



Engaging Persians

through their epic biblical history

and complex identity



A practical Persian ministry study guide

Created by

Snow Educational Resource Associates, LLC

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Do you think that Cyrus epitomizes what it means to be Persian?

"Yes!"

- Iranian PhD student

"If Cyrus is in the Bible, that means everything to me.
Whatever Cyrus believes, I believe."

- Iranian business professional

"Cyrus is in the Bible? I want to read that."

- Iranian PhD student

"Cyrus is in the heart of every Iranian, no matter the religion."

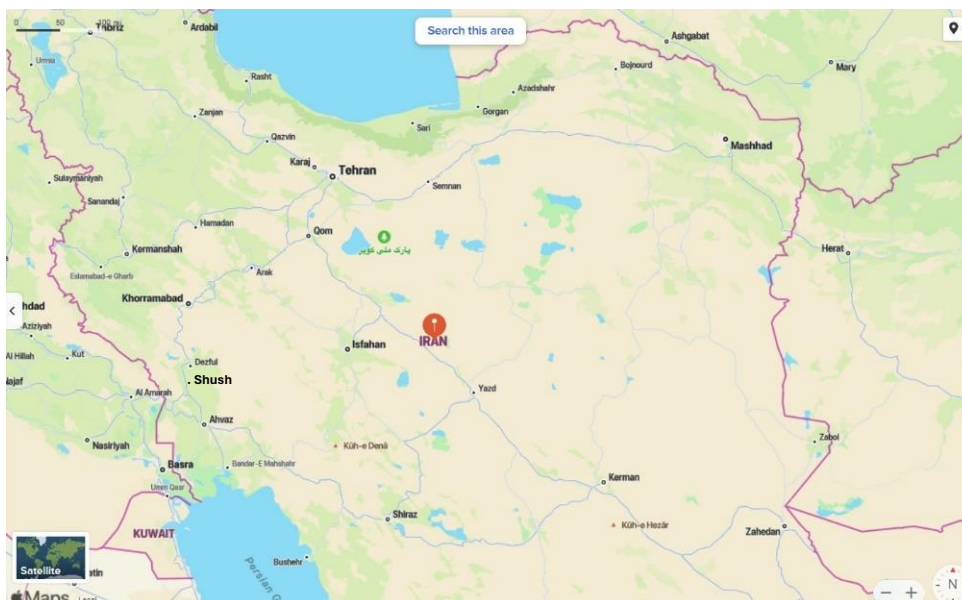
- Iranian YouTube video subscriber

Engaging Persians

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With such a large portion of the Old Testament devoted to Jewish suffering under Babylonian rule and the rescue, protection, and generous provision of Persian leaders on behalf of Jewish people, Persians today deserve the opportunity to read their heroic history and God’s eternal promises for their people found in the Bible. While in geography we often refer to the people living in or descending from Iran as “Iranian,” Iranians typically do not identify themselves in this way, but retain their cultural identity as distinctly “Persian.” The question is “Why?” This question has a long and complicated history, and our goal in this discussion is to gain a deeper understanding of Persians and their journey to regain their cultural, religious, and even political identity. Along the way, we’ll explore the origin of Persian identity in biblical, archeological, and historical records, and discuss political changes that resulted in morphs and shifts that challenged Persia’s traditional and beautiful cultural tapestry.

We’ll begin at the beginning: the rise of a young leader from the small territory of Persis, Cyrus [Persian: koo-ROOSH] the Great. The first recognized Persian leader, 'Shah, or King, Cyrus of Persia (Cyrus II) rose to power with such strength and favor that in his prime, his reign spanned from northeastern Egypt, across portions of the Middle East, northeastward into Turkmenistan, and southeastward into western India [Figure A¹]. Cyrus the Great’s profound political, nationalistic, and heroic value is often referenced today as a role-model for leadership, especially among diverse communities, as reflected in the way Cyrus treated his subjects. It is through Cyrus’s realm and his descendants in what is known as the Achaemenid [ah-KEY-meh-nid] Empire that Persians retain the purest form of their spiritual, cultural, and nationalistic value and identity. The rulers of this period and their role in biblical history provide significant pathways for Persians to relate to the Bible as one possible source of their religious identity and presents unique opportunities for sharing the Gospel and the Bible with modern Persians.



Modern Iran: Shiraz = Persepolis (palace center for Darius I); Shush = Susa (capital of Cyrus, palace of Darius I, alleged burial site for Daniel); Hamadan = Ecbatana (Achaemenid Royal Archives, alleged tomb of Esther and Mordecai)

¹ Persian map Figure A: The Interactive Bible, 2024, <https://www.bible.ca/maps/maps-near-east-500BC.jpg>, accessed January 25, 2024.

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1: The making of Persia

The territory that is now “Iran” has undergone many names and faces throughout its political history. In the Old Testament during the time of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (c. 2000—1900 B.C.E.), parts of modern Iran were referred to as Persis, a central southern region of Iran; Media, a north and northwestern region; and the small territory of Elam, also known as Susiana, located at the tip of the Persian Gulf [Figure A]. In the 1100’s B.C.E. under Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar I [neh-buh-kad-NEH-zar], Elam became part of the Babylonian Empire, later invaded by Assyria under Ashurbanipal [ah-shur-BAN-ih-pawl] in 640.



Figure A: Persian Empire: 539-333 B.C.E.



Figure B: Cyrus the Great Monument

Media, an obscure tribal territory, became an empire sometime in the 7th century under Deioces [di-YU-kuh], who many consider to be the first “Iranian King.” The Medes were also in constant battle with the Assyrians. Yet in 612, the Medes, under Median king Cyaxares [koo-ax-AH-res] (r. 625—585), together with the Chaldeans, known as the Neo-Babylonians under the rule of Nabopolassar [nah-bo-po-LAS-ar] (r. 626—605), conquered the Assyrians, broadening Median territory into what is now modern day Iran,² leaving the Neo-Babylonians and the Medians as the two dominant empires in the region. While Persia began as a tribal territory, the Persian Empire was later organized under the Achaemenid dynasty led by King Cyrus the Great of Persia (b. 590; r. 559-530) [Figure B³], great grandson of Cyaxares. In 550, Cyrus conquered Media, ruled by his grandfather Astyages [ah-stee-AH-jez], and the Neo-Babylonian Empire, ruled by Nabonidus [nah-bo-NY-dus], in 539,⁴ forming the beginning of the Persian Empire.

2: King Cyrus the Great and his empire

Perhaps the most profound heroic figure in Persian history, Cyrus the Great, initiated into his empire many of the concepts of what it means to be Persian, ideas that have endured to this day among modern Iranians. We see some of this cultural heritage in how Cyrus treated his Babylonian captives, which

² “Media,” Encyclopedia of the Bible – Media, Biblegateway, <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/encyclopedia-of-the-bible/Media>, Accessed January 25, 2024.

³ Photo: “Cyrus The Great Monument-NE to SW view” by Shkuru Afshar is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/?ref=openverse>, accessed January 26, 2024.

⁴ Duiker, William J. and Jackson J. Spielvogel. *World History*, ed. 4. Belmont, CA, Wadsworth, 2004, 31.

included Babylonian governmental officials and those captured from various parts of the Middle Eastern world by Chaldean ruler Nebuchadnezzar II (r. 605–562 B.C.E.). Cyrus allowed his captives to remain in their administrative positions and religious groups. This included Jews captured by Nebuchadnezzar II during his invasion and destruction of Jerusalem in 586.⁵

Cyrus’s military victories were extensive, his conquests ranging from western India, into Media and Babylon, all the way to Lydia (modern region of Turkey), and even Greek city-states along the Ionian coast [Figure A]. During the prime era of his reign, Persians considered Cyrus to be a father-figure in their land, one who was known to be gentle, merciful, accepting, and a charitable caretaker of his people, contrary to the historical rulers of other nations. Respecting the cultures of his captives, he followed contemporary, foreign practices when designing and building his palaces and allowing his new subjects to maintain religious and social customs. During his reign, he unified Persia and helped to establish peace across the empire, as well as provide financial stability through the establishment and maintenance of trade routes and roads used for transportation.⁶

Why is this important?

Take a minute to review the maps and recall the details of what you learned in Sections 1 and 2.

What do you respect about how Cyrus the Great ruled his empire?

Why do you think Cyrus is a prominent heroic figure among Persians today? What questions could you ask your Persian friend to engage him or her in a conversation about Cyrus? Begin a list.

3: The religious history of Cyrus the Great and his successors

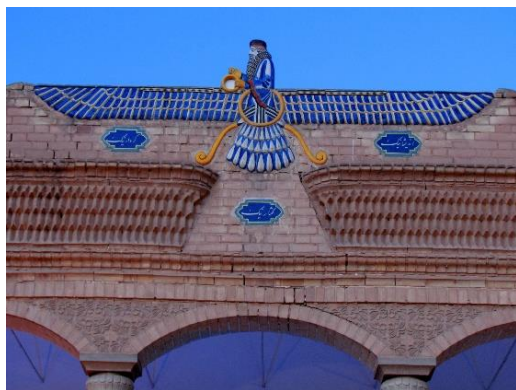


Figure C: Zoroaster Temple at Yazd, Iran

According to Greek historian Xenophon, Cyrus was educated in Zoroastrianism [zaw-RAW-stree-eh-nizm] as a child.⁷ Traditions vary regarding the date of Zoroaster’s birth, 6000—600 B.C.E., yet Zoroaster [Figure C⁸], also known as Zarathustra [zah-rah-THOO-struh], gave birth to a religion that was practiced throughout the Achaemenid Empire and survives to this day. Historically, Zoroaster experienced a spiritual revelation with a message that Ahura Mazda [ah-HOO-rah MAHZ-dah], “the Wise Lord” and creator, was the highest god, and his opponent was an evil spirit. The goal of Zoroastrianism was for men to choose right over wrong, as all men would one day face God’s judgment. Only those who have goodness in thought and deed would be saved from the abyss of eternal punishment.

⁵ Ibid., Duiker and Spielvogel.

⁶ Ibid., Duiker and Spielvogel, 31-33.

⁷ Albert T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948): 66, 450, 477.

⁸ Photo: “Zoroastrian temple of Yazd” by Alireza Javaheri is licensed under CC BY 3.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/?ref=openverse>, accessed January 26, 2024, accessed March 13, 2024.

The full doctrine and practices of Zoroastrian were recorded in the *Avesta*, where we find that worship included the use of fire, representing both the “Holiest Spirit” and the spirit of torment. While some will claim that Zoroastrianism is a monotheistic religion, the *Avesta* records Zoroastrian worship of earth, water, stars, the souls of cattle and righteous ancestors, and other spirits. In the *Avesta*, we see libations and ceremonies, recitations of verses and prayers, the singing of hymns, and the sacrificing of food and animals to the supreme god Ahura Mazda and various subservient spiritual beings, including those related to stars and other elements of nature. Within the *Avesta*, we find the concepts of Ahura Mazda’s salvation, will, and grace, yet William Malandra’s work on the *Avesta* and Achaemenid inscriptions reveals that Xerxes, the fourth Achaemenid king, also included the sacrifice of children in his Zoroastrian style of worship.⁹ According to other scholarly research, it appears that much was added to the *Avesta*’s original message even by the time of the Achaemenid Empire.¹⁰



Figure D: Three Magi mosaic



Figure E: Persepolis Fortification Tablets

In Zoroastrianism, religious duties were performed by magi [Figure D¹¹]. The term *magos* [also *magus*], of ancient Persian origin, was used in ancient Persia, Media, and Chaldea for wise men, teachers, priests, physicians, astrologers, seers, interpreter of dreams, fortune-tellers, and sorcerers from Persia or the eastern world. By Greek definition, magi were magicians or astrologers from the Orient, including countries in the Near East,¹² while its Greek root *Rab-mag* is defined as an official or chief astrologer and fortune-teller of a Babylonian king.¹³ Nevertheless, magi were highly educated royal advisors who trained and studied for years in a craft that required the ability to read, write, and interpret celestial omens through the analysis of historical records maintained for the purposes of imperial fortune-telling and predictions.¹⁴

The Persepolis Fortification Tablets [Figure E]¹⁵ written between 509 and 494 in the ancient Persian capital of Persepolis during the reign of Darius I (r. 522–486) [darh-ree-OOSH], the third Achaemenid king and cousin of Cyrus, reveals that the royal and religious duties of a magus involved serving as a courier or messenger of the king traveling in isolation, pairs, or threes, as well as delivering food and materials to

⁹ William W. Malandra, trans. and ed., *An Introduction to Ancient Iranian Religion: Readings from the Avesta and the Achaemenid Inscriptions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 15, 51–55, 59, 86–87.

¹⁰ Duiker and Spielvogel, 32–33; Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire*, 473–476. Some descriptions of Zoroastrian beliefs are quoted directly from the *Yasna*, recorded worship practices of Zoroastrians as found in the *Avesta*. For changes to and complications regarding the dating of the *Yasna*, see also William W. Malandra, “YASNA,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, 2006, September 20, 2016, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/yasna>, Accessed January 31, 2024.

¹¹ Photo: “File: Three Magi mosaic - Sant'Apollinare Nuovo - Ravenna 2016.jpg” by José Luiz is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/?ref=openverse>, accessed January 26, 2024.

¹² “3097. magos,” *Thayer’s Greek Lexicon*, <https://biblehub.com/greek/3097.htm>.

¹³ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, “7248. Rab-mag,” <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/7248.htm>.

¹⁴ Hermann Hunger, “The Relation of Babylonian Astronomy to its Culture and Society,” *The Role of Astronomy in Society and Culture, Proceedings of the International Astronomical Union, IAU Symposium 260* (June, 2011): 68, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743921311002158>.

¹⁵ Photo: “Persepolis Fortification Archive Tablets” by Pf16 is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/?ref=openverse>, adapted for size, January 26, 2024.

designated people and priests for ceremonies to the gods, rendering libations, and conducting religious ceremonies.¹⁶

Cyrus’s childhood education in Zoroastrianism exposed him to the religious world of magi that became an integral part of Cyrus’s sovereignty. During his political career, Cyrus was commanded by a magus to make sacrifices to Persian and Greek gods, given Cyrus’s supremacy over Greek territories, while revealing their power, or at least strong spiritual influence over kings. At Cyrus’s burial ground, archeologists uncovered a house for the magian guards, who during their lifetimes had received food rations and animals for sacrifices,¹⁷ all pointing to Cyrus’s active use of magi. While five hundred years had passed from the use of magi under Cyrus the Great to the appearance of magi in New Testament Judea as recorded in Matthew 2, the historical link of magi to the era of Cyrus becomes significant as we later examine ancient biblical prophecies, guiding us to a more in-depth understanding of how magi outside of Judea oddly appear in a New Testament account of a Hebrew Messiah’s birth.

Why is this important?

Recall what you learned about the religion of Cyrus and his successors. As of 2021-2022 there were between 100,000 and 200,000 Zoroastrians worldwide, with 30,000 living in America and Canada, likely due to immigration. While most Persians are no longer Zoroastrian in practice or beliefs, some hold on to some of the cultural attributes as a way to identify themselves as “Persian.”

What important questions could you ask your Persian friend about Zoroastrianism?

What are some similarities between Zoroastrianism and the teachings of Jesus and the Bible? In what ways is Zoroastrianism a part of the biblical stories of Matthew 2 and Daniel?

Due to the early dating of Zoroastrianism, some scholars today believe that Zoroastrianism influenced Christianity and Judaism in its beliefs and language regarding the afterlife. Read the following passages and discuss why we should not feel threatened by these assumptions or similarities: [Psalms 33:12-15](#) and [Ecclesiastes 3:11](#).

Read [Acts 17:22-34](#). We see that Paul too was disturbed by the Athenian idols at the Areopagus. Yet, how does he handle this situation? How do the people respond?

¹⁶ Hallock’s research on the Persepolis Fortification Tablets written in 509–494 B.C.E. in the ancient Persian capital of the Achaemenid Empire during the time of Darius I (r. 522–486 B.C.E.), reveals the terms *pirramasda* [with alternative spellings] and *lan performer*, both synonymous with the royal and religious duties of a magus. See Richard T. Hallock, *Persepolis Fortification Tablets*, The University of Chicago Oriental Institute Publications 92 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 26, 42, 227.

¹⁷ Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire*, 66, 450, 477.

4: Nebuchadnezzar, the Jews, and the Old Testament

Jews of the ancient Near East had a long and significant history with Persia, specifically with the Achaemenid Empire, as confirmed in both Hebrew and Persian records. In the sixth century B.C.E., prior to Cyrus's reign over Babylonia, Nebuchadnezzar II, attacked the city of Jerusalem, stealing the temple treasures and setting fire to the Jewish temple and palaces. Breaking down the walls of Jerusalem and destroying everything of value, he took captive ten thousand esteemed men, including those integral to the service of worship, also known as the famous "Babylonian Exile of the Jews." The *Chronicles of Chaldean Kings* [Figure F¹⁸], held in the British Museum, records Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem in March 597 in accordance with biblical Jewish history, while tablets dated ca. 595–569 display rations given to Jews during and after captivity, archeological evidence of their presence in Babylonia during that time.¹⁹ Persian historian Borassus describes the same event in his *Babyloniaca* (written 290—278 B.C.E.), using the ancient Persian name Nabuchodonosor [nah-buh-koo-dah-NOH-sor] for Nebuchadnezzar II.²⁰ Combined with the details offered by respected Roman-Jewish historian Flavius Josephus in his work *Antiquities of the Jews*,²¹ these ancient accounts solidify the Bible's historical accuracy of this segment of Jewish-Babylonian history.



