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Kings of Babylon, Media, and Persia in the Bible

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Last updated:
26-Mar-2018 at 18:32
(See [History](#).)
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1. Introduction

Many kings of Babylon, Media, and Persia are mentioned in the Bible, all of the names in **red** in the table of *Kings of Babylon, Media and Persia* starting around 650 B.C. in the [main chart](#). Most of these can be positively identified in extra-biblical sources, usually under the name given in the Bible, or under one which is clearly the same name with various phonetic modifications due to the languages used. For example, **Nebuchadnezzar** in the Hebrew Bible (נְבוּכַדְנֶצַּר נֶּ, *ḡuḡadneš'šar*) is *Nabû-kudurri-ušur* in the original Akkadian language;¹ **Evil-Merodach** is *Amel-Marduk*, etc. In these cases I give the second form in black in parentheses. The names found in the Bible are always in **red**. If a king is not mentioned in the Bible, his name will be in black. (I also include many of the kings of the last Assyrian dynasty earlier in the chart, and the same format applies to them.) Generally the years of each king's rule are known from extra-biblical sources, and these match the sequence of events given in the Bible quite well.

In two cases the name in the Bible is completely different from the one found in extra-Biblical sources, [Cambyses II](#) as “**Ahasuerus/Xerxes**” in Ezra 4:6 and [Gaumata/Pseudo-Smerdis](#) as “**Artaxerxes**” in Ezra 4:7-23 and 6:14, but given their chronology in relation to the other kings and to datable events there is really no doubt. In these cases it is the biblical name that is given in parentheses.

There is some uncertainty about whether “**Darius the Persian**” in Nehemiah 12:22 is Darius II or Darius III, but otherwise all of the Babylonian or Persian kings mentioned in the Bible can be identified with a fair amount of certainty except for **Darius the Mede** as discussed below.

Actually it seems that several of these names, e.g. **Ahasuerus/Xerxes** and **Artaxerxes**, and perhaps also **Darius**, were probably more titles than distinguishing names, as is suggested by the biblical use of all three of these names in the Bible before the supposed first use of them in the extra-biblical sources, the first two as mentioned above and the third discussed below.

The regnal numbers shown in the chart, as in Artaxerxes I, Artaxerxes II, etc., are never found in the Bible or in extra-biblical sources, but are simply the numbers used by modern historians to keep track of them.

2. Darius the Mede

In the book of Daniel a king named **Darius the Mede** is mentioned, in 5:31 and 11:1, called “**Darius** the son of **Ahasuerus**, by descent a **Mede**” in 9:1, and simply called **Darius** throughout chapter 6. However, unlike all of the other Babylonian or Persian rulers mentioned in Daniel (**Nebuchadnezzar**, **Belshazzar**, and **Cyrus**) or in the rest of the Bible, no such king can be identified with that name in extra-biblical sources.

Now of course there are three well-known kings named Darius in Persian history, as shown in the table, two of whom are mentioned in other books of the Bible, but all of these reigned *after* Cyrus, not before, so they are distinct from the **Darius** in Daniel. And what complicates the question even more is that extra-biblical sources indicate that it was Cyrus who overthrew Belshazzar, leaving no room for Darius the Mede in between the two.

Before I saw the need to write this article in April 2017 I had mainly followed F. LaGard Smith's [The Narrated Bible](#) on this question, as I have in most of my chronology. He gives the reigning years of Darius the Mede as 542 to 539, and states: "Darius the Mede will have control of the nation for about three years before he sees his own writing on the wall, as it were, and virtually hands Babylonia over to the ascending Persian Empire." I had long assumed that he had some evidence for this, but I recently did an extensive search to find out what he based this statement on, and I can find nothing about any three-year period or about the details of a handover to Cyrus, either in or outside of the Bible. (I wrote to him in November 2017 and asked him about this, and he graciously replied that after 35 years he cannot remember, and no longer has his original notes.)

The [Wikipedia article](#) suggests 6 possibilities for who **Darius the Mede** might have been, but only 3 are possibilities if we accept the reliability of the Bible:

1. Gubaru (Gobryas). According to J. C. Whitcomb in the [Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible](#), "It seems quite probable that Darius the Mede was another name for Gubaru, the governor under Cyrus who appointed sub-governors in Babylonia immediately after its conquest ("Nabonidus Chronicle," ANET, 306; cf. Daniel 6:1). This same Gubaru (not to be confused with Ugbaru, governor of Gutium, the general under Cyrus who conquered Babylon and died three weeks later, according to the *Nabonidus Chronicle*) is frequently mentioned in cuneiform documents during the following fourteen years as "Governor of Babylon and the Region Beyond the River" (i.e., the entire Fertile Crescent). Gubaru thus ruled over the vast and populous territories of Babylonia, Syria, Phoenicia, and Palestine..." He also says, "Darius the Mede was born in the year 601/600, for at the fall of Babylon in 539 he was sixty-two (Dan. 5:31)." (Complete text of this article also available [here](#), though without proper attribution.) There is also a Wikipedia article about more than one Gubaru under the Greek name [Gobryas](#), but it does not clearly distinguish the two men discussed in the Zondervan article. It also suggests that Gubaru and Cyaxares II might be the same person.

