

Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther Introduction

By Henry Clay

1. The Persian Empire

The whole post exilic period was dominated by the supremacy of the Persian Empire. This is the back drop for Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

Characteristics of the Persian Empire

1. **Practiced resettlement** of the exiled peoples in the hopes of winning their allegiance and the favor of their gods.
2. Established a network of **good roads** radiating from Susa and Persepolis. The most famous was the Royal Road that went from Iran to Asia Minor. It was 1,700 miles long from Sardis to Susa and took about 90 days for ordinary travelers covering about 19 miles a day. But royal couriers could cover the same distance in a week, covering 243 miles a day by changing horses.
3. Established the world's first **postal service** under Darius I. Greek historian Herodotus commented on its efficiency.

"It is said that as many days as there are in the whole journey, so many are the men and horses that stand along the road, each horse and man at the interval of a day's journey; and these are stayed neither by snow nor rain nor heat nor darkness from accomplishing their appointed course with all speed." Herodotus, The Histories 8.98

(origin of motto engraved on the U.S. Post Office building in New York City)

4. Even the Persian monarch was **under the law**, and could not do whatever he wanted.
5. Many of the kings were followers of **Zoroastrianism**, an ethical religion with monotheistic tendencies.
6. Developed and promoted the concept of **absolute kingship** with all the trappings, which was later imitated by Alexander the Great and the Roman Caesars. The Persian monarch was called the "King of kings" but was not considered a god.
7. First established by Cyrus the Great in 550 BC when he defeated the Medes. It reached its peak under Darius I and Xerxes I when it was not able

to defeat Greece.

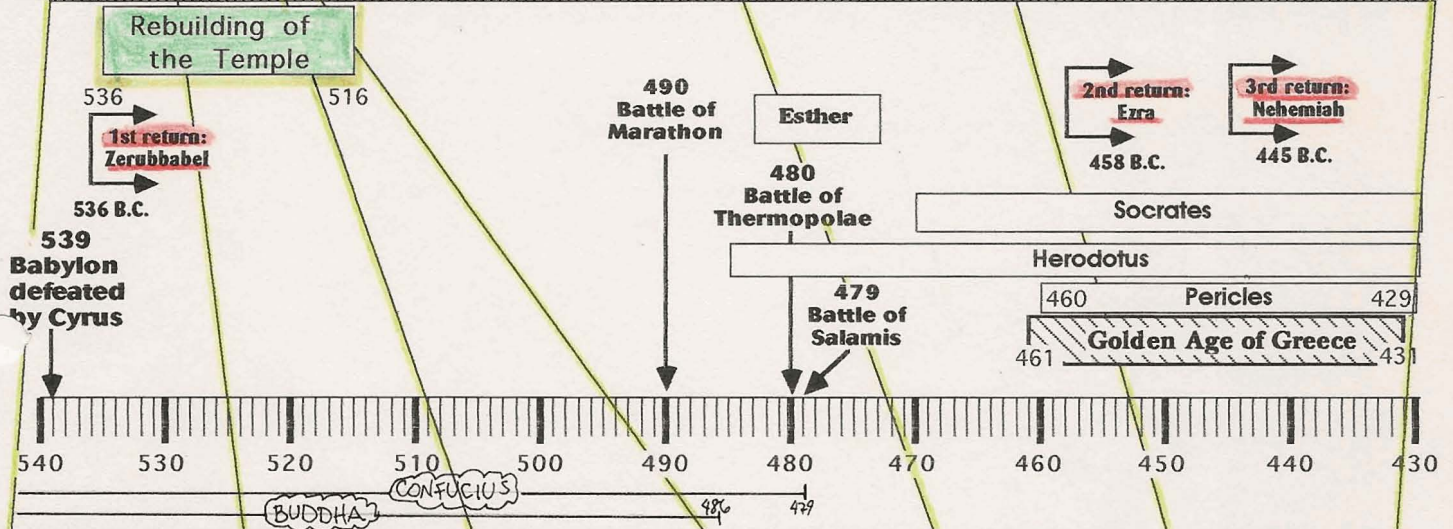
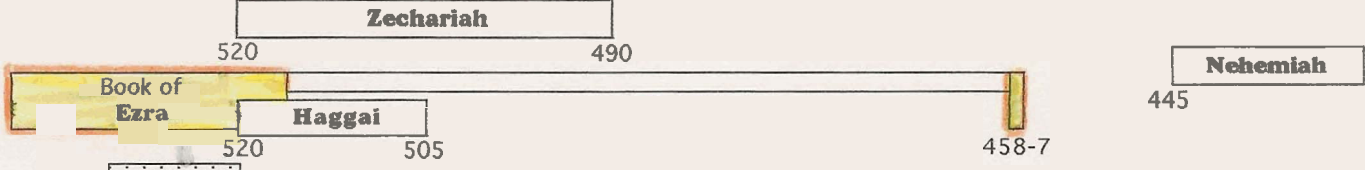
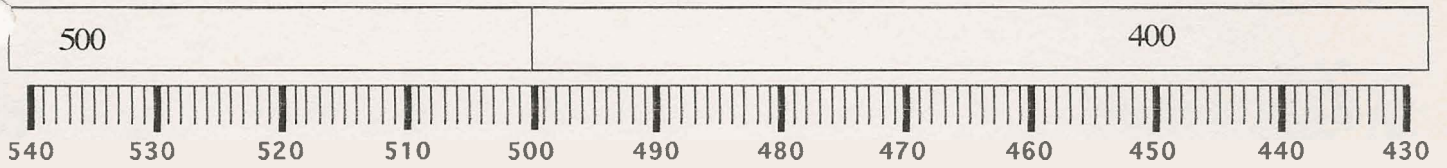
It lasted in all for over two centuries until Alexander the Great destroyed it.