Figure F: 597 B.C.E. conquest of Jerusalem, *Chronicles of Chaldean Kings*



Figure G: The Destruction of Jerusalem painting

Biblical testimonies of Nebuchadnezzar's full destruction of Jerusalem are first conveyed through the prophecies of Jewish prophet Jeremiah (650—570 B.C.E.). In his writings, Jeremiah, along with Isaiah, Amos, Micah, and other prophets, continually warns the Jews of God's punishment awaiting them for their years of rebellion against God's laws and their worship of idols. Not only were the Jews rebellious in their actions but also in their hearts toward God and in matters of justice. In 609, the first year of the reign of Judah's king Jehoiakim [jeh-hoy-ah-KIM], Jeremiah predicts the full destruction of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 25:9).

At the beginning of King Zedekiah's reign in 597, Jeremiah declares specifically that Nebuchadnezzar will destroy Jerusalem and its people by both sword and fire (21:7-10, 14) and that the Jewish people will serve the "King of Babylon" for seventy years (25:11). This timeline can be confirmed either from the time that Jehoiakim had taken office in 609 to the proclamation of the Cyrus Cylinder in 539, or the complete desolation of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem [Figure G²²] in 586 to its complete restoration in 516, both seventy-year timespans.²³ Jeremiah not only predicts Babylon's complete destruction of the temple and confiscation of all treasures but also the restoration of these items (27:19-22). The full prophecies of God's destruction against Babylon and the return of God's people to Jerusalem are both recorded in Jeremiah 50. In Jeremiah 51, the prophet predicts the unification of the Median tribes under

¹⁸ Photo: "The cuneiform inscription highlights the conquest of Jerusalem and the surrender of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, in 597 BCE. From Babylon, Iraq" by Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin FRCP(Glasg) is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/?ref=openverse>, accessed January 26, 2024. Note that the date of 597 for Jehoiakim does not align with other sources which point to 598.

¹⁹ Donald J. Wiseman, *Chronicles of Chaldean Kings (626–556 B.C.) in the British Museum* (London: The Trustees of the British Museum, 1956), 33–34. Fragments can be viewed on the British Museum website under BM 21946.

²⁰ Stanley Mayer Burstein, "The *Babyloniaca* of Berossus," *Sources and Monographs: Sources from the Ancient Near East* 1, ff. 5 (1978): 26–27.

²¹ Wiseman, *Chronicles of Chaldean Kings*, 33–35. See also Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 10.8.1–7, trans. William Whiston, The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, last updated: August 9, 2017, accessed: February 15, 2019, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2848/2848-h/2848-h.htm>.

²² Photo: "Temple Mount (Jerusalem model)_1357" by hoyasmeg is licensed under CC BY 2.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/?ref=openverse>.

²³ See also Megillah 12a:1-6 in the Babylonian Talmud, accessed January 26, 2024.

a certain commander and governing officials among the Medes who attack and overcome Babylon (51:27-28), which we later learn in detailed prophecy is, in fact, Cyrus and his growing empire.



Figure H: Model of Temple Mount

The actual account of Jerusalem's fall to Nebuchadnezzar is recorded and described in Jeremiah 39 and 52. II Chronicles 36:5-20 and II Kings 24-25 also record Nebuchadnezzar's invasion of Jerusalem and the capturing of Judah's kings Jehoiakim (598) and Jehoiachin [jeh-hoy-ah-CHIN] (597), along with temple treasures and ten thousand members of the military, skilled men, priests, prominent men, and noble women, prior to the complete desolation of Jerusalem and the temple under Judah's king Zedekiah (586). Below is the II King's recording of Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem:

On the seventh day of the fifth month, in the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard, an official of the king of Babylon, palace, and all the houses of Jerusalem. Every important building, he burned down.¹⁰ The whole Babylonian army under the commander of the imperial guard broke down the walls around Jerusalem.¹¹ Nebuzaradan the commander of the guard carried into exile the people who remained in the city, along with the rest of the populace and those who had deserted to the king of Babylon.¹² But the commander left behind some of the poorest people of the land to work the vineyards and fields.

¹³ The Babylonians broke up the bronze pillars, the movable stands, and the bronze Sea that were at the temple of the Lord, and they carried the bronze to Babylon.¹⁴ They also took away the pots, shovels, wick trimmers, dishes, and all the bronze articles used in the temple service.¹⁵ The commander of the imperial guard took away the censers and sprinkling bowls—all that were made of pure gold or silver.¹⁶ The bronze from the two pillars, the Sea, and the movable stands, which Solomon had made for the temple of the Lord, was more than could be weighed...

¹⁸ The commander of the guard took as prisoners Seraiah the chief priest, Zephaniah the priest next in rank and the three doorkeepers.¹⁹ Of those still in the city, he took the officer in charge of the fighting men, and five royal advisers. He also took the secretary who was chief officer in charge of conscripting the people of the land and sixty of the conscripts who were found in the city.²⁰ Nebuzaradan the commander took them all and brought them to the king of Babylon at Riblah.²¹ There at Riblah, in the land of Hamath, the king had them executed. So, Judah went into captivity, away from her land. (II Kings 25, NIV²⁴)

II Chronicles 36 provides a brief description of the same account and ends with the rescuing of God's people from the hands of the Babylonians by none other than, Cyrus the Great.

²⁴ All Bible verses are taken from HOLY BIBLE: New International Version, 1996 by Zondervan Bible Publishers, and used by permission.

Readings for section 4

Descriptions of Jerusalem's destruction: *Jeremiah 21:1-10; 25:9; 27:16-22*

Jerusalem's destruction by Nebuchadnezzar: *II Chronicles 36:5-20; II Kings 25:8-21* (Similar descriptions are in *Jeremiah 39, 52* and *II Kings 24, 25*)

Why is this important?

Try to recall some of the details of Nebuchadnezzar's invasion of Jerusalem as recorded in the Bible and the Chronicles of Chaldean Kings.

What is prophecy and why is prophecy important in believing and understanding biblical history?

Why do you think knowing the biblical and Persian archeological evidence of both Jewish and Persian history might be important in your relationship and discussions with Persians about the Bible?

5: Cyrus the Great, the Jews, and their archeology

It is during the Jewish exile into Babylon that Cyrus the Great conquers Babylon in 539 and rescues the Jewish people. Under Cyrus's merciful style of leadership, he immediately frees the Jewish people from the clutches of Babylon's Chaldean rulers. What archeological evidence do we have to suggest that Cyrus did in fact free all Jews in Babylon? Housed in the British Museum rests the Cyrus Cylinder [Figure 1²⁵], a proclamation from King Cyrus rolled onto clay declaring the freedom of all Babylonian captives from places ranging from the Mediterranean Sea (Upper Sea) to the Persian Gulf (Lower Sea), which would have included Judah, the Jewish homeland. The Cylinder was written in 539,²⁶ the first year of King Cyrus's

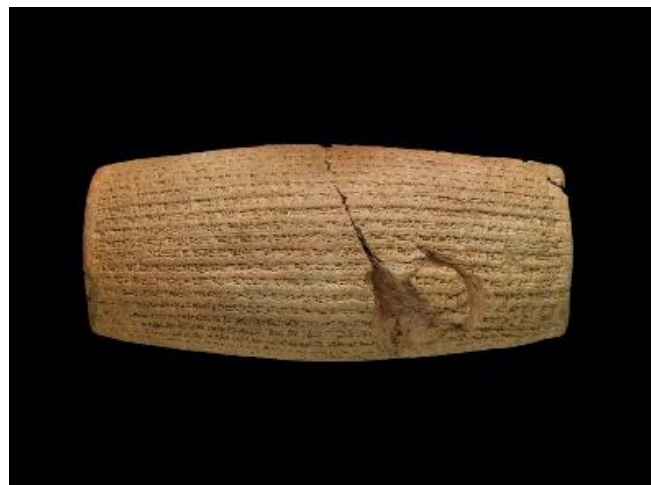


Figure 1: Cyrus Cylinder

²⁵ Photo: Photo of Cyrus Cylinder, The British Museum, released under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1880-0617-1941, accessed January 26, 2024.

²⁶ Date for the Cylinder is provided by Neil MacGregor, "The Cyrus Cylinder: An Artifact Ahead of Its Time," *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 8, 2013, video, 0:28, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/videos/category/at-the-smithsonian/the-cyrus-cylinder-an-artifact-ahead-of-its/>, accessed January 26, 2024.

reign over Babylon and the year that the biblical Hebrew writers documented receiving their declaration from Cyrus (Ezra 1:1-4). While the Cylinder cites Nabonidus (r. 556-539) as the ruler who plundered and destroyed the temples, seizing citizens across the Persian world for service labor in Babylon, the ten-thousand religious men and temple servants of Judah had already been held in Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar for forty-one years prior to the rule of Nabonidus, who retained the prisoners in captivity as depicted from Cyrus's edict:

He [Nabonidus] did yet more evil to his city every day; ... He brought ruin on them all by a yoke without relief... Ex[alted Marduk... relented. He changed his mind about all the settlements whose sanctuaries were in ruins... He inspected and checked all the countries, seeking for the upright king of his choice. He took under his hand Cyrus... and called him by his name, proclaiming him aloud for the kingship over all of everything... Marduk, the great lord, who nurtures his people, saw with pleasure his fine deeds and true heart and ordered that he should go to Babylon... Like a friend and companion, he walked at his side.

His vast troops whose number, like the water in a river, could not be counted, marched fully armed at his side. He had him enter without fighting or battle right into Shuanna; he saved his city Babylon from hardship. He handed over to him Nabonidus, the king who did not fear him. All the people of Tintir, of all Sumer and Akkad, nobles and governors, bowed down before him and kissed his feet, rejoicing over his kingship and their faces shone... 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...

Marduk, the great lord, bestowed on me as my destiny the great magnanimity of one who loves Babylon, and I every day sought him out in awe. My vast troops marched peaceably in Babylon, and the whole of [Sumer] and Akkad had nothing to fear. I sought the welfare of the city of Babylon and all its sanctuaries... I soothed their weariness, I freed them from their bonds(?). Marduk, the great lord, rejoiced at [my good] deeds, and he pronounced a sweet blessing over me, Cyrus, the king who fears him...

All kings who sit on thrones, from every quarter, from the Upper Sea to the Lower Sea,... brought their weighty tribute into Shuanna, and kissed my feet. 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...

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... I have enabled all the lands to live in peace. Every day I copiously supplied [... ge]ese, two ducks and ten pigeons more than the geese, ducks and pigeons [...]. I sought out to strengthen the guard on the wall Imgur-Enlil, the great wall of Babylon, and [...] the quay of baked brick on the bank of the moat which an earlier king had bu[ilt but not com]pleted...²⁷

²⁷ Irving Finkel, trans., Cyrus Cylinder, The British Museum, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1880-0617-1941, accessed January 27, 2024.

At first glance, we might notice that Judah is not specifically mentioned in the Cyrus Cylinder; however, the reference “across the river,” referring to either the Tigris or Euphrates, was a common historical term that referred to territories west of that region, which would include Judah.²⁸ Furthermore, we might question why Cyrus honors the Babylonian god Marduk and not Ahura Mazda or Yahweh, the God of the Jews. In claiming Marduk’s intervention, Cyrus is giving himself divine authority over Babylonia according to his captives’ religion who worshipped Marduk as the supreme deity, the god of that region since the twelfth century B.C.E., a span of six centuries.²⁹ Even if it was Yahweh who had directed and assisted Cyrus in his campaign, not Cyrus’s god Ahura Mazda, according to the Bible, we must understand that Cyrus likely by culture would not have adopted Yahweh as God. He would have seen Yahweh as “the Jewish god.” We see also that Cyrus respected all religions and all gods of his time. He was a respecter of people and their religions as a way of honoring the God who rules over all and a way of appeasing all the gods that *might* exist. Yet, regardless of deistic beliefs or nomenclature, the biblical account of Cyrus’s delivery of Jewish captives is well-defended in both primary documents and historical records, records that demonstrate Jewish reverence and gratitude for Cyrus as a hero and father beautifully and honorably woven into the Jewish story.

Readings for section 5

Cyrus rescues the Jews from Babylon: *II Chronicles 36:20-23, Ezra 1—2:1*

Jews lay the foundation of the temple: *Ezra 3*

Why is this important?

Take a minute to recall what you learned about the Chronicles of Chaldean Kings and Cyrus’s Cylinder.

What do you learn about Cyrus from this cylinder? What can you appreciate about Cyrus’s values and actions?

How do you think Cyrus may have impacted some beliefs and world views of Persians today?

Where would the Jewish and Christian world be today if Cyrus had not rescued the Jews from captivity? Explain.

²⁸ Olmstead, A.T., *History of the Persian Empire*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), n. 153, 311, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.280254/page/n333/mode/2up?q=Israel>, accessed February 20, 2024. The reference is translated in modern terms as “Trans-Euphrates” in the Bible.

²⁹ Wilfred G. Lambert, “Studies in Marduk,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 47, no. 1 (1984): 1, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/618314>.

6: Cyrus the Great and Old Testament prophecies



Figure J: Dead Sea Scrolls, which contains all of Isaiah, 3rd century BCE-1st century C.E.

Cyrus's story in the Old Testament begins an estimated twenty to thirty years prior to his victorious rescue of the Jewish people from the hands of the Babylonians, at a time when Cyrus had already begun his reign in Persis in 559 and had possibly already conquered Media in 550³⁰. Cyrus's victory is depicted in a prophetic scripture written by exiled Jewish prophet Isaiah who predicts that God would appoint King Cyrus to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. In speaking the very words of God, Isaiah says, "[I am the Lord] who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, 'Let it be rebuilt,' and of the

temple, 'Let its foundations be laid'" (Isaiah 44:28). In this passage, we see God calling Cyrus, the "shepherd" of his people and a gentle leader, not a tyrant like other political leaders of ancient territories.

The prophet in Isaiah 45, whose earliest and complete records are found in the Dead Sea Scrolls [Figure J³¹] (c. 200 B.C.E.) also proclaims God's divine favor over Cyrus for this momentous act of obedience to God's command:

¹This is what the Lord says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of to subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their armor, to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut ³I will give you hidden treasures, riches stored in secret places, so that you may know that I am the Lord, the God of Israel, who summons you by name. ⁴For the sake of Jacob my servant, of Israel my chosen, I summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honor, though you do not acknowledge me. ⁵I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God.... ¹³I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness: I will make all his ways straight. He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free, but not for a price or reward says the Lord Almighty." (45:1-13)



Figure K: Cyrus, King of Persia, 'Four Illustrious Rulers of Antiquity

We see in this passage that even though Cyrus didn't know Yahweh, the God of the Jews, God still blesses Cyrus with the ability to conquer nations and promises to open doors for him into city gates.³² Greek historian Herodotus confirms this biblical account in his description of Cyrus's conquest of Babylon, declaring that when Cyrus and his men arrive at Babylon, the city gates were already open, for the inhabitants had no prior news of the militia's arrival because they were distracted with a festival. This

³⁰ See Jeremiah 50:3, which says that an army will come from the north (Media) to destroy Babylon.

³¹ Photo: "Dead Sea Scrolls-" by larrykwoester is licensed under CC BY 2.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/?ref=openverse>, January 26, 2024.

³² "This is what the LORD says to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of to subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their armor, to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut: ²I will go before you and will level the mountains; I will break down gates of bronze and cut through bars of iron" (Isa. 45:1-2).

correlates well with the description in Daniel where Belshazzar, eldest son of Nabonidus, is throwing a party the very night that he is slain when Cyrus's troops arrive (Daniel 5:1-4; 30-31³³). With the Babylonians completely unaware of any threat, Cyrus's men subsequently march into the city unhindered and unopposed.³⁴

While the Old Testament does not go into detail about the Cyrus's invasion, it does document his edicts to free the Jewish people and allow them to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple. We see one copy of his edict in II Chronicles, written in the latter half of the fifth century B.C.E.:

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing: ²³ "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: 'The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of his people among you may go up, and may the Lord their God be with them.'" (II Chronicles 36:22-23)

Similar to what we find in the Cyrus Cylinder, the first chapter of Ezra, written c. 465—424, records Cyrus's provisions to assist in rebuilding the temple [Figure L³⁵]:



Figure L: Persia – Cyrus
Restoring the Sacred Vessels

"This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: 'The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. ³ Anyone of his people among you—may his God be with him and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem. ⁴ And the people of any place where survivors may now be living are to provide him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.'" ... ⁷ Moreover, King Cyrus brought out the articles belonging to the temple of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and had placed in the temple of his god. (Ezra 1:2–7)

The Biblical scroll in Ezra 1 differs in content from the Cyrus Cylinder because it clearly depicts a freeing of the Jewish people. However, it is conceivable that this ancient Jewish society would have received their own proclamation to secure the support of Cyrus to rebuild their city and temple. Renown British scholar and Keeper of Special Middle East Projects at The British Museum, Dr. John E. Curtis, agreed in his lecture about the Cylinder: "Given that it refers to the restoration of shrines, and the repatriation of deported peoples, it seems entirely reasonable to connect the biblical story with the account in the Cylinder."³⁶ When the Jewish leaders are called to defend their edict to King Darius I in Ezra 6, they

³⁴ Herodotus, *The History*, George Rawlinson, trans. (New York: The Tandy-Thomas Company, 1909), 1.191–192.

