



Dating to the
8th cent. B.C.,
Zoroastrian
fire temple still
being excavated.
Zoroastrianism
was the religion
of the Medes in
the region that is
now Iran.

Who Were the Medes?

By Bryan E. Beyer

THE PROPHET DANIEL wrote of Darius the Mede as though the king and his people's identity were common knowledge (Dan. 5:31). But now, over 2,500 years later, we need to ask who the Medes were. The earliest reference to the Medes places them in northern to western Iran in the ninth century B.C. The Medes largely shaped the region of modern Kurdistan, which includes parts of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. Ancient historians referred to these areas as Media.

Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, identified Japheth's son, Madai, as the forefather of the Medes.¹ The earliest reference to the Medes, though, dates to 836 B.C. and is in a text from Assyria's King Shalmaneser III (858-824 B.C.). History shows that Assyria dominated the apparently feisty Medes through the first half of the seventh century B.C. The Assyrian kings Shalmaneser III, Tiglath-pileser

III, Sargon II, Esarhaddon, and Ashurbanipal all received tribute from the Medes.²

An Expanding Empire

The Medes made their first strides toward independence late in the eighth century B.C. They revolted against Assyrian domination and appointed Deioces as their first king (704-647 B.C.). Deioces, who served essentially as a tribal chief, had a strong reputation for rendering fair judgments in civil and criminal disputes. Although he built an impressive capital at Ecbatana (in the Zagros Mountains, south of the Caspian Sea), the "empire" over which Deioces ruled was relatively modest in size and influence.³

Phraortes, the son of Deioces, was the second king of the Medes (647-625 B.C.). He expanded the empire geographically and reportedly conquered the Persians. Phraortes, along with his son, Cyaxares, led the Medes to gain complete independence from Assyria by siding militarily with the Babylonians in the latter half of the seventh century B.C. However, Phraortes

was killed during warfare with the Assyrians.

Cyaxares was the third and most powerful Median king (625-585 B.C.). He reorganized the army and expanded the empire to its greatest size and influence. He subdued an invasion against the Medes by the Scythians, and in 614 B.C. he took Ashur, which was considered the religious (as opposed to political) capital of Assyria. Cyaxares allied himself with the Babylonian leader Nabopolassar, and together they overthrew Assyria's capital city, Nineveh, in 612 B.C.⁴ The Medes and Babylonians continued their assault on Assyria. In 609 B.C. the coalition summarily defeated the Assyrian army at Haran and thus destroyed the once mighty Assyrian Empire.

The relationship between the Babylonians and Medes remained stable through the marriage of Nabopolassar's son Nebuchadnezzar and Cyaxares's daughter Amuhia.⁵ Because

LESSON REFERENCE

BSFL: Daniel 5

of this stability, the Median Empire maintained rule over most of the northern areas identified with Assyria, Armenia, Cappadocia, and modern Iran; the Babylonians kept authority over all the territory of southern Mesopotamia, Syria, and Israel. Cyaxares continued expanding the Median Empire westward toward the Lydian Empire, which covers modern western Turkey. This expansion also ended in a peace treaty through the marriage of Cyaxares's son Astyages, with the Lydian king's daughter, Aryenis.⁶

Astyages was the fourth and final king of the Medians (594-559 B.C.). Through his marriage to Aryenis, Astyages became the brother-in-law of both Croesus, king of Lydia, and Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. This alliance procured peace between these three empires for 32 years. During this time, each empire contributed significantly to world history. The ancient Median religion of Zoroastrianism spread vastly alongside Lydian philosophy and Babylonian metropolitan development. Aesop's Fables appeared in Lydia at this time, while Nebuchadnezzar designed the Hanging Gardens of Babylon for his Median wife Amuhia.

Zoroastrianism has similarities with Hinduism; indeed, many of their ancient spirits also appear in Hindu texts. Zoroastrians believe in a perfectly rational god called Ahura Mazda ("Wise Lord"), representing moral order. In opposition to him, Angra Mainyu ("Evil Spirit") represents confusion. Some teachings of Zoroastrianism also show similarity with some aspects of Judeo-Christian thought. These include belief in angels, demons, the immortality of the soul, the final judgment on individual souls, eternal rewards and punishments, a superhuman messiah; and a bodily resurrection of the dead.⁷



Left: Scythian bronze scrap ornament showing grazing ibex; dates 7th-6th centuries, B.C. Early in his reign the Mede's King Cyaxares (625-585 B.C.) defeated the Scythians.

Right: From the 8th cent. B.C., a relief from the palace of Sargon II shows a Median groom with two horses.



Far right: Lake Van in north-central Media. With the rise of the Assyrian empire, Sargon II (721-704 B.C.) claimed to have ravaged 430 villages in this area. Some of the local Mede rulers chose to pay tribute money to Sargon II to avoid being conquered.