2. [Cyaxares II](#). According to a [doctoral dissertation upholding this view](#), "The view that Darius the Mede is the man identified by Xenophon as Cyaxares II was once the dominant view among commentators on the book of Daniel, but was virtually abandoned after Akkadian inscriptions that supported Herodotus were discovered in the late nineteenth century. There is more extra-biblical evidence in support of the identification of Darius the Mede with Cyaxares II than the attention currently given to this thesis would suggest". It also says, "The thesis of this dissertation is that Cyrus shared power with a Median king until about two years after the fall of Babylon. This king is called Cyaxares (II) by the Greek historian Xenophon, but is known by his throne name Darius in the book of Daniel. Cyrus did not make a hostile conquest of Media, did not dethrone the last Median king, and did not become the highest regent in the Medo-Persian Empire until after the fall of Babylon. Xenophon's detailed account agrees remarkably well with the book of Daniel, and can claim surprising support from a number of other ancient sources." However, he still puts the fall of Babylon at 539, not 542. The same author gives further information [here](#).

3. Another name for [Cyrus the Great](#) himself! A surprising number of conservative, Bible-believing sources hold this position, including George Law's 277-page work [Identification of Darius the Mede](#) (see in particular pages 168 and [171](#)), Sydney Greidanus's [Preaching Christ from Daniel: Foundations for Expository Sermons](#) (see bottom of page 169 and footnote 79), and [this page](#). The idea is that Daniel 6:28, which reads "So this Daniel prospered in the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian", should actually be read "So this Daniel prospered in the reign of Darius, *that is*, in the reign of Cyrus the Persian," a usage of what is called the "*wāw* explicativum", one of the common uses of the Hebrew prefix ׀ (this letter is named *wāw*), whose basic meaning is "and". (See the texts cited for a full explanation of this idea.) One surprising evidence for this theory is that Cyrus was born around 598-600 B.C., so he was right around 62 years old when he conquered Babylon in 539, the age given for Darius in Daniel 5:31.

All three of these positions place the conquest of Babylon by the Medes or Persians in 539, so again no support of Smith's timeline. (Smith suggests that Gubaru is the best candidate, but disagrees with Whitcomb's chronology.) And 1 and 3 have both Darius and Cyrus beginning their rule in 539. For this reason I have changed my timeline accordingly. As to which position I prefer, I really couldn't say, though I perhaps find number 3 the most convincing and number 2 the least convincing (in spite of the fact that I had considered it the most convincing before!).² In any case, I have still kept Darius and Cyrus separate because I am not sure, and the first two are certainly possibilities.

3. Ahasuerus/Xerxes

Another king's name that is a bit confusing in the Bible is **Ahasuerus**, in some translations **Xerxes** (the Wikipedia article on [Ahasuerus](#) lists "[NIV](#), The Message, [NLT](#), [CEV](#), [NCV](#), [NIRV](#), [TNIV](#), etc."). The names Ahasuerus and Xerxes are actually the same name, not two names for the same king. The former is Hebrew from the Bible and the latter the usual Greek form (though not the one used in the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament). They are both derived from the Old Persian *Xšayārša*, as the Wikipedia article shows. The following chart shows how the original name evolved into these two amazingly dissimilar forms, mostly following the data in the Wikipedia articles on [Ahasuerus](#) and [Xerxes I](#):

Ahasuerus

Xerxes

Language	Spelling	Transliteration	IPA pronunciation
Old Persian	𐎧𐎡𐎴𐎠𐎿𐎡𐎴𐎠𐎿	Xšayārša	xʃaja:rʃa
Babylonian (Akkadian)		Achshiyarshu	axʃijarʃu
Hebrew	אֲחַשְׁוֵרֶשׁ	ʾAḥašwēʾrōš	ʔaħaʃwe:ˈro:ʃ
Greek (Septuagint)	Ἀσουήρος	Asouēros	asuˈe:ɾos
Latin (from Hebrew)	Ahasuerus	Ahasuērus	ahasuˈe:ɾos
English	Ahasuerus	/əhəz̩hōðârəs/ /əhəz̩yoðîrəs/ (guide)	əˌhæzjuˈeɪəs (American) əˌhæzjuˈeɪəs (British)
Latin (Vulgate, from Greek)	Assuerus	Assuērus	assuˈe:ɾos
Spanish	Asuero		aˈswero

Meaning
[“ruling over heroes”](#)