³⁵ Photo: "Persia - Cyrus Restoring the Sacred Vessels" by History Maps is licensed under CC BY 2.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/?ref=openverse>, provided by Patrick Gray.

³⁶ Dr. John E. Curtis, OBE, FBA, Keeper of Special Middle East Projects, The British Museum, quoted from *The Cyrus Cylinder from Ancient Babylon and the Beginning of the Persian Empire*, video, 59:00, presented in conjunction with the exhibition *The Cyrus Cylinder and Ancient Persia: Charting a New Empire*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, recorded June 20, 2013, accessed March 26, 2019, 38:17-35:33, <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2013/cyrus-cylinder>.

request a search for their document in the Achaemenid archives stored in the treasury of the Persian Empire. According to biblical records, Cyrus’s decree emancipating the Jewish captives was held in the citadel of Ecbatana, Media, modern-day Hamadan (Ezra 6:1).

In his *Antiquities*, Jewish scholar Josephus (c. 37–c. 100 C.E.) quotes one of Judah’s edicts, originally sent to governors in Syria and still in circulation in the first century C.E., beginning with the introductory comments:

“King Cyrus to Sisinnes and Sathrabuzanes sendeth greeting. I have given leave to as many of the Jews that dwell in my country as please to return to their own country, and to rebuild their city, and to build the temple of God at Jerusalem on the same place where it was before. I have also sent my treasurer Mithridates, and Zorobabel, the governor of the Jews, that they may lay the foundations of the temple, and may build it sixty cubits high, and of the same latitude, making three edifices of polished stones, and one of the wood of the country, and the same order extends to the altar whereon they offer sacrifices to God. I require also that the expenses for these things may be given out of my revenues. Moreover, I have also sent the vessels which king Nebuchadnezzar pillaged out of the temple, and have given them to Mithridates the treasurer, and to Zorobabel the governor of the Jews, that they may have them carried to Jerusalem, and may restore them to the temple of God...”³⁷

Josephus even claims that Cyrus was prompted to free the Jewish captives upon reading the biblical prophecies of Isaiah:

When Cyrus read this, and admired the Divine power, an earnest desire and ambition seized upon him to fulfill what was so written; so he called for the most eminent Jews that were in Babylon, and said to them, that he gave them leave to go back to their own country, and to rebuild their city Jerusalem, and the temple of God, for that he would be their assistant, and that he would write to the rulers and governors that were in the neighborhood of their country of Judea, that they should contribute to them gold and silver for the building of the temple, and besides that, beasts for their sacrifices.³⁸

As predicted in Isaiah 45, “He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free, but not for a price or reward says the Lord Almighty” (45:5), Cyrus indeed did not receive payment for his generosity, but rather rendered kindness to Jews by fully paying their expenses out of the royal treasury, as we saw in Ezra 1, providing animals and sacrifices to God as well as provisions in order that the Jewish believers might return to their homeland and rebuild their temple. In addition to provisions, Cyrus returned to the Jewish people the religious items and treasures that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple of Jerusalem, sending a governor to assist with and oversee the work, a work carried on by Kings Darius [Figure N³⁹] (r. 522-486) and Artaxerxes (r. 465-425), as seen in Ezra 5–6.

³⁷ Josephus, *Antiquities*, 11.1.3., William Whiston, trans., “The Works of Flavius Josephus,” <https://ccel.org/ij/josephus/works/ant-11.htm>, accessed February 2, 2024.

³⁸ *J.A.*, 11.1.2.

³⁹ “Darius-The-Great-or-Xerxes-I-The-Great-of-Persia-With-Crown-Prince-(Behind-Him)” by Arashk rp2 is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>, accessed February 2, 2024.

Readings for section 6

Prophecies of Babylon's destruction by Persia: *Jeremiah 50:17-28, 33-34; 51:56-64*

God calls the Medes, now ruled by Persia, to destroy Babylon: *Jeremiah 21:7-10; 51:1-16, 28*

God summons Cyrus by name: *Isaiah 44:21—45:1-7, 13*

Why is this important?

Try to recall some of the details of the prophecies surrounding Cyrus in the Old Testament.

Why might these prophecies be interesting and of value to your Persian friend?

In these passages, what positive traits and titles does God attribute to Cyrus?

7: Cyrus the Great, Darius the Mede, and Daniel

Daniel was a Jewish prophet and leader serving under the Chaldeans and the Persians while in Babylon. Under the Chaldeans, he was given the name Belteshazzar. Daniel was a handsome, young man of skills and knowledge; however, God had given Daniel special gifts of knowledge – knowledge of literature and learning, along with the ability to interpret dreams and visions. For this reason, Daniel was promoted to leadership over all the magicians and enchanters of King Nebuchadnezzar's court and remained there under King Cyrus and Median Babylonian ruler Darius [dahr-ree-OOSH] the Mede, possibly a petty king over Babylon, not to be confused with Darius the Great of Persia, and not to be perceived as a rival to the Great King of Persia.⁴⁰ Darius the Mede was likely Cyrus's commander who first invaded Babylon and ruled only one year (see [Appendix A](#)). He appointed Daniel as one of three governors over what may have been sub-satrap throughout Babylon (Daniel 1:21; 6:1, 28; 9:1).

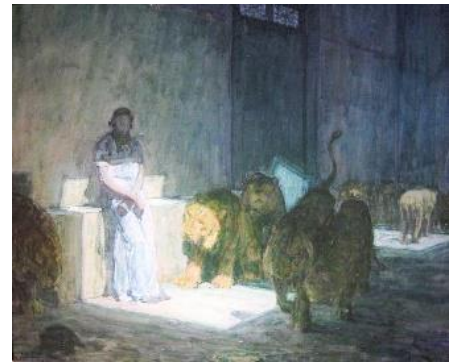


Figure M: Daniel in the Lions' Den

During Darius's reign, Daniel is thrown into a lion's den [Figure M⁴¹] as capital punishment for praying to his own "god," rather than to Darius. Pressured by members of his court, Darius adheres to the law he had created, yet rushes the next morning to the lion's den only to find Daniel unharmed and protected by angels during the night. At this, Darius issues a decree requiring the people of his region to "revere and fear" Daniel's god (6:25-27). In other words, Yahweh, even if for a short time, became one of the

⁴⁰ For more information on the political administration of Persia and Media under the rule of Cyrus, see Farazmand, Ali. "Administrative Legacies of the Persian World-State Empire: Implications for Modern Public Administration, Part 1," *Public Administration Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 3/4, 2002, p. 303-314. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41288175>, Accessed 16 Feb. 2024.

⁴¹ Photo: "Daniel in the Lions' Den" by Beesnest McClain is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/?ref=openverse>.

many gods accepted in the region of the recently conquered Persian territory of Babylonia, resulting from the powerful miracle that Daniel had experienced.

In chapter 8, Daniel reflects back to the period when he was serving in the court of Belshazzar under Chaldean rule. In a vision, Daniel sees himself in the citadel of Susa located in the province of Elam, now a southern portion of modern Iran. He looks up and sees what seems to be an unconquerable ram ruling the east. With two horns, one longer than the other, the ram charges and conquers the north, south, and west of the Persian Empire until another goat with a single horn on its head overcomes the ram [Figure N⁴²]. This goat grows in power, but his horn is broken off and replaced by four other horns, out of which one grows and defeats the Lord’s people in the “Beautiful Land” (8:9), destroying their worship. At that time, “truth was thrown to the ground” (8:12).

While Daniel tries to understand this vision, the angel Gabriel appears to explain the meaning: The ram symbolizes the kings of Media and Persia, while the longer horn transforms into a ram personifying King Cyrus (8:20). In accordance with the Cyrus Cylinder, the powerful ram claims authority over “the four quarters of the universe”: north, south, and west, the east in the vision representing territories that by 335 B.C.E. were under Greek ruler Alexander the Macedonian. The goat embodies Alexander who then conquers areas of Persia between 334–331 B.C.E. (8:21).



Figure N: 4th c C.E. Sasanian Christian stamp-seal from Iran of ram fighting goat, Middle Persian inscription

After the death of the ram, Gabriel describes the goat’s end and how the four horns, or four rulers, grow out of the goat’s head, conquering Alexander, an historical allegory referring to the quadripartite fracturing of Persia that followed and resulting in territories ruled by the Seleucids, Antigonids, Pergamines, and the Ptolemies.⁴³ The horn that arises from the four represents the Seleucid Kingdom (312–36 B.C.E.) and leader Antiochus IV (r. 175-164), who later attacks Jerusalem, severely persecutes the Jews, and violates their temple. Daniel sees this vision again the first year that Cyrus has rescued the Jews, yet before the official edict has been established that would allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem, or possibly even a few days before Cyrus’s arrival into Babylon after the initial invasion by his commander (9:25-27). The prophecy confirms again that Cyrus, the “anointed one, the ruler” (v. 25) will help the Jews to rebuild the temple, but will die under the hands of a ruler, Alexander, whose Seleucid

subject Antiochus IV will rise to power and desecrate the temple of God. Daniel’s prophecies and visions testify to the evidence-based history that we now know occurred.⁴⁴

⁴² Photo: “Stamp-seal,” Asset Number: 1527538001, The British Museum, used by permission by the Trustees of the British Museum through Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1967-0220-385, accessed February 17, 2024.

⁴³ See Duiker and Spievel, *World History*, 112.

⁴⁴ Daniel’s prophecy in Dan. 5 pertaining to the fall of Belshazzar’s kingdom to the Persians on October 12, 539 B.C.E. was also documented in history by Greek historians Xenophon (Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, 7.5.15) and Herodotus (Herodotus, *The Histories*, 1.191). In the Daniel 8 prophecy, Gabriel tells of another horn, King Antiochus Epiphanes who would rise and destroy God’s people and their worship, persecuting them for 2,300 days. From history, we know that Antiochus persecuted Jews from 171 B.C.E. to 165 B.C.E. when Judas Maccabeus restored the Jewish temple (See fn. Dan. 8:9 in Ryrie, *Ryrie Study Bible*). Gabriel explains that because Antiochus set himself up as god, he would in turn be destroyed by Yahweh. In 164 B.C.E., plagued with mental illness, Antiochus did indeed suffer an incurable disease, living the remainder of his life “with excruciating pains in his bowels and sharp internal torment” (2 Macc. 9:5, NABRE), further testifying to the truths and outcomes of Daniel’s premonitions. (For more on the death of Antiochus, see Mendels, “A Note on the Tradition of Antiochus IV’s Death,” *Israel Exploration Journal*, 31, no. 1 (Israel Exploration Society, 1981): 1, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27925782>).

To note, the ram became an astral symbol for areas of Persia, at least by the Sasanian [seh-SAY-nee-in](Iranian) period (224 C.E.—651 C.E.) and possibly as early as the 1st or 2nd century C.E.,⁴⁵ just as the ram became an astral sign for Palestine, its neighboring areas, and the Dead Sea in Israel.⁴⁶ This astral symbol becomes significant when we enter into the time of Jesus and the New Testament.

Readings for section 7

Daniel's vision of Alexander's invasion of Persia and Daniels' service to Chaldean and Achaemenid kings: *Daniel 1-8:27*; see also [Appendix A](#)

Why is this important?

Who was Daniel and what was his role in the Chaldean and Persian kingdoms? What spiritual gifts had God given him?

Why is Daniel's vision of the ram and goat particularly interesting in the historical trajectory of Cyrus and Persia?

8: Darius I (the Great) and the Old Testament

The books Ezra and Nehemiah together describe the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its sacred temple. At the beginning of Ezra, we see King Cyrus bringing 5,400 articles of silver and gold that belonged to the Jewish temple ransacked by Nebuchadnezzar and faithfully returning the Jewish people to Jerusalem in 538. Persian neighbors also contributed to the returning Jews, sending them away with even more precious articles, valuable gifts, and even livestock (Ezra 1:6), providing the Jews animals to sacrifice in worship and a means to live. Under Cyrus the Great, over 50,000 Jewish people returned to Jerusalem where they were able to settle in their own towns and gather all they needed to rebuild their temple, completed in c. 516 (6:15), the sixth year of Darius the Great (r. 522–486) [Figure O⁴⁷]. Under the protection of Achaemenid ruler Artaxerxes (r. 465—424), son of Xerxes (r. 486—465), son of Darius I, the Jews were also able to repair Jerusalem's city walls (c. 445—444).



Figure O: Darius I's tomb

Jewish governor Zerubbabel and high priest Joshua led and supervised the work of rebuilding the temple and parts of Jerusalem, thanks to the generosity of Cyrus. Ezra, a teacher of Jewish Law and priest (Ezra 7:6, Nehemiah 8:2), records that from the time of Cyrus to Artaxerxes, the Jewish people faced many

⁴⁵ "Daniel 8:3, ram as astral sign of Persia," John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, "The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2000), p. 742. See note below for earlier reference.

⁴⁶ The ram as an astral sign for Elymais, Persis, Susa, Palestine and its neighboring area, and the Dead Sea, are found in the 2nd century document of Valens, Vettius, "Anthologies: Book 1," Hellenistic Astrology, Mark Riley, trans., 2, p. 2, <https://www.csus.edu/indiv/r/rileymt/Vettius%20Valens%20entire.pdf>, accessed February 17, 2024.

⁴⁷ Photo: "File: Tomb of Darius I Image of Darius I.jpg" by Diego Delso is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/?ref=openverse>, accessed January 26, 2024.

challenges from neighboring communities from Samaria and just west of the Euphrates. Ezra gives a summary of what happened over these periods, beginning with Artaxerxes in chapter 4 and reverting back to Darius in chapter 5. Most likely Ezra is writing from the most current news for his era, as he arrives in Jerusalem from Babylon in the seventh year of Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:7-8), c. 458⁴⁸ and later reverts back to the conditions under Darius.⁴⁹ For contemporary continuity, we will begin with Ezra's story under the reign of Darius:



Figure P: Ecbatana, Iran

At the beginning of chapter 5, we see neighboring officials from the Trans-Euphrates region beginning to question who had authorized the Jewish people to build their temple. They write a letter regarding this matter to Darius I, while the Jewish leaders respond to these officials retelling the story of King Cyrus's original edict. The Trans-Euphrates officials request that Darius issue a search in the Achaemenid royal archives for this edict, which Darius initiates at the end of chapter 5. The officials of Babylon discover the edict in the royal archives of Persia's Ecbatana (modern Hamadan) [Figure P⁵⁰], the summer capital of the Achaemenid Empire and the location of Darius's

famous Behistun inscription, where Darius declares his right to reign over Persia and records his feats against enemies who attempted to usurp his reign. In response to the request about the Jewish temple, Darius sends this decree to the neighboring officials near Jerusalem:

³ Let the temple be rebuilt as a place to present sacrifices, and let its foundations be laid... ⁵ Also, the gold and silver articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took from the temple in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, are to be returned to their places in the temple in Jerusalem; they are to be deposited in the house of God... ⁷ Do not interfere with the work on this temple of God. Let the governor of the Jews and the Jewish elders rebuild this house of God on its site. ⁸ ...Their expenses are to be fully paid out of the royal treasury, from the revenues of Trans-Euphrates, so that the work will not stop... ¹¹ ... If anyone defies this edict, a beam is to be pulled from their house and they are to be impaled on it.⁵¹ And for this crime their house is to be made a pile of rubble. ¹² May God, who has caused his Name to dwell there, overthrow any king or people who lifts a hand to change this decree or to destroy this temple in Jerusalem. I Darius have decreed it. Let it be carried out with diligence. (Ezra 5)

⁴⁸ Note that the names of men who arrived with Ezra, including Daniel, Obadiah, and Zechariah (8:1-9) were not the same men mentioned during the time of Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus, or Darius. Daniel and Obadiah, who lived during the time of Nebuchadnezzar would have surely already passed away, and Zechariah had already been in Jerusalem at the time of the temple construction.

⁴⁹ Ezra finishes his description of the circumstances under Artaxerxes and transitions in 4:24 back to the difficult circumstances under Darius I: "Thus [or "then"] the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until [or "during"] the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia" (original version, NIV). While the modern translation attaches this verse to the previous description of Artaxerxes' reign, it is more appropriately a transitional verse to chapter 5's description of circumstances under Darius I, 60 years prior. This is likely an issue of translation, as the passage immediately shifts back to prophets Haggai and Zechariah, living and prophesying to the Jewish people under Darius I, along with Governor Zerubbabel and high priest Joshua beginning the work under Darius. The Septuagint, the earliest Greek version of the Hebrew Bible translated in the 3rd century B.C.E., combines the books of Ezra and Nehemiah into 1 & 2 Esdras. In 1 Esdras 2:25, the English translation agrees: "Then when what was written by King Artaxerxes had been read, Raoumos and Samsaios the scribe and those associated with them marched in haste to Jerusalem with cavalry and a throng of the first rank and began to hinder those who were building. And the building of the temple in Jerusalem ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of the Persians" [emphasis added]. See "1 Esdras," NETS translation of the Septuagint, Robert Hanhart, ed., (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974), <https://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition/15-1esdras-nets.pdf>, p. 396, accessed February 21, 2024. With modern chapters and verses introduced as late as the 13th century C.E., the imposed segmentation causes increased confusion in accurate translation in modern versions, such as the NIV. For dating of on chapter and verse segmentation, see G. F. Moore, "The Vulgate Chapters and Numbered Verses in the Hebrew Bible," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (1893), p. 73, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3259119>, accessed February 21, 2024.