A Biblical Connection

During the relatively peaceful reign of the Median and Babylonian Empires, the Jews remained under Babylonian rule. Details of Nebuchadnezzar's reign (605-562 B.C.) appear in Daniel 1-4, while details of or allusions to Belshazzar's reign (553-539 B.C.) appear in Daniel 5 and 7-8. Belshazzar ruled as Babylon's king in place of his father Nabonidus, who went into a self-imposed exile because of his unpopularity with the Babylonian priesthood.

Daniel's mentioning Darius the Mede (5:31) has stirred much debate among Bible scholars as no extrabiblical sources refer to him. Secular historians often use this fact to attack the reliability of the Book of Daniel. But this is certainly inappropriate, as at least four possibilities for identifying this king exist. All possibilities require a brief introduction to the reign of Cyrus the Great.

Cyrus founded the Persian

Empire. In 550 B.C., he overthrew the Median Empire, although extrabiblical sources vary in depicting how this took place.⁸ Cyrus was extremely wise in his relations with conquered peoples. He honored the Medes as the most important group in his empire; consequently, the empire and its law were called both Median and Persian.⁹ He also allowed many former Median leaders to maintain positions of authority in his new Persian Empire.

The following are different explanations that may help us understand the connection between Darius and Cyrus.

First, some interpreters have identified "Darius" as an alternate name for Gubaru, one of Cyrus's generals. One Babylonian document records Gubaru as the one responsible for overtaking Babylon. The record states that he became governor of Babylon and appointed many governors, much as Daniel 6:1 suggests Darius did. Therefore, some



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surmise that Cyrus granted temporary regency to Gubaru for his victory. Gubaru's rule would imply Cyrus's trust in his general to exercise grand authority and receive the lofty accolades recorded in Daniel chapter 6.

Second, some interpreters have suggested Darius is Astyages, the son of Cyaxares and the Medes' fourth king. An ancient Greek translation of the Book of Daniel speaks of Astyages as the king who immediately preceded Cyrus. Another variation of that Greek translation has Astyages rather than Darius the Mede receiving the kingdom in Daniel 5:31. Ancient sources agree Astyages was treated with clemency after Cyrus's coup, but no reference places Astyages in Babylon.

Third, other scholars believe Darius is another name for Cyrus the Great himself. This interpretation has the most supporting evidence. Some ancient sources state that Cyrus was born of Median descent and married a Median princess, thus linking him with the Medes. Ancient kings often bore more than one title depending on their area circle of influence. Further, the Aramaic of Daniel 6:28 allows for the translation "So Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius—that is, the

reign of Cyrus the Persian."¹⁰ By this point in history, Cyrus had clear control over both the Median and Babylonian Empires. Further, the age of 62 mentioned in Daniel 5:31 appears close to Cyrus's age at this time. Finally, the Greek Septuagint translation of Daniel 11:1 has "Cyrus" listed in the place of "Darius the Mede."

Fourth, some scholars take the Book of Daniel at its face value. This would mean that a certain Darius, a Mede, was given authority over Babylon by Cyrus. We do not currently have extrabiblical sources that affirm the identity of this person—but Belshazzar's identity was also in a similar state of controversy until recent years. Belshazzar's identity became clear as archaeology unearthed evidence that confirmed what the Scriptures portrayed. Perhaps a future archaeological discovery will confirm Darius's exact identity and provide further details about his reign.

Even after their empire ended, the Median people remained a coherent ethnic group in the Persian, Greek, and Roman Empires. Their descendants today include the Iranian and Kurdish peoples. Zoroastrianism has largely been overtaken by Islam, though approximately 200,000 Zoroastrians around the world

still practice their ancient faith.

Daniel lived through and prophesied about many earthly empires, including that of the Medes. Though the Medes occupy a fascinating era of history, the coming kingdom of God must occupy our grandest attention, just as it did for Daniel. **B**

1. Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews, The Works of Josephus*, William Whiston, trans. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson 1987), 1.6.124 (p. 36); Genesis 10:2.

2. See Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Persians" in *Peoples of the Old Testament World*, Alfred J. Hoerth, Gerald L. Mattingly, and Edwin M. Yamauchi, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 108.

3. T. Cuyler Young, Jr., "Media" in *The Anchor Bible*, David Noel Freedman, ed.-in-chief, vol. 4 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 658-659.

4. See William Culican, *The Medes and Persians, Ancient Peoples and Places*, Glyn Daniel, ed., vol. 42 (New York: Praeger, 1965), 51.

5. See "Media," *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Herbert Lockyer, Sr., gen. ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986), 691.

6. See Herodotus, *The Histories, Everyman's Library*, George Rawlinson, trans. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1910), 1.74 (p. 42-43).

7. See Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Religions of the Biblical World: Persia" in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, gen. ed., vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 127-128.

8. See J. M. Cook, *The Persians* (London: The Folio Society, 1983), 35-39.

9. See F. F. Bruce, *Israel and the Nations: The History of Israel from the Exodus to the Fall of the Second Temple* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 89; also Daniel 6:8, 12, 15.

10. The Holman Christian Standard Bible and the New International Version also footnote this translation as a possibility.

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