Language	Spelling	Transliteration	IPA pronunciation
Old Persian	𐎧𐎡𐎴𐎠𐎿𐎡𐎴𐎠𐎿	Xšayārša	xʃaja:rʃa
Greek	Ξέρξης	Xérxēs	ˈksɛrkse:s
Latin	Xerxes	Xerxēs	ˈksɛrkse:s
English	Xerxes	/zûrksēz/ (guide)	ˈzɜːkˌsɪz (American) ˈzɜːkˌsɪːz (British)
Spanish	Jerjes		ˈxerxes

If we follow along at each stage in the process in the two columns, we can see that the changes in sound are gradual and understandable, but the end results are surprisingly different. (Actually the jump from Old Persian to Greek in the table on the right is perhaps the least transparent of the changes.) This is typical of sound changes in languages: the end result is often so different that it seems impossible that two words came from the same original word. For example, archaic English “thou” and Spanish “tú”, both meaning “you (singular)”, both had the same origin, the Indo-European word “tū”, but without understanding the intervening sound changes it seems like they have nothing in common.

This name is apparently used to refer to three different individuals in the Old Testament, given here in chronological order:

- 1) The father of **Darius** the **Mede** in Daniel 9:1. See the section on **Darius** above.
- 2) [Cambyses II](#) of Persia, son of **Cyrus** the Great, in Ezra 4:6, as discussed in the introduction above.
- 3) [Xerxes I](#) of Persia throughout the book of [Esther](#). (Oddly, the Septuagint calls him Ἀρταξέρξης Artaxerxes throughout the book of Esther, where the Hebrew always has **Ahasuerus**; the Greek only uses Ἀσουήρος in Daniel 9:1 and Ezra 4:6. However, as the above table shows, the Hebrew name **Ahasuerus** corresponds to the Greek name Xerxes, both being derived from Old Persian Xšayārša, not to Artaxerxes, which is a completely different name. See the next section for more on Artaxerxes.)

4. Artaxerxes

This name, though it looks like it contains the name Xerxes, is actually a completely different name in Old Persian, with a different etymology, according to the Wikipedia article on [Artaxerxes I of Persia](#). Its history is much simpler than that of Ahasuerus/Xerxes shown above, though its later Greek form, from which all subsequent forms were derived, was influenced by the name Xerxes according to the [Jewish Encyclopedia](#):

Language	Spelling	Transliteration	IPA pronunciation
Old Persian	𐎠𐎵𐎲𐎠𐎧𐎡𐎴𐎠𐎿	Artaxšaça	artaxʃaθra
Hebrew	אַרְתַּחְשֵׁטֶשׁ	ʾartaḥʾšastəʾ	ʔartaħˈʃast(əʔ)
Aramaic	אַרְתַּחְשֵׁטֶשׁ	ʾartaḥʾšaštāʾ	ʔartaħˈʃaʃt(ʔ)
Greek (early form)	Ἀρταξήσης	Artaxéssēs	artaˈkse:sse:s
Greek (later form)	Ἀρταξέρξης	Artaxérxēs	artaˈksɛrkse:s
Latin	Artaxerxes	Artaxerxēs	artaˈksɛrkse:s
English	Artaxerxes	/ärtəzûrksēz/	ˌɑrtəˈzɜːkˌsɪz (American)

Meaning
[“whose rule \(xšaça < *xšaθram\) is through arta \(truth\)”](#) or [“he whose empire is perfected”](#)
 ← Ezra 7:1-12, 8:1, Nehemiah 2:1, 5:14, 13:6
 ← Ezra 4:7-23, 6:14, 7:13-26

		(guide)	.a:tʰə'zɜ:k si:z (British)
Spanish	Artajerjes		arta'xerxes

This name is apparently used to refer to two kings in the Old Testament, given here in chronological order:

- 1) [Gaumata \(Pseudo-Smerdis\)](#) the usurper in Ezra 4:7-23, 6:14. This is the view of Smith and [various others](#), and fits the time frame of the events in 522, when he ruled. The events in Ezra 4 occurred more than 60 years before the events in Ezra 7, during the construction of the temple, which was completed in 515, during the reign of **Darius I**, so this **Artaxerxes** could not be the **Artaxerxes** of Ezra 7, but instead must be **Darius'** predecessor.
- 2) [Artaxerxes I \(Longimanus\)](#) of Persia, son of **Xerxes I**, in Ezra 7:1-8:1 and Nehemiah 2:1, 5:14, 13:6.

¹ This is Ναβουχοδονοσορ ([nabuxodonosor]) in Greek, from which the Spanish *Nabucodonosor* is derived.

² One thing that makes this less likely is that his father is called **Ahasuerus/Xerxes** in Daniel 9:1, whereas Cyrus's ancestry is fairly well known, and does not seem to include any ancestor named Ahasuerus/Xerxes. Even so, this does not absolutely rule him out, since this name may in some cases have been used as a title, as discussed in the introduction above.