⁵⁰ Photo: "Ecbatana, Iran - 50897009323" by Carole Raddato from Frankfurt, Germany is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/?ref=openverse>, accessed February 21, 2024.

⁵¹ To note, Darius's use of crucifixion as punishment (v. 11) is also recorded in his Behistun inscription. See "Ancient Persian Lexicon," Herbert Cushing Tolman and James Henry Stevenson, trans. and ed. (Nashville: Vanderbilt University, 1908), <https://archive.org/details/dictionaryofolds0000biel/page/26/mode/2up?q=earth>, II.13-14 p.21-22, III.8, p. 25.

Here we see the reverence that Darius the Great had for the worship of God and his obedience to the will of Cyrus. As a result, the Jewish people were able to rebuild and complete their temple during the sixth year of Darius's reign (6:15), c. 516.⁵²

Readings for section 8

Role of King Darius I in rebuilding the temple: *Ezra 5-6:16*

Why is this important?

Darius the Great was another hero of Persia's Achaemenid Empire. Describe the on-going support that Darius provided the Jewish people.

Historically, Darius was also a worshipper of Ahura Mazda. From Darius's edict found in the book of Ezra, how was Darius's religious views similar to those of Cyrus?

9: Artaxerxes I and the Old Testament

In chapter 7, Ezra fast forwards to his present life as he arrives in Jerusalem from Babylon in the seventh year of Artaxerxes (7:7-8) [Figure Q⁵³]. Back in Ezra 4, we learn that neighboring enemies in the Trans-Euphrates have sent another letter to Artaxerxes accusing the Jews of being an historically rebellious people who shouldn't be allowed to build its city foundations and walls, which they claim would result in the Jewish people's failure to pay taxes to Persia (4:9-16). Unaware of the agreement that the Jewish people had with Cyrus and Darius, Artaxerxes stops the work on Jerusalem.

Ezra, a high-level Jewish priest and teacher who had a relationship with Artaxerxes (7:6), most likely explains the situation to Artaxerxes and then asks that the Persian king to provide Ezra with a letter permitting him and others living in Babylon to return safely to Jerusalem. Artaxerxes not only agrees to Ezra's request, but he also sends Ezra along with generous provisions and sacrificial offerings for worship. Artaxerxes even commands other officials in the Persian-ruled Trans-Euphrates to contribute to the provisions and forbids them from imposing taxes or duties upon the Jewish people for these provisions:

⁵² To note, some translations of 6:14 contain a misunderstanding of the missing direct object in Hebrew, saying that the temple was completed under Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes. While Jerusalem's walls and gates were completed during the reign of Artaxerxes, the temple was actually completed earlier under Darius. In context, the statement is designed to be a concluding sentence that all the work was completed under these three kings, not just the temple. For translation see Strongs 3635 under "Ezra 6:14," Bible Hub, <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/ezra/6-14.htm>. The direct object contextually is all that was completed under these rulers, not just the temple.

⁵³ Photo: "Relief of Artaxerxes I, from his tomb in Naqsh-e Rostam" by Diego Delso is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/?ref=openverse>, accessed March 13, 2024.

¹³ Now I decree that any of the Israelites in my kingdom, including priests and Levites, who volunteer to go to Jerusalem with you, may go. ¹⁴ You are sent by the king and his seven advisers to inquire about Judah and Jerusalem with regard to the Law of your God, which is in your hand. ¹⁵ Moreover, you are to take with you the silver and gold that the king and his advisers have freely given to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, ¹⁶ together with all the silver and gold you may obtain from the province of Babylon, as well as the freewill offerings of the people and priests for the temple of their God in Jerusalem... ²⁵ And you, Ezra, in accordance with the wisdom of your God, which you possess, appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice to all the people of Trans-Euphrates—all who know the laws of your God. And you are to teach any who do not know them. ²⁶ Whoever does not obey the law of your God and the law of the king must surely be punished by death, banishment, confiscation of property, or imprisonment. (Ezra 7)



Figure Q: Artaxerxes I – tomb at Naqsh-e Rostam

For all of this, Ezra and his people praise God! When Ezra arrives in Jerusalem, however, he encounters many spiritual issues among the Jewish people, and the wall and gates have remained in disrepair. In the book of Malachi, which means “messenger,” we encounter a prophet, possibly Ezra himself, preaching against the people for not obeying the Lord in offering proper sacrifices to God and for their continual disregard for righteous living.



Figure R: Jerusalem walls

In the book of Nehemiah, we fast forward thirteen years, or twenty years into the reign of Artaxerxes (445), when Nehemiah, cupbearer to the king, comes to Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:1) and becomes governor of Judea. The story begins with Nehemiah in the citadel of Susa where he’s weeping over the sins of his people and over the fact that the walls and gates of Jerusalem are still in rubble (1) [Figure R⁵⁴]. His distress becomes evident to Artaxerxes and the queen, so they permit Nehemiah to return for the reconstruction of his homeland.

Again, Artaxerxes not only provides letters to the governors of the Trans-Euphrates permitting Nehemiah’s safe passing through enemy territory, but he also grants him access to all the timber he needs as beams for the gates, walls, and Nehemiah’s own residence when he arrives (2). To give further authorization within the territory, Artaxerxes appoints Nehemiah as governor of Judah (5:14). Despite

⁵⁴ Photo: "Israel-06454 - Jerusalem Walls" by archer10 (Dennis) is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/?ref=openverse>, accessed March 13, 2024.

much opposition from surrounding enemies, Nehemiah and his vast team, unified and determined in their efforts under the grace and power of God, finish the entire wall and the gates in fifty-two days, c. 445—444, a miraculous feat!⁵⁵ (6:15) Once again, without the generosity, spiritual reverence, protection, and ongoing assistance of Persian kings throughout the Achaemenid Empire, Jerusalem would have stayed in rubble. Nehemiah remained Judah’s governor for twelve years before he returned to his service for Artaxerxes (433) (13:6), a long time for a king not to drink wine! 😊

To note, while this document does not record archeological evidence of Artaxerxes’ contributions, we know from history that the Jewish people would not have had the resources to rebuild their walls and gates, and substantial external contributions would have been required due to the years of exile. With Judah’s enduring relationship with Achaemenid rulers, Persia is the only viable candidate for these significant contributions.

Readings for section 9

Role of Artaxerxes I in rebuilding Jerusalem: *Ezra 4:11-23; 7:6-28; 8:31, 35-36; Nehemiah 1-2; 6:15-16*

Why is this important?

Throughout the Old Testament, many prophets proclaim God’s promise to rebuild Jerusalem and its walls. Explain the role of hero Artaxerxes I in fulfilling those promises.

Why might it have been religiously imperative for the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild both their temple and city, along with its gates and walls?

10: Cyrus the Great and Messianic prophecies

One thing to understand about Jewish culture is that Jewish governance not only had to do with a specific territory, but a people group: the entire Jewish population, including the diaspora. Jewish people were governed by a high priest and other priests, who, as we’ve seen, maintained relationships with Persian governing officials throughout the territories where they lived. These cooperative relationships became possible through the groundbreaking leadership style of Cyrus the Great and the relationships he built with his captives of various backgrounds, keeping rulers in their positions over the territories they ruled and incorporating nationals into his administration.⁵⁶

By his design and divine plan, God used the Achaemenid rulers to continually protect Jewish traditions, holy scripture, lands, worship, and lineage. Without Cyrus’s obedience to God’s command to free the Jewish prisoners, Judaism would have been lost and their records likely neglected and even destroyed under Chaldean rulership that forbid the worship of gods foreign to Babylon. Likewise, through ongoing

⁵⁵ Kennedy, Titus, “Unearthing the Bible: 101 Archeological Discoveries That Bring the Bible to Life,” Eugene Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 2020), pp. 245-246. See also Olmstead, A.T., p. 316.

⁵⁶ Duiker and Spielvogel, 31.

intermarriage with foreigners of Judaism, as we see beginning to occur under Ezra (Ezra 10), the lineage required for the Messiah to have been born may also have been altered. Even if God in his righteous sovereignty had prevented such circumstances, the documented prophecies conveying the significance of a Messianic spiritual ruler may have been lost. It is through these prophecies and the historical knowledge of their significance that we can recognize and even defend the prophetic fulfillments of Jesus as the Messiah in the New Testament.



Figure S: 1821 Torah scroll

Four hundred prophecies proclaiming the coming of a Messiah thread the works of the Old Testament compilation of Jewish history [Figure S⁵⁷], written between approximately 300 and 1500 years before the birth of Jesus Christ.⁵⁸ Numerous Jewish prophets, including Moses, King David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Micah, and others, made proclamations about the coming Messiah, details beyond the control of any human being: the Messiah's birth in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2) his conception from a chosen virgin (Isaiah 7:14), his descendancy from the line of Judah and King David (Micah 5:2, Jeremiah 23:5-6), his titles (Psalms 2:6-8, Isaiah 9:6), his miraculous powers to heal the sick (Isaiah 53:5-6), descriptions of his death (Isaiah 52:13-15, 53:4-12, Psalms 22), and his resurrection from the dead (Hosea 6:1-3, Psalms 16:8-11). Prophecies from Isaiah are preserved in the Dead Sea Scrolls, while other verses can be found in the Septuagint (2nd—3rd century B.C.E.), all dated centuries before the birth of Jesus.⁵⁹ Former mathematician and astronomer, Professor Peter Stoner calculated a 1 in 1,028 chance of any man fulfilling even eight of the 400 Old Testament prophecies.⁶⁰ Given the name *Jesus* [Heb: *Yehoshua*] of Hebrew origin, meaning "the Lord is salvation,"⁶¹ and the Greek name *Christ*, [Gk: *Christos*] defined as "anointed" or "Messiah,"⁶² Jesus Christ fulfilled all 400 Old Testament prophecies for the Messiah, proving himself to be the long-anticipated Savior of mankind.⁶³ Preservation of Old Testament scripture was imperative for the meaning of these prophecies to be preserved.



Figure T: Middle Eastern shepherd

As we have learned, Jesus was not the only "anointed" one prophesied in the Old Testament. The Lord honors Cyrus as well in saying, "This is what the Lord says to his *anointed*, to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of to subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their armor, to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut" (Isaiah 45:1, emphasis added). When translated into Hebrew, the term "anointed" results in two terms: *mashiach*, meaning "Messiah" or "anointed,"⁶⁴ and *nagid*, meaning "foreign

⁵⁷ Photo: "1821 Torah scroll" by LGLou is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/?ref=openverse>, accessed March 13, 2024.

⁵⁸ Dates of Old Testament books are taken from William Sanford La Sor, et al., *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 9, 271, 279, 329. Dating of Genesis is based on the Mosaic Period, and Moses's delivery of Jews from Egypt according to 1 Kings 6:1, ca.1450 B.C.E. La Sor offers dates as late as 1200 B.C.E.

⁵⁹ To review verses from the book of Isaiah in translated form from the Dead Sea Scrolls, see "The Great Isaiah Scroll," *The Digital Dead Sea Scrolls*, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem (1995-2021), accessed September 29, 2021, <<http://dss.collections.imj.org.il/isaiah#>>.

⁶⁰ Robert C. Newman and Peter W. Stoner, "The Christ of Prophecy," *Science Speaks: Scientific Proof of the Accuracy of Prophecy and the Bible*, Moody Chicago, online edition (November, 2005), accessed February 7, 2019, http://dstoner.net/Science_Speaks/Christ_of_Prophecy.html#c9. Stoner is a former Chairman of the Mathematics and Astronomy Department in Pasadena City College and Chairman of Science of Westmont College.

⁶¹ Francis Brown, Samuel R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, "3091. Yehoshua," *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, unabridged, electronic database (Biblesoft, 2000), <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/3091.htm>.

⁶² "5547. Christos," *Thayer's Greek Lexicon*, electronic database (Biblesoft, 2011), <https://biblehub.com/greek/5547.htm>.

⁶³ For a complete explication of prophecies and their fulfillments, see William S. Kennedy, *Messianic Prophecy and the Life of Christ*, 2nd ed. (Andover: Warren F Draper, 1860) with available online version: https://archive.org/details/messianicprophec00kenn_0/page/n6/ mode/2up.

⁶⁴ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, "4899. mashiach," <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/4899.htm>.

ruler” or “prince.”⁶⁵ While by definition the term can also be interpreted as *nagid*, both by context and translation *mashiach*,⁶⁶ appears to be the more appropriate translation for Cyrus when God declares through Isaiah: “I summon you [Cyrus] by name and bestow on you a title of honor, though you do not acknowledge me” (45:4). There are only a few other prominent and distinctly honored men given the title “anointed,” including the kings of Judah, such as King David (Psalms 132:10-11), and Jesus the Messiah (Luke 4:18). In the Bible, Cyrus is the only one “anointed” by God who neither claimed Jewish descent nor worshipped Yahweh as God.

In the Isaiah prophecies, we see again Cyrus given one of the same titles and roles of the Savior to come: “shepherd” [Figure T]⁶⁷. In speaking the Word of God, the prophet Isaiah said, “[I am the Lord] who says of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, ‘Let it be rebuilt,’ and of the temple, ‘Let its foundations be laid’” (Isaiah 44:28). In this passage, we see God calling Cyrus, the “shepherd” of his people, the same term Jesus gave himself when he said, “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11). We see similar references throughout the Old and New Testaments for the Messiah: Isaiah 61:1; Luke 4:18; Acts 4:25-27. For these reasons, Cyrus is often referred to as a “Christ-figure,” one who symbolizes and reflects Christ, and in this case, serves as a foreshadowing symbol of the Messiah to come. By setting the Hebrews free from physical captivity, Cyrus was to the Jews in Babylon as what Jesus Christ would be for mankind, freeing all men from spiritual bondage.⁶⁸

Readings for section 10

Role of Cyrus II in protecting Jewish prophecies of the Messiah:

Messiah is born in Bethlehem – *Micah 5:2*

He descends from the line of Judah and King David – *Micah 5:2; Jeremiah 23:5-6*

He is conceived from a virgin – *Isaiah 7:14*

He bears divine titles – *Isaiah 9:6; Psalms 2:6-8*

He has miraculous powers to heal the sick – *Isaiah 53:5-6*

He dies in the ways described – *Isaiah 52:13-15; 53:4-12; Psalms 22*

He is raised from the dead – *Isaiah 53:11; Psalms 16:8-11; Hosea 6:1-3*

Cyrus as a representation of the Messiah to come:

Cyrus is called “anointed” – *Isaiah 45:1, 4; See Jesus in Isaiah 61:1; Psalms 132:10-11; Luke 4:18-19, Acts 4:25-27*

Cyrus is called “a shepherd” – *Isaiah 44:28; See Jesus in John 10:11-18*

Why is this important?

Consider the titles and actions of Cyrus the Great. Discuss why he might be seen as a figure foreshadowing the Messiah to come.

⁶⁵ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, “5057. nagid,” <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/5057.htm>.

⁶⁶ See Isaiah 5:1, Strong's 4899: מָשִׁיחַ, Hebrew text: Westminster Leningrad Codex, Biblehub, <https://biblehub.com/interlinear/isaiah/45-1.htm>.

⁶⁷ Photo: "Shepherd" by AfghanistanMatters is licensed under CC BY 2.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/?ref=openverse>, accessed March 13, 2024.

⁶⁸ See n. Isa. 45:1 in Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Ryrie Study Bible, Expanded Edition*, NIV (Chicago: Moody, 1994).

11: Cyrus, Jesus, and the magi

With Cyrus’s esteem and the ongoing role of Persian kings in God’s story of the coming Messiah, it should not come as any surprise that the first people to proclaim the Christ child to be King of the Jews are Persian rulers called “magi from the east” (Matthew 2:1). The time is between c. 6 B.C.E. and 4 B.C.E., the most probable dates of Jesus’s birth prior to the death of Herod, the Roman Empire’s client king over Judea. Magi from the east have been monitoring the trajectory of a star whose constellation was prophesied nearly 1500 years prior to this auspicious event. In the account of Jesus’s birth and infancy found in Matthew 2, these magi arrive in Jerusalem at Herod’s court asking, “Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him” (v. 2).

Before diving deeper into the Matthew 2 account, we’ll explore this term *magi* [pl., also *magos* or *magus*, sing.]. The term is of ancient Persian origin and was used in ancient Persia, Media, and Chaldea for wise men, teachers, priests, physicians, astrologers, seers, interpreter of dreams, fortune-tellers, and sorcerers from Persia or the eastern world. By Greek definition, magi were magicians or astrologers from the Orient, including countries in the Near East,⁶⁹ while its Greek root *Rab-mag* is defined as an official or chief astrologer and fortune-teller of a Babylonian king.⁷⁰ Throughout eastern history, magi were highly educated royal advisors who trained and studied for years in a craft that required the ability to read, write, and interpret celestial omens through the analysis of historical records maintained for the purposes of imperial fortune-telling and predictions.⁷¹ The Achaemenid Empire employed magi of Zoroastrian origin, the religion of the Empire, as defined in their holy book, the *Avesta*.



