

# The Medes and the Persians

by John F. Walvoord

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*The sermon explores the historical and prophetic significance of the Medes and Persians in biblical history, particularly their role in Israel's restoration.*

**Scripture:** Ezra 1:1, Nehemiah 2:8, Isaiah 13:17, Jeremiah 25:25, Daniel 2:39, Daniel 8:3, Malachi 4:6

**Topics:** "Biblical Prophecy", "Ancient Empires"

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## Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the historical rise and fall of the Medes and the Persians, emphasizing their significant background in Biblical history spanning over two hundred years. The Medes and the Persians, as prophesied by Isaiah and Jeremiah, played a crucial role in the downfall of Babylon and the restoration of Jerusalem. Daniel's prophecies accurately foretold the emergence and conquests of the Medo-Persian Empire, highlighting their dominance in the Middle East. The reign of the Medes and the Persians paved the way for Israel's partial restoration under the leadership of figures like Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes, setting the stage for the coming of the Messiah.

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## Transcript

The history of the rise and fall of the Medes and the Persians forms an important background for over two hundred years of Biblical history. Located in the area south of the Caspian Sea and east of the Zagros Mountains, its original domain stretched for 600 miles north and south, and 250 miles east to west. The nation first came into prominence in the ninth century b.c. and is mentioned in inscriptions concerning Shalmaneser III (about 836 b.c. ). Though under the domination of Assyria until the seventh century b.c., their rise in power was contemporary with the decline of the Assyrian Empire and in 614 b.c. the Medes captured Asshur, the capitol city of Assyria. Later in 612 b.c. in alliance with the Chaldeans they captured Nineveh resulting in the downfall of the Assyrian Empire. In the years which followed they were an important ally of Babylonia and formed various alliances and intermarriages. Toward the end of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, the Persians began to become a powerful force and under Cyrus II Media was conquered in 549 b.c. and was combined with the empire of the Persians to form Medo-Persia. The combined strength of the Persians and the Medes led to conquest of Babylon in 539 b.c., with the resulting extension of their empire over much of the Middle East until the conquest of Alexander the Great in 331 b.c.

Early Prophecy Concerning The Medes

First mention of the Medes in Scripture is found in the prophetic utterance of Isaiah when he declared 175 years before it was fulfilled, "Behold, I will stir up the Medes against them, which shall not regard silver; and as for gold, they shall not delight in it" (Isaiah 13:17; cp. 21:2). In succeeding verses the downfall of Babylon is predicted, "And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldees' excellency, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah" (Isaiah 13:19).

Jeremiah includes the Medes as one of many nations which will be punished by God (Jeremiah 25:25). Jeremiah also states that the Medes will be used of God to destroy Babylon: "Make bright the arrows; gather the shields: the Lord hath raised up the spirit of the kings of the Medes: for his device is against Babylon, to destroy it; because it is the vengeance of the Lord, the vengeance of his temple" (Jeremiah 51:11; cp. 51:28). Thus long before Babylon fell it was predicted that the Medes would be God's avenging instrument.

### Prophecy Of Daniel

It was given to Daniel the prophet, however, to give the Medes and the Persians their proper place in the panorama of future history. The Medes and the Persians are anticipated in the expression in Daniel 2:39, "And after thee shall arise another kingdom inferior to thee." This refers to the chest of silver in the image of Daniel 2, where the two arms anticipated the dual kingdom of the Medes and the Persians, More detail is given in the vision of Daniel recorded in 7:5 where Daniel describes the second beast in these words, "And behold another beast, a second, like to a bear, and it raised up itself on one side, and it had three ribs in the mouth of it between the teeth of it: and they said thus unto it, Arise, devour much flesh."

The kingdom of the Medes and the Persians is described as a bear which raises itself on one side (referring to Persia being greater than Media) and has three ribs in its mouth. No explanation is given of this, but the strength of a bear is a good symbol of the empire of the Medes and the Persians. The three ribs may refer to the principal elements of the kingdom, namely, the Medes, the Persians, and Babylonia. The exhortation to "Arise, devour much flesh," is encouragement to the new empire to expand as it did in its conquests to the north and to the west.

A further prophetic picture of the empire of the Medes and the Persians is given in Daniel 8 where the ram with two horns which is destroyed by the goat is an obvious reference to the kingdom of the Medes and the Persians. The two horns represent the Medes and the Persians. Daniel's description of it in Daniel 8:3, 4 is characteristic of the two centuries of the rule of the Medes and the Persians,

Then I lifted up mine eyes, and saw, and, behold, there stood before the river a ram which had two horns: and the two horns were high; but one was higher than the other, and the higher came up last. I saw the ram pushing westward, and northward, and southward; so that no beasts might stand before him, neither was there any that could deliver out of his hand; but he did according to his will, and became great.

The lower horn apparently refers to the kingdom of the Medes and the higher horn that came up later to the kingdom of Persia, which dominated Media. The fourth verse describes their conquests westward, northward, and southward which characterize the history of this empire as there was no considerable progress eastward. All of this prediction is precisely fulfilled in later history. Only by divine revelation could Daniel know in advance that the conquests of the Medes and Persians would be to the north, south and west, but not to the east--in contrast to the Macedonian conquests which were mainly to the east, as indicated in subsequent verses in the activities of the he goat.

## Israel's Restoration Under Medes And Persians

While the prophetic record concerning the Medes and the Persians is clear and its fulfillment is confirmed by history, its principal importance is historical rather than prophetic. In contrast to the Babylonian Empire which is significant for its destruction of Jerusalem, the city of God, beginning Gentile dominion over Israel which will not culminate until Christ comes in His second advent, the rise of the Medes and the Persians is important as forming the background of Israel's partial restoration.

