

April 16th

When we read the book of **Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel**, we need to understand the **Persian Empire**. They were a nomadic people who arrived on the east side of the Persian Gulf about 900BC, then merged with the Medes, another nomadic group east of the Tigris-Euphrates valley. Persian comes from the Greek name, but they called themselves Iran which means “Aryan Race”. These nomads were following the Zagros Mountain ranges that have high grasslands which lie east of the Valley and the Gulf. The Elamites, descendants of the first son of Shem, son of Noah, lived east of the Persian Gulf along the semi-arid coast where only about 8 inches of rain falls a year. The Persians overwhelmed them, then learned to be good administrators who managed to adopt irrigation methods of the Mesopotamians. About 600BC Zoroaster, a holy man reformer, revamped their nature gods and wrote *Avesta*. In it, he conceived two major gods, a good creator, Ahura Mazda (not a car dealership. Ahem.), and an evil god, Angra Mainyu, who ruled the world. Each human was thought to have a wise inner being, like a spark, from Ahura Mazda. Men were free to choose the good god or the evil one and at death, Ahura Mazda judged everyone. To discover one’s inner goodness, a person had to practice good works and thoughts to avoid going to live in Hell at death. It was definitely works righteousness. (Zoroastrianism = the tiny group of Parsis of India today. Yazidis are an offshoot of pre-Zoroaster)

The Persians were excellent conquerors and treated subjects well. They adopted cuneiform writing for official documents but were seriously outnumbered by their conquered people, so they allowed a lot of autonomy and administered all things well in return for taxes. Jews especially loved this because they could go back home to the Promised Land and proclaimed Cyrus a liberator. Persians imposed a governor, or Satrap, who ruled like a local king. The first postal system was invented (like pony express) and coins were widely used for the first time. They dissuaded tribal loyalties and thus raised large armies that swept over most of the known western world, from Pakistan to Turkey, from Oman to Egypt to southern Russia, but failed to conquer Greece, losing first at Marathon pass and then Thermopylae. Persian fighters were known to be fanatic, fight-to-the-death soldiers. Their capital, and the setting for Esther, is Susa, close to the Tigris River near the mouth at the Persian Gulf. The emperor was called “king of kings” and the national symbol was a lion (army and power) with wings (wings meant Ahura Mazda). He employed a Gestapo-like secret service to keep the Satraps under control, but rivalry and assassinations were common. Xerxes (Ahaseurus in *Esther*) was assassinated 10 years after Esther’s story.

Their system was better than the Assyrians who tried to kill the men of conquered peoples and then rape as many women as possible so that the resulting children would claim Assyrian absentee fathers and better than the Babylonians who carried off most of the wealth plus the educated and artisan people leaving behind the poor. In Persia, wives were like cows needed to create children, kept at home with veils, not allowed in public unless escorted. Multiple wives of powerful men were common and the emperor kept a harem. Thus Esther,

though given a title of queen, was not allowed (at a risk to her life) to invade the space of Ahaseurus unless he extended the scepter to her. Some relationship that was! The early Persian empire of the Achaemenid dynasty was conquered by Greek Alexander the Great in 331BC, but a resurgent Parthian empire replaced that in 155BC-225AD and then the Sassanid dynasty until 641. Interestingly, the fanatic Muslims, who rapidly conquered the Persians in 641, knew how to rule almost nothing. They adopted the administration of a large territory from the Persians. Included was Persian culture in which big shots had multiple veiled wives at home but an arm-candy mistress they proudly paraded in public. Hence, women under Islam wore no head covering in the first hundred years, but the Persian influence became entrenched thereafter.

Persian language was similar to the ancient Sanskrit of India and their official writing was in cuneiform, a writing that only a few accountants and experts knew. Thus Persians adopted Aramaic as a common second language and the Hebrew alphabet as the common writing. This is why Mordecai and Ezra are considered scribes for the emperor. And why, when Xerxes could not sleep, he asked for the Book of Memorable Deeds, official records of heroism written in mysterious cuneiform, to be read (Esther 6). There he 'discovered' Mordecai had saved his life.

Persian religion with its final judgment and seeking after a moral life sounded vaguely like Christianity in the first centuries. Christians were early converts in Asia Minor where the influence of Persia was strong. One Persian belief was that in order to improve one's life, you had to follow secret information, Gnosticism. Gnostic is the Greek word for "hunch". Follow your intuition and find the secrets so that your good life-spark will grow. Of course this is directly counter to Christianity's basic belief that all have sin and are helplessly in need of a Savior in Jesus Christ. Hence there are many Gnostic gospels and other texts but they were roundly rejected by early church fathers and the Council of Milan to set the canon of the Bible's books in 315. Another Persian belief was that there was a lower god, Mithras (sun god, also found in Hindu religion), who was the son of light who would encourage one to become better. Mithrasism made its way into the Roman Empire about 75BC and for a couple hundred years was a strong rival to Christianity.