Figure U: 19th c print showing Zoroastrian priests in Persepolis with an external fire-altar at Persepolis, entitled 'Persiani'

Records show that at times magi not only observed the stars but also played an active role in the spiritual lives of ancient royalty [Figures U⁷² & V]⁷³. According to Greek historian Xenophon, Cyrus the Great was educated in Zoroastrianism as a child, exposing him to the religious world of magi that became an integral part of Cyrus’s sovereignty. During his political career, Cyrus was commanded by a magus to make sacrifices to Persian and Greek gods after gaining supremacy over Greek territories, suggesting magi’s spiritual authority, or at minimum strong guidance, over kings. At Cyrus’s burial ground, archeologists uncovered a house for the magian guards, who during their lifetimes had received food rations and animals for sacrifices,⁷⁴ all pointing to Cyrus’s active use of magi.

The Persepolis Fortification Tablets recorded under Darius I reveal the terms *pirramasda*⁷⁵ and *lan performer*, both synonymous with the royal and religious duties of a magus. Depicted as a courier or messenger of the king traveling in isolation, pairs, or threes, a pirramasda delivered food and materials to designated people and priests for ceremonies to the gods [Figure W]. The lan performer was the

⁶⁹ “3097. magos,” *Thayer’s Greek Lexicon*, <https://biblehub.com/greek/3097.htm>.

⁷⁰ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, “7248. Rab-mag,” <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/7248.htm>.

⁷¹ Evidence of such imperial works have been discovered as early as the 7th century B.C.E. in the archives of Assyrian king Esarhaddon (r. 681-669 B.C.E.) and his son Ashurbanipal (r. 668-627 B.C.E.). Hermann Hunger, “The Relation of Babylonian Astronomy to its Culture and Society,” *The Role of Astronomy in Society and Culture, Proceedings of the International Astronomical Union, IAU Symposium 260* (June, 2011): 68, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743921311002158>.

⁷² Photo: “Persiani,” BM2013,6049.1, Trustee of the British Museum, released under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license.

⁷³ Photo: “Closeups of Ceremonial Silver Bowl depicting Persian victories with Zoroastrian themes from Burma 1875-1900 CE” by mharsch is licensed under CC BY 2.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/>, accessed March 13, 2024.

⁷⁴ Albert T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948): 66, 450, 477.

⁷⁵ Alternative spellings for *pirramasda* are also used in the Persepolis Fortification Tablets.

magus or priest responsible for rendering libations⁷⁶ and conducting religious ceremonies. Although not entirely related to the worship found in the Persepolis Tablets that reveal a mixture of beliefs,⁷⁷ descriptions of such libations during this period are found in the *Avesta*, where we see the recitation of verses and prayers, the singing of hymns, libations, and the sacrificing of food and animals to Ahura Mazda and various subservient spiritual beings, including those related to stars and other elements of nature.⁷⁸



Figure V: Silver bowl with Zoroastrian motifs

According to Herodotus, who lived inside Persian territory during the reign of both Xerxes and Artaxerxes, magi accompanied Xerxes during the Persian Wars for the purpose of libations, continuing the sacrifices of both animals and children.⁷⁹ Magi continued gaining strength during the later reign of Artaxerxes II⁸⁰ (r. 405–359 B.C.E.) and rose to equal authority with kings by the Sasanian Empire (224 to 651 C.E.),⁸¹ just prior to the invasion of Islamic forces. While five hundred years had passed from the use of magi under Cyrus the Great to the appearance of magi in New Testament Judea, the historical link of magi to the era of Cyrus becomes significant as we examine ancient biblical prophecies, guiding us to a more

in-depth understanding of how magi outside of Judea oddly appear in a New Testament account of a Jewish Messiah's birth.

The prophecy of a star rising over Judea as a Messianic sign originates from an ancient Assyrian prophet during the time of Moses (c. 1500 B.C.E.) named Balaam, son of Beor, from Pethor [Figure W⁸²], just a few miles south of Karkemish, located along the Euphrates River near the modern Syrian-Turkish border. Likely a Mesopotamian magus or seer, Balaam was hired by the Moabite king Balak living in Moab (modern Jordan) to call down curses upon Israel. Contrary to Balak's commands, Balaam instead prophesizes blessings over the territory and proclaims that a star in the distant future will announce the coming of a ruler over Israel: "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter [ruler] will rise out of Israel..." (Numbers 24:17). While the context is metaphorical, in accordance with Jewish prophetic interpretation, the message can also be interpreted as literal: that a physical



Figure W: Drawing of a copy of Balaam's inscription, Deir 'Alla, 800–825 B.C.E.

⁷⁶ Richard T. Hallock, *Persepolis Fortification Tablets*, The University of Chicago Oriental Institute Publications 92 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 26, 42, 227.

⁷⁷ For a description of *lan* ceremonies and magian roles, see Shahrokh Razmjou, "The Lan Ceremony and Other Ritual Ceremonies in the Achaemenid Period: The Persepolis Fortification Tablets," *National Museum of Iran, Tehran* 42 (2002): 103–111, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4300666>. Razmjou discusses the term *lan* and comparable Iranian term *daušiyam* (105–107), as well as religious differences within the PFTs (108–109). Descriptions of ceremonies in the *Avesta*, specifically the *Yshats* are also included (110–111).

⁷⁸ William W. Malandra, trans. and ed., *An Introduction to Ancient Iranian Religion: Readings from the Avesta and the Achaemenid Inscriptions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 15, 51–55, 59, 86–87.

⁷⁹ Olmstead, "Persian Empire," 250–251.

⁸⁰ Jean Perrot, ed., *The Palace of Darius at Susa: The Great Royal Residence of Achaemenid Persia*, trans. Dominique Collon and Gerard Collon (London: I.B. Tauris and Iranian Heritage Foundation, 2013), 464.

⁸¹ Zouberi, Joan. *The role of religion in the foreign affairs of Sasanian Iran and the Later Roman Empire* (330-630 A.D.), *Historia I Świat*, nr 6 (2017), ISSN 2299 – 2464, p. 122.

⁸² This inscription is an 800–825 B.C.E. copy of some of Balaam's extra-biblical prophecies housed in the Jordan Archeological Museum, revealing the long-term effect Balaam and his prophetic works had on the region. For more information and translation, see <https://www.livius.org/sources/content/deir-alla-inscription/>. Photo: "File: Deir 'Alla Inscription.png" by Disdero is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/?ref=opensearch>, accessed March 14, 2024. Some argue that Pethor is located in the Jordan area, while the Bible distinctly says the location is Mesopotamia ("Aram Naharaim," Deut. 23:4), along the Euphrates (Num. 22:5).

star will rise above Israel. While the modern Hebrew term *kokab* found in the verse could be interpreted as “star” or “planet,”⁸³ biblical archeologist William F. Albright compares the usage of *kokab* to other early Canaanite constructs that indicate a plural form of the word. In accordance with Assyrian culture and astrology, *kokab* would then be translated as “constellation,”⁸⁴ resulting in a horoscopic announcement of a regal birth. The significance of this interpretation and of Balaam’s birthplace will later be discussed.

This prophecy correlates with another prophecy of Isaiah nearly 1000 years later that affirms this sign in the sky symbolizing the rise of a Messianic ruler:

¹⁰ In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious. ¹¹ In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a *second* time to reclaim the surviving remnant of his people...¹² He will raise a banner for the nations and gather the exiles of Israel; he will assemble the scattered people of Judah from the four quarters of the earth. (Isaiah 11, emphasis added)

The “Root of Jesse” is an Old Testament metaphor for the Messiah born through the line of King David’s father Jesse. This “root” is then compared to a “banner” [Heb. *nes*], while metaphorically conveyed may be better understood or more directly translated as “sign” or “miracle.”⁸⁵ This sign or miracle will be “raised” (v. 12) and “stand,” [Heb. *amad*] (v. 11), meaning “stand still, stop, cease moving” or “remain” in a particular location⁸⁶ as a sign for the people. If interpreted alongside Balaam’s prophecy and the fulfillment of that prophecy in Matthew 2, then we can discern that a miraculous star within a constellation will rise above Judea and rest over a particular spot, declaring a special period when the Lord will “reach out his hand a *second* time to reclaim the surviving remnant of his people.” While the *first* deliverance of God’s people “from the four quarters of the world” (Cyrus Cylinder) was exemplified through Cyrus’s delivery of Jewish captives in Babylon, the *second* time is Christ’s spiritual salvation for the people scattered across the “four quarters of the earth,” (11:12): an ancient term for the “entire world.”

This sign was in fact what the magi were tracking:

⁹ The star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. (Matthew 2)

⁸³ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, “3556. kokab,” <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/3556.htm>.

⁸⁴ See n. 83 for ancient explication of *kokab* as plural in William F. Albright, “The Oracles of Balaam,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 63, no. 3 (September, 1944): 219, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3262320.pdf>.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, “5251. nes,” <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/5251.htm>. See נִסְיָן in 1.a. and 3.a as a “signal” of a Messiah; also Number 26:10, NAS and IST translations for 11:10, although later Hebrew.

⁸⁶ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, “5975. amad,” <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/5975.htm>. See אָמַד in 2.a. “stand still, stop, cease moving,” as with Nahum 2:9 or 3.6 “remain” or stay in a location as in II Kings 15:20.

With our modern precision of astronomical calculations and knowledge of both Babylonian and Greek astronomy and astrology used during the time of Jesus, do we have any scientific and historical evidence that such a star existed? If it did, there is a high probability that modern astronomers with their instruments and calculations would be able to find it. Astrophysicist Michael R. Molnar and former manager of the Physics Instructional Lab at Rutgers University has clearly done the most extensive research on the Star based on the astrological astronomy practiced at the time of Christ's birth. Molnar's journey began with a fifty-dollar purchase of an ancient coin from 6 C.E. Antioch, Syria under Roman rule, depicting the ram of Aries looking back at a star,⁸⁷ [Figure X⁸⁸]. Although laying no claim to faith in Jesus as the Messiah, Molnar was at the time of purchase aware of the Messianic star foretold in the book of Matthew and, out of curiosity, began researching possible meanings behind the symbols depicted on the coin.



Figure X: Coin of Antioch, Syria, 5/6–11/12 C.E.



Figure Y: Aries constellation

While Molnar references Greek astrologer-astronomers Ptolemy, Dorotheus, Valens, and Firmicus as the most well-known sources for his understanding of regal horoscopes, much of Molnar's study of the first century B.C.E. astronomy in the Roman world leaned heavily upon astronomer Claudius Ptolemy and his work *Tetrabiblos*. Through his research, Molnar contends that the magi were using Greek methods for investigating the stars, derived from those of the Babylonians. Although Ptolemy wrote his work in 150 C.E., sections of his findings were derived from first century B.C.E. knowledge of astronomy, reflecting studies on the subject contemporary to Herod's reign.⁸⁹ According to Ptolemy's work, the constellation Aries the ram [Figure Y⁹⁰] found on Molnar's coin symbolized areas of Herod's kingdom: southern Syria and Palestine, including Judea. As an astrological sign, Aries as a horoscopic

constellation would have symbolized any king born in any of these relative lands.⁹¹ This astrological connection to Judea launched Molnar's further investigation into the famous Christmas Star and the magi's quest.

In his book, *The Star of Bethlehem*, Molnar describes the type of schematic the magi would have used to construct their theories based on the positioning of the Sun, Moon, and planets. The actual viewing of the planets by magi was not necessary but could rather be determined by calculating the positions of planets, producing a horoscope to identify the time and place of a regal birth.⁹² Such calculations would have allowed the magi to predict accurately the positioning of the celestial sign without seeing the Star itself, given their possible distance from the location of the newborn Judean king. In his work, Molnar

⁸⁷ Hellenized cities typically portrayed on the front of a coin the head of either the emperor or god of the time, along with a political or religious message and zodiac signs on the back. In the same fashion, Molnar's coin portrayed Zeus on the front with a new symbol on the backside: Aries the ram looking backwards at a star. While the bust of Zeus was a usual representation of that era, the Aries symbol only first appeared in 5 C.E., near the time that Judea and Samaria were annexed to Syria in 6 C.E. under the governorship of Publius Sulpicius Quirinius, and possibly imprinted by Quirinius as a symbol for his new leadership over Antioch. Molnar's research uncovered that the Aries constellation depicted the rulership of Antioch, while the picture overall connected the rulership to a Greek tale of a ram looking back at Helle, a child of goddess Nephele who died during the ram's attempt to save her from death. The ram was sacrificed to Zeus and made into a constellation. See Molnar, Michael R., *The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 3, 5, 45-47, 50.

⁸⁸ Photo: "Coin, head of Zeus with ram looking back at star," RPC-1 4265, Roman, Provincial Coinage Online, Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford and the British Museum, <https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/coins/1/4265>, accessed March 6, 2024.

⁸⁹ Molnar, *The Star of Bethlehem*, 44-45.

⁹⁰ Photo: Adapted by "Pisces and Aries from San Gabriel" by SkyLightDream is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/?ref=openverse>. Non-commercial use only. Accessed March 13, 2024.

⁹¹ Molnar, 46-47. This concept was confirmed by Vettius Valens in his 2nd cent. work in astrology, *Anthology*.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 65-67.

explains the ideal celestial arrangement for a royal birth and outlines an example of elements necessary for a promising prediction of a Judean King. Molnar concludes that the magi were in fact tracking Jupiter, as it moved into the constellation Aries, the ultimate sign of this newborn king and the leading astral figure in the foretelling of a most magnificent birth of a King of kings, one worthy of worship and royal gifts,⁹³ and one of even greater honor than Caesar Augustus.⁹⁴ According to Molnar’s research, the conditions under which this star was discovered were both “incredible” and “rare.”⁹⁵ In his work, Molnar assigns the year of Jesus’s birth to April 17, 6 B.C.E.⁹⁶

It is in Daniel’s vision and prophecy that we realize the tremendous significance of Molnar’s findings: The magi were tracking Jupiter as a star that rose inside the constellation Aries, the ram, the astral sign not only for Palestine and Judea, but also for Persia even through the time of the Sasanians (r. 224 to 651) who ruled Persian territory for over 400 years after subverting the Parthians. Through stamp-seals [Figure Z⁹⁷], we see the theme of a ram as a symbol for both Sasanian territory (Persia) and Syria, which included Judea during the 1st century C.E. In other words, the sign of the star spoke to both regions and descendants thereof. While our western theological mentality is far removed from this line of horoscopic thinking, during the time of Jesus, astronomical astrology for the sake of horoscopes was thriving and even at work among Jewish mystics, as seen in the Jewish Babylonian Talmud.⁹⁸ Such a rare, fortuitous, and auspicious zodiac was evidence at that time and era of a noble birth with divine and universal significance.⁹⁹



Figure Z: Sasanian stamp-seal, 3rd-7th c., Iran, ram looking behind at a star

To the Jews, the ram represented God’s provision of a male sheep as a substitute for Abraham’s sacrifice of his son, Isaac (Gen. 22:13).¹⁰⁰ The ram and baby ram, a lamb, became sacrificial sin offerings under Jewish Law (Leviticus 9:1-4, Exodus 20:24, Numbers 28:16-19). These Old Testament events and practices served as foreshadowing symbols of the son that God would one day sacrifice for his children as covering for their sins. For Christ followers, this lamb became the symbol for Jesus who suffered on the cross to take away our sins, reflected also in the prophetic description of the Messiah’s death in Isaiah 53: “⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions... and by his wounds we are healed... ⁷ He was led like a lamb to the slaughter,” prophecies fulfilled through Jesus’s death on the cross in Luke 23.

While many attempts, both noble and ignoble, have been made to trace the Star’s origin, Molnar’s work attained world recognition among both Harvard scientists and those who attended the *Star of Bethlehem and the Magi* international scientific conference, held in 2014 at the University of Groningen,

⁹³ Ibid., 81–82.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 79–80.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 102.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 104.

⁹⁷ Photo: 140818, Asset No.: 1588527001, Sasanian period, The Trustee of the British Museum, The British Museum, Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1988-0514-2, accessed March 3, 2024.

⁹⁸ Eastern Jews highly valued astronomy as a science and had an educated understanding of Babylonian astrological practices, as depicted by scholars Rabbi Hanina in the first century C.E., as well as Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak and Ashi of the fourth century, both referenced in the Babylonian Talmud of the 4th century C.E. While some Jewish sages practiced astrology for the purpose of horoscopes, it was not until the fourth century that the practice was theologically condemned in the Babylonian Talmud, suggesting that astronomical forecasting was still in play and acceptable during the reign of Ananel, Herod’s Jewish priest from Babylon. See Michael L. Rodkinson, trans., “Tract Sabbath,” *New Edition of the Babylonian Talmud: Original Text, Edited, Corrected, Formulated, and Translated into English*, 2nd edition, 1 (Boston: New Talmud, 1903): 372-373 (PDF 326-327), <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/FullTalmud.pdf>.

⁹⁹ Molnar, 79-80.

¹⁰⁰ Here again we see God using a common practice in the culture of Mesopotamia, whose people practiced human sacrifice. Prior to the Law, the Lord used this one-time event demonstrated by Abraham, the physical father of all Jews, as a symbol and sign for the sacrifice God would one day make of his Son Jesus for the sins of man. See n. Gen. 22:2 in Ryrie, *Ryrie Study Bible*.

the Netherlands, with experts in ancient near eastern history, the Greco-Roman world, and modern astronomy in attendance. Yet, one of the greatest objections to Molnar’s work was the unlikely location of the magi as originating anywhere east of Judea, including the most common theory of Parthia, where the use of Greek astronomy to this day has not been discovered. Molnar’s research ultimately ended with this unfortunate conclusion, as no other possible locations were considered or presented at the conference. If this Star did exist, then where might these magi have originated?