8. **Military prowess** was a key reason for their success. They had a warrior aristocracy who were very loyal. They built the world's first great navy. They switched from chariots to cavalry.
9. They were very skilled at **administration** and organization. Darius organized the empire into satraps. For the first time taxes could be paid with a stable official coinage: the gold daric and the silver shekel.
10. The empire had a common language for commerce and administration: **Aramaic**, a Semitic language related to Hebrew. It became the most common language of western Asia for over a thousand years.

2. King Xerxes

1. **His name.** *Xerxes* is from the Greek. His name in Hebrew was *Ahasueras*.
2. **His reign.** He was king from 485 – 465 B.C. In the end he was assassinated by the captain of the bodyguard in a palace plot to take over the throne.
3. **His main battle.** Against Greece. His father had lost a battle at Marathon. Xerxes was defeated in the battles of Salamis and Platea.
4. **Crossing the Hellespont** (Herodotus, The Histories 7:34-35) To this headland, then, they built the bridge, those who were instructed to do so, the Phoenicians making the one bridge of white flax, the Egyptians the other, of papyrus. But when the strait had been bridged, there came a great storm upon it and smashed it and broke it all to pieces.
“On learning this, Xerxes was furious and bade his men lay 300 lashes on the Hellespont and lower into the sea a yoke of fetters. ...and he ordered the beheading of the supervisors of the building of the bridge.”
5. **Dealing with Pythius.** He was a wealthy man in Asia Minor who gained Xerxes' favor by feeding the entire army and offering all his wealth for the campaign. But later when he asks the king to spare his oldest son from the danger of military service in the war, Xerxes has the son cut in two and had the army march between the two pieces. “Vile creature, I am myself marching to Greece, and with me are my children, and you dare speak of your son – you who are my slave, who ought, with all who live in your house, to follow in my train? ... You and four of your sons will be protected by the hospitality you showed me, but for this one son of yours, for whom you care so greatly – your request will cost him his life.” (From Herodotus, The Histories 7:38-40)

Timeline for Ezra



Cyrus	Cambyses	Smerdis	Darius I	Xerxes	Artaxerxes I
29 years	8 years	1 year	35 years	21 years	40 years
Leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua			Prophetic Ministry of Haggai and Zechariah	Esther	Ezra Nehemiah
Begin rebuilding Temple	The work stopped for 15 years		Finish rebuilding Temple	Battles of Thermoplae, Salamis and Platea	REBUILDING THE WALLS
Ezra 1-4:5			Battle of Marathon		
			Peak of Persian Empire		
Period covered by Herodotus in "The Histories"					