

The Persian Empire (2000 BCE to 100 BCE)

The **Medes** and the **Persians** lived on the Iranian plateau in the area between the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf.

In 550 BCE, the Persian ruler **Cyrus the Great** united these two cultures into one nation. He then began to expand Persia's territory westward by conquering Lydia and Babylonia. He also expanded eastward and began conquering lands as far as the Indus River valley. In 539 BCE Cyrus the Great allowed Hebrew exiles to return to his lands and resettle in Palestine, living as subject people of the Persians. Cyrus's son also conquered Egypt but he died while invading the Kingdom of Kush.

The next ruler, **Darius**, unified the Persian Empire by building a network of roads. These roads showed how advanced a civilization the Persians had become. The roads were open to the public, and were main arteries to the many capital cities of each region built along the roads. To ensure fair trading practices within the empire, the Persians created a system of uniform weights and measures so that all goods traded could have equal value from region to region.

Persia grew larger than any other empire during this time period. It stretched more than 3,000 miles from the Nile to the Indus River. The Persians controlled these vast areas by dividing their territory into provinces. Each province was then ruled by a group of local officials, loyal of course to the Persian king. The Persians collected tribute and taxes from these provinces. The provinces profited under Persian rule by participating in the extensive trading network set up throughout the empire.



The first Persians were polytheistic, having many gods. However, in 570 BCE, a new faith was introduced into Persia by their religious leader **Zoroaster**. His religion, called **Zoroastrianism**, taught that there were **only two gods**; the god of truth, light, and goodness and the god of darkness and evil. The whole universe was a battleground between these two forces. Those who led a good life would go to Heaven, while others would be doomed to a fiery Hell!

The Persian Empire came to an end around 330 BCE when they were conquered by Alexander the Great.