Readings for section 11

Story of the magi: *Matthew 2*

Prophecies about the Star of Bethlehem: *Numbers 24:17, Isaiah 11:10-12*

Significance of the ram: *Genesis 22:3, Leviticus 1-4, Exodus 20:24, Numbers 28:16-19, Isaiah 53:5-7 (prophecy of Jesus’s death), Luke 23 (Jesus’s death)*

Why is this important?

In your own words, recall the story of the magi found in Matthew 2. Discuss the prophecies of Balaam and Isaiah surrounding this event.

Discuss Dr. Molnar’s more recent research presented about this Star and its constellation.

How does Molnar’s discovery of Aries the ram as the constellation in which the Star is found have spiritual significance?

12. The magi’s origin and link to the Achaemenid Empire

During the 2015 conference held to discuss Molnar’s work on the Star of Bethlehem, Parthia as the origin of the Persian magi was ruled out, as were most “eastern” locations due to the absence of Greek astronomy used in these territories, as well as their hostile relationship with Judea. To note, the conclusion regarding Greek astronomy was based more on a lack of information, rather than concrete evidence;¹⁰¹ however, if we concur with these findings, then we are led to look outside of Parthia for the magi’s home country. During the conference no consideration was given to the migration of Persian magi outside of Parthia, which could include territories such as Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, or Egypt, with magi still in use in first century B.C.E. To align with Molnar’s theory and biblical history, the royal court of any country would be using Greek astronomy and astrology, have friendly relations with Judea or perhaps seeking an alliance, possess the scientific ability to calculate the pathways of star within constellations with or without the ability to physically view the stars, and possess the wealth to bring gifts for royalty, including frankincense, gold, and myrrh.

¹⁰¹ Discussions and presentations from this symposium are recorded in “The Star of Bethlehem and the Magi: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Experts on the Ancient Near East, the Greco-Roman World, and Modern Astronomy,” George H. van Kooten and Peter Barthel, eds., (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

One most probable yet unassuming location is the small territory of Commagene [Figure 1],¹⁰² an independent country located in the Gaziantep and Adiyaman regions of modern Turkey that had not yet become a client kingdom or province of Rome by the time of Jesus's birth.¹⁰³ Not surprisingly, the Commagene border lay a little less than 30 to 40 miles north of Pethor, the native city of Balaam, the Assyrian prophet who proclaimed the star over Judea 1500 years before the birth of Christ.¹⁰⁴ In this small territory buffering Rome and Parthia, one of the wealthiest kings of his day laid royal claim to the territory through his Seleucid and Persian Achaemenid lineage:¹⁰⁵ Antiochus I of Commagene (70-31 B.C.E.), a friendly contemporary of King Herod. While Commagene does not lie directly east of Judea, but rather north and only slightly east, the only Biblical demographic requirement of these magi is that they were "from the east," which could indicate either physical location or ancestral association, in the sense of "originating from the east,"¹⁰⁶ allowing Commagene to be a feasible origin of the magi.



Figure 1: Early Commagene before Pompey expansion



Figure 2: Lion Horoscope, Mt. Nemrud, Commagene

Astrology and astronomy in Commagene

Regarding astronomical and astrological sciences of that time, we see Antiochus' use of Greek astronomical and astrological methods reflected in his Lion Horoscope relief [Figure 2]¹⁰⁷ located at Mt. Nemrud, proclaiming the birthday or coronation of his father Mithridates I. This monument along with modern calculations, provide evidence that Commagene possessed not only the astrological knowledge for such claims but also the astronomical calculating abilities to detect and track accurately the location of unseen stars of the past.¹⁰⁸

Little is known about Antiochus I's great-grandson,

Antiochus III (12 B.C.E.—17 C.E.), who ruled during the time of Jesus's birth and would have been the king over magi sent to Judea; however, the time between the reign of Antiochus III and his great-grandfather marks only nineteen years. If we wish to explore Commagene as a viable homeland for the magi, then we can and must do so through the life and reign of Antiochus I.

What archeologists have uncovered from the tomb at Mt. Nemrud [Figure 3]¹⁰⁹, along with other locations of priest activities, is that while Antiochus I made use of magi of Persian descent throughout his kingdom, he worshipped "all gods," with specific reference to both Persian and Greek gods.¹¹⁰ Antiochus used his grandiose and larger-than-life architectural mounds to reflect wealth and power to

¹⁰² Photo: "File: Roman East 50 CE Commagene highlighted-en.svg" by User: Quartier Latin 1968 modified an image created by User: Cplakidas based on an original image by User: Sémhur from public domain mapping resources is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/?ref=openverse>, accessed March 13, 2024.

¹⁰³ After Antiochus III's death in 17 C.E., Commagene became a province of Syria; however, Roman Emperor Caligula returned the country to Antiochus IV as a client kingdom until 73 C.E., when Rome officially annexed Commagene into the province of Syria.

¹⁰⁴ Historians believe that Pethor lay a few miles south of Karkemish, also known as Carchamesh and Karkamis.

¹⁰⁵ Crijns, Mauricem, Mt. Nemrud: *The Discovery of the Colossal Coronation Horoscope of Antiochus I, King of Commagene on Mt. Nemrud*, Babesch 97 (2022), 77-91. doi: 10.2143/BAB.97.0.3290534, 78.

¹⁰⁶ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, "575. apo," <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/575.htm>. See II.1.a.

¹⁰⁷ Photo: "Antiochus I Theos of Commagene and Zeus Oromasdes" by Klearchos Kapoutsis is licensed under CC BY 2.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/?ref=openverse>, accessed March 13, 2024.

¹⁰⁸ Crijns, Mt. Nemrud, 78. This ability was in practice among the Greeks as early as 2nd century B.C.E. See Giuseppe Cambiano, *Astronomy and Divination in Stoic Philosophy*, chapter 14.1 (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2020), doi:10.1163/9789004400566_048, accessed March.

¹⁰⁹ Photo: "Commagene Tyche, West Terrace, Nemrut Dagı, Turkey" by Following Hadrian is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/?ref=openverse>, accessed March 13, 2024.

¹¹⁰ Versluys, Miguel John. *Visual Style and Constructing Identity in the Hellenistic World: Nemrut Dag and Commagene under Antiochus I*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 16, 103-4, 157-18, 256, 260.

his royal neighbors, while always maintaining religious respect and even agreement to ward off neighboring attacks, in keeping with the ruling style of his Achaemenid ancestors.

As a fellow neighbor to Judea and client kingdom of Rome, we can viably assume that Antiochus III sent his magi as royal representatives to welcome the newborn King of the Jews in Judea, to gain favor with King Herod and maintain political peace. As Herod the Great was also referred to as “King of the Jews,” the magi would likely have been searching for Herod’s descendent, not a rogue “king” lacking proper royal lineage to either Herod. As a friendly country, Commagene magi, unlike those from Parthia, would have been met by Herod without defense or suspicion, making Commagene a more likely origin of these travelers. Still another test of their plausibility is the wealth of the Commagene nation. With its native minerals and access to the Silk Road,¹¹¹ Antiochus III would have been able to supply these magi with gifts of “gold, frankincense, and myrrh” (2:11), commonly used for both religious purposes and as gifts for royalty.¹¹²

Commagene and Jewish history

Understanding the magi’s political and theological motives, we might wonder if Persian magi from Commagene had any previous knowledge of Jewish history regarding the Star. Much had happened since the time the Achaemenid Empire and their relationship with ancient Jewish leaders, who may have conveyed this hope of a Messiah to Persians. Alexander from Macedonia had conquered Persia in the century following Artaxerxes, and by 312, Alexander’s conquests had been lost to the Seleucids, as both history and Daniels’ prophecy attest (Daniel 8). The region was then



Figure 3: Remains at Mt. Nemrud, Commagene

subverted by the Parthians who ruled from 247 B.C.E. to 224 C.E. – all this to say that contemporary Commagenes might not have possessed Messianic historical knowledge passed down through their Achaemenid ancestry.

Did the Commagenes retain Balaam’s Star prophecy preserved in Assyrian records? The answer is hard to say. Housed in the Jordan Archeology Museum are what appear to be copies as late as 825—800 B.C.E. of unrelated, extra-biblical inscriptions of Balaam [Figure W-1]¹¹³ found near Amman, Jordan, revealing that Balaam’s words were still having an impact 700 years after his death, yet in an area over 350 miles south of Pethor. However, in just a few chapters after Balaam’s star prophecy found in the Bible, we learn that Moses and his troops had killed Balaam in a battle against the Midianites (Numbers 31:7-8), who were descendants of Abraham’s son Midian living in northwestern Arabia and enemies of the Jewish people. On Balaam’s return to his homeland, the Israelites killed Balaam in battle as punishment, for

¹¹¹ Ibid., Versluys, p. 39. See also Common Dwelling Place of all the Gods: Commagene in its Local, Regional and Global Hellenistic Context, Michael Blömer, et al., eds., Chapter: “Sovereignty and Autonomy in the Hellenistic Coins of Commagene,” by Margherita Facella, (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2021) p. 140. Open access: <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/50601>, accessed March 6, 2024; Brijder, Herman A. G., Nemrud Dag: Recent Archeological Research and Conservation Activities in the Tomb Sanctuary on Mount Nemrud (Boston: Walter de Gruyter Inc., 2014) pp. 71-2.

¹¹² Van Kooten, George. *Matthew, the Parthians, and the Magi: A Contextualization of Matthew’s Gospel in Roman-Parthian Relations of the First Centuries BCE and CE*, Chapter 20, downloaded from Brill.com, p. 617, accessed March 6, 2024. This is an open access chapter distributed under the terms of the CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>. See also Seland, Eivind Heldaas, *Archaeology of Trade in the Western Indian Ocean, 300 BC–AD 700*, *J Archaeol Res* (2014) 22:367–402, DOI 10.1007/s10814-014-9075-7, p. 376. This article is published with open access at Springerlink.com.

¹¹³ See Figure W: Drawing of a copy of Balaam’s inscription, Deir ‘Alla and associated fn.

teaching Balak to entice Jewish people to sacrifice food to idols and commit sexual immorality (Numbers 31:8, 16; Revelation 2:14).

From this, we can conclude that Balaam’s Star prophecy may have only been recorded and retained in Jewish and Moabite (Jordanian) records. This account, however, may have circulated among Moabite and Jewish merchants and rulers in the areas near or traveling to Commagene, including Jews living in Tarsus, Cilicia, where Paul was born. Acts 2:9-10 records Jews living in areas including Mesopotamia, Cappadocia, Asia Minor, and Pontus [Figure 4]¹¹⁴. Matters related to a renown, local magi in Jewish history may have been interesting topics of conversation along well-traveled trade routes in and out of Commagene and throughout the areas near to where Balaam once lived and worked. From Biblical records, we see Balaam’s teachings still circulating by 90 C.E. and influencing Christians living in Pergamum near the eastern coast of modern Turkey, a practice that is reprimanded in Revelation 2:14.



Figure 4: Map of Asia Minor, including Commagene and Mesopotamia, and areas where Jews resided in Acts 2

Commagene and Christianity

While the magi may have traveled into Herod’s territory for both religious and political motives, we might wonder if there is any evidence of Christianity in the archeological remains of Commagene during the first century. First, we must understand that bringing gifts and bowing in worship to a child leader of that horoscopic magnitude was culturally, religiously, and politically appropriate at that time, just as the newly freed subjects of Cyrus “bowed down before him and kissed his feet” (Cyrus Cylinder), and subjects of Roman emperors worshipped sovereign royalty during the first century. We must also remember that the magi would not have understood the full story of Jesus through their encounter with his birth unless they lived to hear the message of Jesus’s resurrection after c. 33 C.E. After their encounter with the Christ child, Matthew records that the magi simply return to their country fearing

¹¹⁴ For more information regarding Jews in surrounding areas, see Michal Marciak’s *Sophene, Gordyene, and Adiabene: Three Regna Minora of Northern Mesopotamia Between East and West*; Photo: “Asia Minor in the Greco-Roman period - general map - regions and main settlements” by Caliniuc since Putzger & Westermann atlases (Atlas zur Weltgeschichte, Stier, H.E., dir., 1985) is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/?ref=openverse>, accessed March 13, 2024.

Herod (2:12), and would likely not have readily shared what they learned in fear of Herod's retaliation. Commagenean rulers were political friendship makers, not friendship breakers.

Historically, we know that Antiochus III died in 17 C.E., sixteen years before Jesus's resurrection, while opening doors for the Roman Empire to temporarily annex Commagene. Too young to rule and possibly an infant, his son Antiochus IV Epiphanes was not raised and educated by his father or the Commagene court, but rather inside Rome until 38 C.E., when Commagene was returned to Antiochus IV. Without a native ruler in power during that time, the magi may not have remained active in their roles and may have lost any concern about a certain king over the Jews that had no political power.

As for the royal Commagene family, they appear to have remained pagan throughout their lineage.¹¹⁵ As an adult with Roman upbringing, Antiochus IV supported Rome against a Jewish uprising in Judea and assisted in the destruction of the Jewish temple in 70 C.E., revealing no connection to a magian report that he deemed significant. Two years later, Commagene was invaded by Rome in 72/73 C.E., yet remained on friendly, if not honorable, terms with the royal Commagene family, taking them into the Empire and allowing them a life of privilege on Roman soil.¹¹⁶ From this, we see that Antiochus IV's political interests and even upbringing aligned with Rome, as did his religious expressions in archeological remains.



Figure 5: St. Peter's cave church, Antioch

As of today, there is little to no evidence of Antiochus III and his father, Mithridates III, aside from a few mentions in history. Could Antiochus III's disappearance have related to his interest in a Jewish King? The mystery remains until more is discovered. His disappearance and that of his father's is likely due to Roman invasions and ongoing battles in the region, including those of the Ottomans and Islamic forces, as well as common flooding in the Euphrates. Frequent flooding and international security issues in the area over the past fifteen years has made further excavation of the area difficult; however, rustic, ancient caves alongside tombs once served as churches in

Commagene.¹¹⁷ To escape persecution, Christians often worshipped in tombs and caves during the first and second centuries until Christianity was legalized in 313 by Roman emperor Constantine. Other churches have been discovered and appear quite early, including St. Peter's cave church in Antioch, Turkey [Figure 5¹¹⁸], that may be the oldest cave church known to date (façade added in 1100 C.E.) and believed to be the first church in Antioch (Acts 11); however, the actual date still remains unclear. Churches flourished after the legalization of Christianity, when we find numerous structures in the area.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Antiochus IV's grandson Philopappos (d. 116) was buried in a monument in Athens alongside Masaeus, a 6th century B.C.E. priestly poet and mystical seer, a tomb also decorated with the statues of Philopappos, Antiochus IV, and Seleucus I Nicator, all alluding to the retained values of both Zorostrians and Hellenized Greeks.

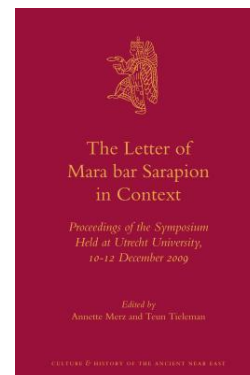
¹¹⁶ Facella, Margherita. "Sovereignty and Autonomy in the Hellenistic Coins of Commagene," *Biblioscout*, <https://biblioscout.net/book/chapter/10.25162/9783515129268/00010>, p. 140, accessed March 12, 2024; Brijder, Herman A. G. *Nemrud Dagi: Recent Archeological Research and Conservation Activities in the Tomb Sanctuary on Mount Nemrud* (Boston: Walter de Gruyter Inc., 2014), pp. 71 – 76.

¹¹⁷ Versluys, p. 17; Comfort, Anthony, et al. "Crossing the Euphrates in Antiquity: Zeugma Seen from Space," *Anatolian Studies*, Vol. 50 (2000), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3643016>, pp. 102-3, accessed March 12, 2024; Comfort, Anthony, and Rifat Ergeç. "Following the Euphrates in Antiquity: North-South Routes around Zeugma," *Anatolian Studies*, Vol. 51 (2001), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3643026>, pp. 19-49, images pp. 29, 32, accessed March 12, 2024.

¹¹⁸ Photo: "Saint Peter's Cave Church, Antioch" by twiga_swala is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/?ref=openverse>, accessed March 14, 2024.

¹¹⁹ Comfort, Anthony. "Fortresses of the Tur Abdin and the confrontation between Rome and Persia," *Anatolian Studies*, Vol. 67 (2017), pp. 181-229.

While we know that the early region overall remained devoted to native mythological worship,¹²⁰ one peculiar piece of evidence points to the possibility that Christians were living in Commagene at the time of Rome’s invasion. The Letter of Mara bar Sarapion,¹²¹ son of Sarapion (76), is a letter¹²² written originally in Syriac,¹²³ an Aramaic language, from a father to his son Sarapion and whose context aligns with the reign of Antiochus IV of Commagene (r. 38–72) but after the Jews had “lost their kingdom” (73). This suggests that the letter is dated sometime after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. and during the time when Vespasian overtook Commagene and assigned it to Syria as a province.¹²⁴ If this is correct, then at the time the letter is written, Antiochus has just escaped Samosata, Commagene’s capital, due to the Roman invasion. Mara, a resident of Commagene and perhaps the king’s friend or in the royal circle, believes that the king has fled to Seleucia, which would have been in Parthia at that time, and joins his friends who have also escaped to Seleucia (76). By the time the letter is written, Mara has been captured (71, 75); however, in accordance with Commagene tradition, he claims to have no enemies among the empires (76).