Three of the historical books, namely, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther and three of the minor prophets, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi have their context in the reign of the Medo-Persian Empire. During this period the captives of Judah were permitted to go back to Jerusalem and restore their ancient city and its temple. The key to the Babylonian Empire is Gentile dominion over Jerusalem. The key to the Empire of the Medes and the Persians is restoration of Jerusalem.

Daniel gives a whole chapter to the account of his being cast into the lions' den. This important episode in the life of Daniel, while affording many spiritual lessons of God's care over His prophet as well as foreshadowing God's protection over the people of Israel as a whole, illustrates the beneficent attitude of the Medes and the Persians to the people whom they had conquered. Their deference to individual religious faith is manifested in the attitude of Darius to Daniel and his earnest desire that Daniel might be delivered from the lions.

Darius himself, described in Daniel 5:31 as "Darius the Median," is properly identified as Gobryas or Gubaru, a governor of Babylon appointed by Cyrus the supreme monarch of the empire of the Medes and the Persians. (Cyrus II or Cyrus the Great reigned from 559 b.c. until he was killed in battle in 530 b.c.) Darius the Mede is mentioned a number of times in Daniel (6:1, 6, 9, 25, 28; 9:1; 11:1). Darius seems to have reigned under Cyrus in governing the southern portion of the kingdom known as the Fertile Crescent. The statement that "Daniel prospered in the reign of Darius, and in the reign of Cyrus the Persian" (Daniel 6:28) must therefore be interpreted as the reign of Darius under the contemporary reign of Cyrus.

It was in the first year of the reign of Cyrus that permission was given to the children of Israel to return to reconstruct their temple in Jerusalem (II Chronicles 36:22, 23; Ezra 1:1-4). More than a century before the remarkable prophecy of Isaiah about Cyrus (Isaiah 44:28) had anticipated the Israelites return. The generous permission and encouragement of Cyrus for Israel to restore their ancient worship was in line with the official policy to allow captive people freedom of religion. The temple, however, was not finally completed until the reign of Cambyses II (530-522 b.c.) who succeeded his father Cyrus and is referred to in Ezra 4 as Artaxerxes.

Artaxerxes was a common name ascribed to many kings. Others given this title include Artaxerxes of Ezra 7:1, known as Artaxerxes I Longimanus who reigned 465-425 b.c., and Ahasuerus or Xerxes of Esther 1:1 who reigned 486-465 b.c. The appeal to Darius the king mentioned in Ezra 6:1 is a reference to Darius I, known as Darius the Great who reigned 522-486 b.c., and should not be confused with the Darius the Mede of Daniel's prophecy.

The more important kings of the Medo-Persian Empire are again the subject of prophecy in Daniel 11:2 where Daniel is told: "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." The first of the three kings which were to follow Darius the Mede (Daniel 11:1) can be identified as Cambyses II. He was followed by Smerdis, a usurper who reigned for eight months. (Some think he is the

ruler mentioned in Ezra 4:7-24 instead of Cambyses.) After the murder of Smerdis a Darius the Great (522-486 b.c.) appeared. He is referred to in Ezra 4:24. It was under Darius that the authority to complete the temple was received.

The king designated as "the fourth" in Daniel 11:2, who used his great riches to attack the realm of Grecia, was undoubtedly Xerxes (486-465 b.c.) referred to as Ahasuerus in Esther 1:1. His celebrated attempt to conquer Greece ended in miserable failure. This attack can be placed chronologically between the first and the second chapter of Esther. In fact, the great feast of Esther 1 was a part of the preparation for the organization of the campaign against Greece which occurred in the third year of Xerxes' reign. Esther 2, recording his marriage to Esther, did not occur until four years later after his return and the crushing defeat and loss of his great army and naval force. From a prophetic standpoint, Xerxes was important as incurring the undying hatred of the Grecian people which forms the background of the conquest of Alexander the Great more than a century later.

The importance of Ezra, with its record of events which occurred under Persian rule, is that the temple was restored as the center of Israel's religious life. The record of Daniel 8 and 11 is also significant as forming the prophetic bridge from Babylon to Alexander and giving the background of Israel's history in this period. In Ezra 7:1 a successor to Xerxes is mentioned, namely, Artaxerxes I Longimanus, but he does not figure in Daniel's prophecy because he was not important to Daniel's revelation. The same is true of other rulers who followed in the Medo-Persian Empire prior to its downfall.

#### Rebuilding Of Jerusalem

Nehemiah adds the important final chapter in Israel's reconstruction. Under Nehemiah's leadership during the reign of Artaxerxes I Longimanus the wall of Jerusalem was rebuilt with the encouragement and supply of materials from the king, and subsequently the debris of the city was cleared out and houses were built, thus repopulating the city of God. The two important steps of rebuilding the temple and rebuilding the city during the reign of the Persians mark this period as the time of Israel's partial restoration in preparation for the coming of their Messiah. The spiritual revivals under Ezra and Nehemiah are a corresponding spiritual restoration which the people thoroughly needed.

The prophetic writings of Haggai and Zechariah also fit into this period and are related to the prophetic encouragement of the people during the reconstruction of the temple of Ezra 5. Malachi gives the concluding chapter of the Old Testament before Israel was plunged into the so-called four hundred silent years before Christ came. The history of the Medes and the Persians, constituting as it does accurate and meticulous fulfillment of God's prophetic Word, is another important evidence supporting the hope that prophecies yet unfulfilled will have their day of fulfillment in the consummation of the age. The Medes and the Persians, however, belong to fulfilled prophecy and do not figure largely in events of the end time although Persia is mentioned in passing in Ezekiel 38:5.

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