeological Information

<http://www.bible-history.com/archaeology/persia/persians.html>

<http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2013/04/24/Thermopylae-and-the-Book-of-Esther.aspx>

<https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/people-cultures-in-the-bible/people-in-the-bible/50-people-in-the-bible-confirmed-archaeologically/>

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Summary

Artaxerxes is the last Persian king mentioned in the Old Testament. The armies of Alexander the Great defeated the Persians less than 100 years after the death of Artaxerxes. The impact of the Greeks on the Jews living in Judah after the defeat of the Persians can be found during the time many scholars call the “Intertestamental Period.” That’s thought to be the time between the writing of the last Old Testament prophet (Malachi) and the appearance of John the Baptist in the early part of the 1st century AD, or the completed writing of the New Testament by the apostles of Jesus Christ (end of 1st century AD).

Jerusalem and Judah remained under the control of the Persian Empire until about 332 BC when the Greeks defeated the Persians. Jews had been allowed to rebuild their temple and worship in it under the Persians, but that would change under the rule of the Greeks. Alexander brought Greek philosophy and politics to the lands he conquered. The Old Testament was translated into Greek (Septuagint) and Greek culture was promoted throughout the empire.

Judea had many Greek rulers after Alexander died and one of them, Antiochus Epiphanes, desecrated the temple and overthrew the rightful line of the priesthood about 167 BC. This action by Epiphanes led to the Maccabean Revolt. Judas Maccabeus signed an agreement with the Roman Republic in 161 BC. That led to the establishment of the Hasmonean dynasty in Judea. It continued until

Rome deposed the Jewish high priest Antigonus and installed Herod the Great as king of Israel in 37 BC.

We first read about Herod the Great in the New Testament in this familiar story in Matthew's Gospel account –

“Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, ‘Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.’ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. So they said to him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.’ Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, ‘Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also.’ When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had

opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way." Matthew 2:1-12

Evidence from the New Testament

In the next section of our study, *Convince Me There's A God*, we will look at the evidence for the existence of God in the New Testament of the Bible.

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