According to the text, Mara was a well-learned man with a Greek education who valued freedom, education, knowledge, wisdom, and philosophy, yet also valued righteousness, truth, purity, and austerity, while renouncing the values of the world and materialism. He appears to consider himself “chosen” and a “Blessing of God” (70, 73-74). As a true Commagenean, he upholds Achaemenid rulers Darius and Polycrates, as well as Greek mythological heroes Achilles, Agamemnon, Priam, and Palamedes, and Greek scholars Archimedes, Socrates, and Pythagoras (72). Time also appears to be a divine protagonist in life’s story (75), one who offers beauty and love, while robbing Mara of his goals and the life he has yet to live (75-76). At the same time, Mara professes “God” and believes men to have a divine purpose in their lives (73). He believes that evil and the world will one day be destroyed and that holding to righteous and pious living will allow a man to escape that destruction (76).

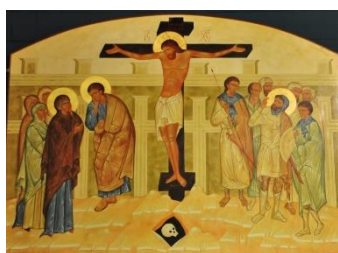


Figure 5.5: Crucifixion icon

In this, Mara speaks of three “Wise Kings” who were killed for their wisdom: Socrates by the Athenians, Pythagoras by the people of Samos, and the “wise king” of the Jews who killed their own king because of “the laws he promulgated” (74) [Figure 5.5¹²⁵], some of which can be found in Matthew 5 as contrasted with traditional Jewish Law. Mara believes that the killing of the “wise king” of the Jews was the divine cause of the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., causing the scattering of Jews from Israel (74), and destruction of their kingdom (73). Mara advocates the

¹²⁰ Comfort, Anthony, and Rifat Ergeç, pp. 29, 32 (images).

¹²¹ While the Mara bar Sarapion was originally found in a 7th century Syriac collection of works, the original document may have been written as early as 72 C.E. when Rome invaded Commagene. English translation can be found in *Spicilegium Syriacum: Containing Remains of Bardesane, Meliton, Ambrose, and Mara bar Sarapion*, Rev. William Cureton, Trans., (London: Francis and John Rivington St. John’s Churchyard and Waterloo Place, 1985), <https://archive.org/details/spicilegiumsyria00cureuoft/page/n5/mode/2up>.

¹²² While most scholars from *The Letter of Mara bar Sarapion* symposium held at Utrecht University treat the Mara bar Sarapion document as an authentic letter, Pokorný offers a weak reason for doubt based on speculation that Mara would have followed the king, rather than staying behind and then searching for him (See Merz and Tieleman, 132). Josephus records that the king, his wife, and his children escape “privately” to Cilicia, suggesting that there was no accompaniment of a royal entourage that might attract attention (Josephus, *War of the Jews*, 7.7) and that Mara and his friends were, in fact, searching for the king, yet appear to be heading in the wrong direction. Pokorný contention that Mara mistakes Pythagoras of Samos the sculptor for the mathematician is simply false, as Pythagoras the mathematician’s schools and followers in Croton were burned alive (See Richard D. McKirahan, *Philosophy before Socrates: An Introduction with Texts and Commentary*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2010), 80). Ramelli contends that the letter is an academic exercise, which is highly unlikely given Mara’s beliefs about Jesus, likely not found in the pagan educational system (See *Mara bar Sarapion: Comments on the Syriac Edition, Translation, and Notes by David Rensberger*, Haria L.E. Ramelli, 210). With no strong indication that the letter lack authenticity, evidence to the alternative is entirely theoretical. Notwithstanding, the evidence reveals a strong possibility that Jesus as the “wise king” of the Jews was known among Commageneans at the time of Antiochus IV and Rome’s invasion of Commagene in 72 C.E. and prior to the destruction of Seleucia in 165 C.E. Cureton notes that there was a Sarapion who “succeeded Maximinus as eighth Bishop of Antioch, about the year 190” (XV); however, there is no indication that the Sarapion of the late second century is the writer, and in fact, may have been the ancestor of Mara, which could further indicate a Christian influence upon Mara’s writings. As the Bible was not yet canonized, nor was church governance solidly formed by this time, it is impossible to critique the level of Mara’s beliefs about Jesus compared to his Hellenized contemporaries. We simply know that Mara believed Jesus to be the true “king of the Jews,” who taught wisdom in his laws and was either alive through a resurrection or through obtaining immortality otherwise. For full discussions on Mara bar Sarapion, see Annette Merz and Teun Tieleman, Eds., *The Letter of Mara bar Sarapion in Context: Proceedings of the Symposium Held at Utrecht University, 10-12, December 2009* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

¹²³ Cureton, xiii.

¹²⁴ Speidel, Michael A., “Making Use of History Beyond the Euphrates: Political Views, Cultural Traditions, and Historical Contexts in the Letter of Mara bar Sarapion,” Annette Merz and Teun Tieleman, Eds., *The Letter of Mara bar Sarapion in Context: Proceedings of the Symposium Held at Utrecht University, 10-12, December 2009* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 29.

¹²⁵ Photo: “Crucifixion icon” by bobosh_t is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/?ref=openverse>.

immortality of each of these men, yet is unclear about his belief in the resurrection of Jesus (74). While Mara clearly states the names of both Greek scholars, he appears to be unaware of Jesus’s name and uses the same reference to Jesus as the magi used, “king of the Jews,”¹²⁶ a title also posted on the cross that Jesus bore by Roman prefect over Judea, Pontius Pilate. Overall, Mara’s letter provides one of the earliest secular pieces of evidence that the “wise king” of the Jews and his teachings were at least known among Commageneans by 72 and is referred to with the same title given to Jesus by the magi.

Whether the magi traveled from Commagene or elsewhere where magi claimed Persian descent and utilized Greek astrology calculations for astrological horoscopes, we can see how Persian, Jewish, and Christian history collided in the sky on the day that Jupiter found its way into Aries the ram, announcing the birth of the long-awaited Messiah, or King of the Jews. And while Christians today rightly treasure the constellation’s representation of the ram, the ram’s reflection of Cyrus, who foreshadowed the saving acts of Christ, may also touch the hearts of Persians today.

Readings for section 12

Spread of Gospel into Iran (Media and Elam), Turkey (Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia Minor, Phrygia, Pamphylia), and Mesopotamia: *Acts 2:1-13 (v.9)*

Why is this important?

Briefly summarize how Commagene is a possible place of origin for the famous magi.

Consider the contributions the Persians have had on Jewish and Christian history. What attitude should we have in sharing our knowledge of Cyrus and the story of other Achaemenid rulers?

13: Challenges to the modern Persian identity

While this discussion cannot possibly cover all the details shaping Persian identity and the struggles that Persians face today, we will touch on some historical elements and recent trends that both explain and express this struggle. First, we must consider the political history of Iran’s territory since the time of the Achaemenid Empire. In line with Daniel’s prophetic vision concerning the ram and the goat (Daniel 8), Persia was lost to Alexander “the Malevolent,” not “the Great” in the minds of Persians. During the reign of Darius III (r. 336–330



Figure 6: Battle between Alexander and Darius III, Battle of Issus 333

¹²⁶ Cureton’s argument that Mara’s failure to mention Jesus by name due to persecution seems somewhat unlikely, given that many could put simple pieces together that he is referring to Jesus and the crucifixion (xiii).

B.C.E.), Alexander gained control over Syria and Judea in 332 and over Persia in 333 [Figure 6]¹²⁷, looting the treasuries of Susa and Persepolis, just as Nebuchadnezzar had looted Jerusalem. Now king over the new Greek Empire, Alexander rolled out a cultural transformation plan, infusing Greek art, archeology, religion, academics, language, literature, cuisine, ideology, and political structure called *Hellenism*, leaving Persian in cultural hybrid of two worlds.



Figure 7: Parthian Empire, 124-91 B.C.E.

As we know from Daniel’s vision and historical records, the Seleucids gained control over Persia under Macedonian general Seleucid I Nicator (r. 305—281) and established the Seleucid Kingdom in 312, a period when Hellenism thrived. The Seleucids reigned until 247 when an unassuming little people group, the Parni, a nomadic tribe from northeastern Iran, slipped into Parthia. At the time, Parthia was an ancient satrapy of the Achaemenid Empire and province of the Seleucid kingdom. As a result, the Parni melded into the culture and rose to power, taking over Parthia and

extending into what became known as the Parthian Empire (227 B.C.E.—224 C.E.) [Figure 8].¹²⁸ It was during the Parthian Empire that Jesus was born, crucified, and resurrected (c. 6 B.C.E.—33 C.E.). We know from Christian history in Acts 2 that Jews from Parthia, Media, Elam, and even Arabia heard the message at Pentecost through Jesus’s follower Peter and that Paul, who learned of Jesus in a vision, continued to spread the message of Jesus into south and western portions of Turkey, western Syria, and northern Arabia, with a strong focus on the Roman Empire rather than Parthia.

On the political side, the Roman Empire battled hard for Parthia until 224 C.E. when Parthia was overthrown by the Sasanians in 224 C.E., an empire strongly influenced by Zoroastrian Magian rulers.¹²⁹ The Sasanians were considered to be “Iranian” in name. Their first ruler Ardashīr I, a petty(?) king from Persis rose to overthrow the Parthians, was crowned ‘king of kings in Iran,” and made Zoroastrianism the state religion.¹³⁰ Throughout the course of their reign, Sasanians revived Iranian art and architecture and incorporated the Pahlavi language, Middle Persian, a language in use toward the end of the Achaemenid Empire, to restore Persian culture.¹³¹ Within the next two hundred years, Christianity [Figure 8]¹³² became a minority religion under the Sasanians under what is known as the “Church in the East,” a schism of the Roman Catholic Church.¹³³

¹²⁷ Photo: “Battle of Issus in 333 BC, between Alexander the Great & Darius III, from House of the Faun, Pompeii; closeup of Alexander on his horse Bucephalus” by Gary Lee Todd, Ph.D. is marked with Public Domain Mark 1.0.

¹²⁸ Photo: “Map of the Parthian Empire under Mithridates II” by Original file by Ro4444, edited by me is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/?ref=openverse>.

¹²⁹ Zouberli, p. 122.

¹³⁰ “Ardashir I: Sāsānian King.” Britannica, February 13, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ardashir-I>, accessed March 1, 2024.

¹³¹ “Sasanian dynasty: Iranian dynasty.” Adam Zeidan, ed., Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sasanian-dynasty>; “Pahlavi language,” Amy McKenna, ed., Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pahlavi-language>, both accessed March 1, 2024.

¹³² Photo: “Gem with Sacrifice of Isaac.” Accession No. 65.1649. Belongs to Sasanian Christian gem group with Sacrifice of Isaac, Iran, MFABoston, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/163784/gem-with-sacrifice-of-isaac?ctx=e076ea60-986f-40ff-8333-460491e86d60&idx=1>, accessed March 6, 2024.

¹³³ The schism resulted from the Council of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451).

The “Church in the East,” founded on the teachings of Nestorianism, contended that Jesus was two persons with two natures: one divine and one human, versus one person with one nature: both divine and human. The complexity of these discussions and divisions reaches far beyond the scope of this discussion; however, there is evidence that Christianity through the Church in the East spread during this time under the favorable leadership of Yazdegerd I (r. 399—420), who helped to establish the official “Iranian Church” and even places for worship. The church continued to grow for the next 100 years into the Sasanian courts and military; however, reactions to Christianity varied among leaders. The spread of Christianity under the Church of the East, the alleged conversions of Sasanian leaders, as well as persecutions are worthy topics for further research and discussion. Nonetheless, the original teachings of the Church were strongly subdued by future events that impacted both Zoroastrianism and Christianity in Iran, as well as Persian national identity.



Figure 8: Sasanian Christian gem with Sacrifice of Isaac, 4th-5th c, Iran

What appears to have been an Iranian-Persian cultural dream and revival lasting 427 years came to a halt in 650 C.E. After the death of Islam’s prophet Mohammad (570—632) in 632 and his conquests of Mecca and most of Arabia, successors rose up out of Arabia and overcame the Sasanians. The cultural tapestry of Iran was forever altered under the newly invading Arabs with their implementation of Islamic Law and persecution of both Zoroastrians and Christians. With controversial historical interpretations, the details surrounding the history of Islam might be better addressed by Persian Muslims with their differing views, and further research is necessary to navigate these events.

Without going into political or religious detail of the long, complex history of Muslim dynasties in Iran, the title “Shah” was introduced in the 1500’s under the Safavid Empire, established by Ismael I (r. 1501-1524) who revived a “Persian Empire,” and established Shi’ism as the state religion thereafter, a reaction to Sunni control until that time. While again there are twists and turns regarding political events that ensued thereafter, the Safavid Empire marks a shift in diplomacy that shaped modern political ideology even among Persians to this day.



Figure 9: Mohammad Reza Pahlavi

The title “Shah” as a Shiite monarchical rulership endured until 1979 when Mohammad Reza Pahlavi [Figure 9]¹³⁴, the final Shah of Iran, was subverted by the Islamic Republic of Iran during the Iranian Revolution (1977—1979). Resulting cultural and political changes are interesting topics of discussion for Persians, especially those who lived at that time. Crowned in Persepolis, Shah Pahlavi presented himself as a revivalist of Achaemenid Persia, a sort of pre-Islamic nationalist identity that brought the people out of Arab control and oppression and revived Iran’s pride and glory. He declared the Cyrus Cylinder an ancient decree of human rights. For many Persians, the Iranian

¹³⁴ Photo: "File: Wandeling naar Koninklijk Paleis. Koningin Juliana en sjah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Bestanddeelnr 910-3802.jpg" by Harry Pot / Anefo is marked with CC0 1.0. To view the terms, visit <https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/deed.en?ref=openverse>, accessed March 13, 2024.

Revolution was a black mark on Iran’s modernization and international respect, and many Persians to this day honor the Cyrus Cylinder in the same manner as Pahlavi, longing for a return to former days.

Pahlavi died in 1980, and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini [i-eh-TO-lah ROO-ho-lah ko-MEH-ni] took power until his death in 1989. The politics changed from pro-western to anti-western Islamic nationalism and ultimately radicalism. Marked as a terrorist country among western states, Iran’s most recent conflicts surrounding the death of Mahsa Amini [Figure 10]¹³⁵ in 2022 and the subsequent protests against Islamic Law imposing women’s head coverings (the *hijab*) are evidence of the government’s brutal treatment of its people, as several executions, imprisonments, and arrests resulted from ongoing protests against the current regime¹³⁶ ruled by Ayatollah Ali Khomeini (1989—present). Modern Persians may vary on their interpretations of this change; however, discussions surrounding the Iranian Revolution could provide opportunities for understanding varying thoughts and perceptions of individual modern Persians about their current political, cultural, and religious state.



Figure 10: Poster of Mahsa Amini

Why is this important?

Discuss why and how Persian political, cultural, and religious identity has been challenged, confused, and even lost over the centuries. How do you think these events have impacted modern Persians?

What questions do you have regarding post-Achaemenid events that you could ask your Persian friend?

In what ways could you transition into discussions regarding your friend’s personal cultural and religious views?

What would it look like for your Persian friend to reclaim his or her religious and cultural Persian identity in light of their biblical heritage?

¹³⁵ Photo: "22-11-26 04 Mahsa Amini Poster" by Felton Davis is licensed under CC BY 2.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/?ref=openverse>, accessed March 13, 2024.

¹³⁶ "Iran Hangs 23-Year-Old in Latest Crackdown on Mahsa Amini Protesters," Arsalan Shahla / Bloomberg, *Time*, January 23, 2024, <https://time.com/6565282/iran-executes-mohammad-ghobadlou-mahsa-amini-protesters/>, accessed March 2, 2024.

14: Persian identity and Christ

While personal Persian identity must be individualized among Persians today, we get a glimpse of some of the most profound political events that have affected and even confused modern Persians struggling with their loss of religious and political identity [Figure 11¹³⁷], with a seemingly grim hope if a new Cyrus ever coming to their rescue. Helping Persians to understand their role in biblical history and the trajectory of Messianic prophecies could help them to identify to Jesus in a way that is neither Jewish nor Christian in culture, or even Roman or American in heritage. Persians can relate to the Messiah in a way no other culture can: No other Gentile culture received such powerful prophecies over their most highly honored ancestral leadership, rescued the Jews from captivity, assisted in the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its temple, or used their pagan ancestral religion to announce the Messiah, spiritual King of the universe (Isaiah 9). Persia clearly has an elevated role in the Bible that calls for honor, admiration, and public knowledge.

Similar to how the Jews of Jesus's day were looking for a physical Jewish nationalist king to save them from the Roman Empire and its physical oppression and persecution, many Persians today are looking for the next Cyrus to rescue them from Islamic extremism. In the same way, even after Jesus had risen from the dead and returned to his followers to teach them about the Kingdom of God for forty days, his followers asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6) And how does Jesus reply? "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (1:7-8). Only when Jesus's followers had received the Holy Spirit did they truly understand that Jesus's kingdom is a spiritual kingdom to restore all things to himself, as ruler over all.



Figure 11: Flag inside map of Iran

To encourage the church in Ephesus, Paul expounds on this concept of a unified spiritual kingdom in heaven and on earth in Ephesians 1:

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace ⁸ that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, ⁹ he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

¹³⁷ Photo: "Flag of Iran in map" by Haideer23 is licensed under CC BY 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/?ref=openverse>, accessed March 13, 2024.

Again, in Romans 8, Paul goes into detail that the freedom Jesus brings is not a physical freedom from a government, but a spiritual freedom from sin and the world, a righteous standing with God through the sacrifice of Jesus, and the secure promise of eternal life. In all this, we can have peace in this life, despite our physical circumstances:

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, ²because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. ³For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. ⁵Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. ⁶The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.

Where then is our identity derived once we understand who Jesus is and why he came? When we understand that Jesus is the lover of our souls and our hearts, then we understand that he is inviting us into an eternal kingdom that has far greater power than anything any man or people could create. In his eternal kingdom, we find our true and everlasting identity and reward. We see in history that whatever man has created is ultimately destroyed, and by whom? Other men. God alone can create a kingdom that lasts forever – never to be changed or destroyed, and bring salvation to every tribe, language, nation, and people (Revelation 7:9).

For more verses on our identity and eternal hope in Christ, see [My Identity in Christ](#) and [Promises of God](#).

Why is this important?

Discuss how we define our identity today. Consider political ways that we define who we are.

Discuss how the way Jesus defines identity is different than how we define identity.

Discuss how Persians might identify with Jesus as the Cyrus they are waiting for. How do the stories of Cyrus and Jesus remind Persians who they are and whose they are?

15: Practice: Questions for discussions

Here are some sample questions to get to know your Persian friend, their background, how they think, what they believe, and their interest in the Bible. If you feel they are not comfortable with a question, just apologize and say, “I’m so sorry. I wasn’t trying to be nosy or insensitive. I genuinely want to get to know you, but we can talk about something else.” Be sure to share about yourself as they share about themselves. It’s a friendly conversation; not an interview. 😊

Personal profile

What does your name mean in Persian? Does your name have any significance?

In Iran, where did you live, grow up, or go to school? Lightly discuss if that location has any biblical or other historical significance.

Take time to find their city on a map and learn more about the current news and history of their city.

Persian history

What is your most and least favorites part of Persia’s history?

If you could change something about Persia’s past, what would you change and why? How would you change it?

How did the invasion of Alexander from Macedonia affect Persian culture? How do you feel about that invasion?

How do you view the Sasanian period? How do you view the Islamic period of Persia’s history? Discuss their feelings about the Iranian Revolution.

Persian identity and feelings

How would you describe your identity as Persian? What does being “Persian” mean to you politically, religiously, culturally, and even personally?

How have the history of Persia and the political conquests affected the identity of Persians?

How would you define the religious identity of Persians today? Political identity?

How has the Iranian revolution affected the thoughts and beliefs of Persians today?

Discuss their personal identity in light of these historical events.

Discuss current trends among women and their roles in society. How have these trends affected you personally?

Religious identity and feelings

Explore any unanswered questions about religious identity or personal beliefs. Discuss Zoroastrianism, Islam, Bahai (another religion in Iran today), Christianity, etc.

When and how did you develop your beliefs (beyond those of your parents, if relevant)?

How do these beliefs affect your daily life, family life, schedule, and rhythms, etc.? How do your beliefs impact your mind, heart, and the way you make decisions?

If your friend is negative about religion, it's understandable, given their history. Explore more about how these feelings have developed, how they grew up, and how their feelings changed over time. Discuss any significant events that impacted them personally.

Feelings about Christianity and the Bible

What has been your experience with Christians or people who follow Jesus? What positive and negative experiences have you had?

Do you have any Christian friends locally, in Iran, or some other places?

What do you believe about Jesus? About the Bible? Do you believe it's true or that it's still reliable?

Introduction to the Bible

Have you ever read the Bible or learned some of its stories from the Old or New Testaments? Discuss the stories and the terms "Old" and "new" Testament. Give a brief overview of the Bible, if necessary.

Did you know that Persian history is found in the Bible? If yes, what stories do you know?

Did you know that Cyrus freed the Jewish people from Babylonian captivity, and that it's one of the most important events in Jewish and Christian history? Give a short background.

Did you know that Cyrus is a major hero and one of God's "anointed" leaders in Jewish history? Discuss the term "anointed" as it relates to Cyrus.

Share what Cyrus did to rescue the Jewish people from captivity and how that relates to what Jesus wants to do for us today spiritually. Ask how that story affects them.

Would you like to get together and read some of these passages in the Bible so you can learn more?

16: Passages of Scripture to read with your friend

As you read passages to your friend, you can reference the sections in this document to help you explain to your friend what they are reading and how these passages reflect what we find in history and archeology. You don't have to read the sections word-for-word, unless you feel more comfortable doing so. If you're able, try to highlight words and keep the reading conversational, but it's okay to use the reference as a guide. Eventually, the conversations will become natural! Here are some questions to ask as you read passages found at the end of most sections. Be sure to share your personal thoughts too! Encourage and honor your friend's Persian leaders as opportunities arise:

Are there any vocabulary words you don't understand? (You can also have them read in Farsi.)

What do you think this passage or verse is saying? What questions do you have?

Ask what they know about these segments of their history. Take time to learn from your friend!

What do you find interesting or significant about this passage or verse?

Discuss the information found in the related sections in this document.

Appendix A: A note about Darius the Mede

While “Darius the Mede,” does not appear in extra-biblical documents the 4th century B.C.E., the Nabonidus Chronicles [Figure 12¹³⁸] records the name of Cyrus’s general who has several similarities to Darius the Mede and may be the same person. In ancient records, name changes and complex transliterations between languages can render completely different names for the same people, but we can look at details surrounding these names to discern if a name change or undistinguishable transliteration has occurred.



Figure 12: Nabonidus Chronicles

According to the Nabonidus Chronicles Ugbaru, also known as Gobryas in other historical documents, is the one who charges unhindered into Babylon, with Cyrus following several days later. While Ugbaru claimed to be an Assyrian-born prince,¹³⁹ he was former governor of Gutium, a Median region near the Zagros Mountains and one which butted Babylonia. Ugbaru had served under Cyaxares, Astyages’s father and Median king who centralized the “Median State,” which during that time enveloped Assyria, a process begun by Cyaxares’ father Phraortes.¹⁴⁰ In the book of Daniel, Daniel distinguishes Darius as “the Mede,” and son of Xerxes, a descendent of Mede (9:1). If this is the case, then Darius’s mother was Assyrian royalty who had married a Mede, likely for political reasons. This marriage and political situation would explain how Ugbaru, both a royal Assyrian and Mede, historically rose to power as governor in the Median State and became commander under Cyrus.

Within the rank and responsibilities of Ugbaru, we see similarities to Darius the Mede in Daniel. Upon Cyrus’s conquest of Babylon, Cyrus divides the entire Persian Empire into twenty satrapies, or regions ruled by satraps and assigns Ugbaru the role of satrap of Babylon,¹⁴¹ also called Cyrus’s “district officer” in the Nabonidus Chronicles.¹⁴² According to Farazmand in his paper on the public administration of Persia, there were five levels of governance under Cyrus. “Supreme” satraps directly reported to Cyrus and governed large territories that could have included smaller monarchies. In this way, any title of “king,” i.e. King Darius (the Mede) was likely that of a “petty king” and would have in no way suggested equality with Cyrus of Persia, but simply an indication of title over a given territory. As former “prince” of Assyria, we might assume that he was granted the opportunity to retain a regal title for his territory, given Cyrus inclination to honor the traditions of his captives, as well as the primary role that Ugbaru played as Cyrus’s commander and being first to invade Babylon. In addition, Xenophon records that Ugbaru (here called Gobryus) sealed Media’s relationship with Cyrus by giving his daughter in marriage to the Persian king, connecting himself to Persian royalty.¹⁴³ With Cyrus’s acceptance, Ugbaru may have maintained his royal title as prince and now petty king over one of twenty satrapies in Persia.

¹³⁸ Photo: Nabonidus Chronicles, “Nabonidus’s faults and absences were recorded alongside events of his reign. By the autumn of 539 BCE, Babylon had surrendered to the army of king Cyrus to become part of the growing Achaemenid Empire. From Babylon, Iraq, 530-400 BCE” by Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin FRCP(Glasg) is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/?ref=openverse>, accessed March 13, 2024.

¹³⁹ Xenophon, *Cyropedia*, The Project Gutenberg eBook of Cyropaedia, F. M. Stawell, ed., Henry Graham Dakyns, trans., August 9, 2011, 4.C.6., 5.C.1.6-20, C.2.2-14, C.3.1, <https://gutenberg.org/files/2085/2085-h/2085-h.htm>, Accessed February 16, 2024.

¹⁴⁰ Farazmand, Ali. “Administrative Legacies of the Persian World-State Empire: Implications for Modern Public Administration, Part 1,” *Public Administration Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 3/4, 2002, p. 290. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41288175>, Accessed 16 Feb. 2024. See also Herodotus 1948:83-84.

¹⁴¹ Farazmand agrees that Ugbaru (Gobryas) was satrap (312).

¹⁴² “ABC 7 (Nabonidus Chronicle),” *Livius.org*, A.K. Grayson, transl. with recent edits, July 14, 2020, iii.20, <https://www.livius.org/sources/content/mesopotamian-chronicles-content/abc-7-nabonidus-chronicle/>, Accessed February 16, 2024.

¹⁴³ Xenophon, *Cyropedia*, C.6.9-10.

Satrap were divided into sub-satrap and provinces as well with their own sub-satrap and governors.¹⁴⁴ In the same way that Darius the Mede, “ruler over the Babylonian kingdom” (Daniel 9:1), assigns satrap throughout Babylon in Daniel 6:1, Ugbaru, assigned district officers throughout Babylon, according to the Nabonidus Chronicles.¹⁴⁵ Similarities are also found in the lengths of their reign. Ugbaru is recorded to have died within his first year of reign,¹⁴⁶ while a second year of reign for Darius the Mede is never mentioned in the book of Daniel. For this reason, discovering extra-biblical records of the name “Darius the Mede” may also be difficult, as his reign was quite short. Little information regarding Ugbaru exists, the Nabonidus Chronicles being the sole circulating primary source of his existence. Whatever the nomenclature or rank, the writer of Daniel was sure to distinguish Darius as “the Mede” from the later successor of Cyrus, Darius I, the Persian, when he says, “So Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius [the Mede] and the reign of Cyrus the Persian” (6:28).

Why is this important?

A Persian might question the name “Darius the Mede” as an authentic name of an ancient Persian king. How might you handle this objection?

¹⁴⁴ Farazmand, Ali, 307-8.

¹⁴⁵ “ABC 7 (Nabonidus Chronicle).”

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, iii.22.

Appendix B: A note about Esther and Xerxes



Figure 13: Esther and Mordecai's tomb, Hamadan

The story of Esther and Xerxes presents several complications in discussions about Jewish and Persian history. While its canonization into the Jewish Bible was approved and documented in the Babylonian Talmud (see *Megilla*), it was done so at a later date and was not included in the Dead Sea Scrolls, although not an indication necessarily of its lack of earlier acceptance. While the historical validity of Esther's reign does not appear to be an issue among Jews or Christians, both groups historically debated over the divine nature of the text, given the absent mention of God, as well as Xerxes' involvement in harems, his pagan beliefs, and his historically documented sacrifice of children to pagan gods.

From a Persian and secular historical perspective, conflicts arise between Jewish history of Esther and Vashti and the Greek records of Herodotus and Xenophon, who assign Amestris as the only queen reigning until Xerxes' death. On the other hand, the name "Mordecai" does seem to appear as transliterated into the Babylonian / Akkadian name Marduka (with alternative spellings, i.e. Mar-du-uk-ka) in both the Persepolis Fortification and Treasury Tablets,¹⁴⁷ assigning him significant administrative roles, yet under a governor without evidence of his ever attaining the royal title of "second-in-command" (Esther 10:3).

To note, little is known about Xerxes and his reign, aside from coins, treasury records, reliefs, seals, artifacts, and a few inscriptions. His palace was destroyed during the reign of Artaxerxes I, making historical validation on either side a difficult quest. To complicate matters, the Septuagint translates Xerxes as Artaxerxes, as does Josephus in his rendition of Esther and Mordecai,¹⁴⁸ with Artaxerxes II offering another possibility and expanding potential marital relations. A full discussion of Esther reaches beyond the scope of this discussion, but should questions come up regarding its historicity, it's important to acknowledge the differences in historical perspective (Greek vs. Jewish), the varying translations of "Ahasuerus," and the limited Persian records of Xerxes's reign. Such limitations leave much room for discovery.

If your friend is interested in Esther's history, then you can read the book of Esther together and watch the clean, exciting, and romantic movie portraying Esther and Xerxes: *One Night with the King*. Should your friend have additional historical records regarding Xerxes reign, please send them to us through our [Connect the Nations](#) website. For a balanced view of the historicity of the book of Esther, read Carey A. Moore's *Archaeology and the Book of Esther*.¹⁴⁹ Esther and Mordecai's alleged tomb can also be viewed in Hamadan, Iran [Figure 13¹⁵⁰].

¹⁴⁷ See Cameron, George G. *Persepolis Treasury Tablets*, Thomas George Allen, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948) <https://isac.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/uploads/shared/docs/oip65.pdf>, p. 84, accessed March 15, 2024.

¹⁴⁸ Josephus, "The Antiquities of the Jews," XI.6."

¹⁴⁹ Moore, Carey A. "Archaeology and the Book of Esther," *The Biblical Archaeologist*, Vol. 38, No. 3/4 (Sep.-Dec., 1975), pp. 62-79, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3209587>, accessed March 14, 2024.

¹⁵⁰ Photo: "Tomb of Esther and Mordecai - Hamadan - Western Iran - 02" by Adam Jones, Ph.D. - Global Photo Archive is licensed under CC BY 2.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>, accessed March 13, 2024.

Appendix C: Timeline

B.C.E.	
6000-600	Zoroaster, leader of Zoroastrianism is born (no concrete evidence of his birth exists; however, Zoroastrianism is most evident in the sixth century)
2000-1900	Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lives
1500	Moses and prophet Balaam live
1100	Nebuchadnezzar I, first King of Babylonia, captures Elam
800-600	Median Empire is formed
669-631	Ashurbanipal, King of Assyria, reigns
650-570	Prophet Jeremiah lives
648	Ashurbanipal of Assyria conquers Babylon
626-605	Nabopolassar, King of Neo-Babylon, reigns
625-585	Cyaxares, King of Media and grandfather of Cyrus the Great, reigns
612	Media and Neo-Babylon conquer the Assyrians
605-562	Nebuchadnezzar II reigns over Babylon
605	Jehoiakim begins his reign over Judah; Jeremiah predicts the full destruction of Jerusalem
598	Nebuchadnezzar II captures Jehoiakim, King of Judah
597	Nebuchadnezzar seizes Jehoiachin, King of Judah, and Jerusalem; King Zedekiah becomes King of Judah; Jeremiah prophesizes that Nebuchadnezzar will destroy Jerusalem and that the Jewish people will serve the “King of Babylon” for 70 years
586	Nebuchadnezzar destroys Jerusalem and the Jewish temple
559-530	King Cyrus the Great reigns
556-539	Nabonidus reigns
550	Cyrus conquers Media, ruled by Astyages
550-330	Dates of Persian Kingdom
539	Cyrus conquers Babylon ruled by Nabonidus and writes Cyrus Cylinder
522-486	Darius I, King of Persia, reigns
516	Jews completely restore Jewish temple
509-494	Persepolis Fortification Tablets record Persian treasury records
509-27	Dates of Roman Republic
486-465	Xerxes, King of Persia, reigns
484-425	Greek historian Herodotus lives
465-425	Artaxerxes, King of Persia, reigns
465-424	Jewish teacher Ezra lives, book of Ezra is written
445-444	Jews repair Jerusalem’s city walls
445	Jewish leader Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem
356-323	Alexander of Macedon lives
336-330	Darius III, King of Persia, reigns
333	Alexander gains control over Persia
332	Alexander gains control over Syria and Judea
312	Seleucid Kingdom is established by Seleucid I Nicator

312-64	Dates of Seleucid Kingdom
247 B.C.E.-224 C.E.	Dates of Parthian Kingdom
175-164	Antiochus IV, Seleucid king, reigns
70-31	Antiochus I of Commagene reigns
12 B.C.E.-17 C.E.	Antiochus III of Commagene reigns
6-4	Jesus is born
4	Herod, King of Judea, dies

C.E.	
17	Antiochus III (Commagene) dies; Commagene is temporarily annexed by the Roman Empire
37-100	Jewish historian Josephus lives
72	Commagene is conquered permanently by the Roman Empire
150	Ptolemy wrote his work <i>Tetrabiblos</i>
224 -651	Dates of Sasanian (Iranian) Empire
399—420	Reign of Yazdegerd I, helped to establish the official "Iranian Church"
570—632	Mohammad, founder of Islam, lives
650	Mohammad's successors conquer the Sasanians
1501-1736	Dates of Islamic Safavid Empire; concept of "Shah" is introduced
1501-1524	Ismael I's reigns as first Shah of the Safavid Empire
1941-1979	Mohammad Reza Pahlavi reigns as Shah of Iran
1977-1979	Iranian Revolution: Islamic Republic of Iran fights to overthrow Shah
1979	Islamic Republic of Iran is established; new leaders are called "Ayatollah Khomeini"
1979-1989	Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini reigns
1989	Ayatollah Ali Khomeini begins his reign
2022	Mahsa Amini dies

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