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The Persian Empire and the Colony of Judah

I.

Historical Introduction¹

Cyrus II and the March to Empire

Establishing the Achaemenid dynasty that was to endure until the conquest of Persia by Alexander the Great in 332 BCE, Cyrus II, the Achaemenid King of Persia (559–530 BCE), entered unopposed the city of Babylon in 539 BCE, where he was hailed as the new ruler of the former capital of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. According to the Babylonian Chronicle: ‘In the month of Arahshamnu, the 3rd day, Cyrus entered Babylon, green twigs were spread in front of him—the state of “peace” (*šulmu*) was imposed upon the city’.² Persia became the metropole of a vast empire that ruled most of the ancient Near East and even Egypt for some two centuries.

The road to this imperial status was a long and winding one that took years to travel before reaching its destination. Defeating the Medes by 550 BCE whose king, Astyages, was killed in battle, Cyrus then moved east, taking control of Lydia in 546 BCE. For the next six years (546–540 BCE) he extended his empire in the east. The Behistun inscription, dating from 520 BCE, indicates that Parthia, Drangiana, Aria, Chorasmia, Bactria, Sogdiana, Gandara, Scythia, Sattagydia, Arachosia, and

1. For a review of Persian history and list of sources, see Curtis and Tallis, *Forgotten Empire*; Sancisi-Weerdenburg, Kuhrt, and Root, *Achaemenid History VIII: Continuity and Change*. Also see Allen, *The Persian Empire*; Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*. For the literary sources, Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire*. Much of our information about the history, religion, and political organization of the Persians was supplied by Greek historians, not indigenous writers, due to the fact that many Persian sources have not survived.

2. *ANET* (3) 306.

Maka were eventually absorbed, although the historicity of their being taken by Cyrus is questioned. It is likely that Cyrus himself led the army that defeated many of the nations that came within the Persian Empire.

Following the conquest of the Babylonian Empire and the nations of Asia Minor, the Persians conquered the different states of the Levant. Most of Egypt was later conquered by Cambyses II (530–522 BCE) when Persian forces carried the day at the battle of Pelusium in the eastern Nile Delta in 525 BCE. Thus Persia came to include most of southwest and central Asia and extended south to Egypt, westward to the Hellespont, and eastward to the Indus river. Its only significant military failure before Alexander was the defeat by the Greek city-states of the European mainland at Marathon in 490 BCE and the sea battle of Salamis in 480 BCE. This halted the Persian Empire's extension into Europe.

The enormity of this empire (in excess of 3000 km on its east–west axis and more than 1500 km from north to south) made it the largest in world history to this point. Its geographical, environmental, and cultural diversity were of epic proportions. For example, while Aramaic was the *lingua franca* of the empire and served as the language of most official correspondence, other official languages of the empire included Elamite, Akkadian, Old Persian Greek, Aramaic, and hieratic Egyptian. Thus, wide differences in language and culture presented formidable obstacles to a centralized and direct form of rule. Instead, the Achaemenids came to establish a system of provinces overseen by Persian governors and yet permitted large measures of local autonomy to loyal kingdoms and tribes through the practice of their own political, social, and religious traditions. In a loosely knit system of satrapies, given initial shape by Darius I (522–486 BCE), Persian sovereignty was recognized by means of tribute, taxes, and treaty. In its foreign rule, the Achaemenids were not the tolerant and benign rulers their propaganda depicted. However, there were major changes brought about by the necessity of ruling this huge area of land and sea that called for forbearance in the areas of local constitutions and religion.³

From the Death of Cyrus to Alexander

Cambyses II (530–522 BCE) followed his father, Cyrus II, to the throne after Cyrus' death in 530 BCE during a battle against an Iranian people, the Massagetae, along the banks of the Syr Darya river. The new king was soon successful in conquering Egypt in 525 BCE. However, he died during his journey from Egypt back to Persia to quell a local revolt

3. Grabbe, *A History of the Jews and Judaism*, 133–66.

leading to an extensive rebellion that greeted the accession of Darius I (522–486 BCE), a member of the Achaemenid royal house. The putting down of this rebellion led to Darius' desire to spread the Persian presence eastward into Eastern Europe against the states in Anatolia and Greece and westward into India. He subdued Thrace in 512 BCE and engaged the Scythians at the mouth of the River Danube. When allied with the states in Anatolia and Cyprus, however, the Greek states proved to be a cohesive military power that resisted successfully the Persians. Hostilities between Athens and other Greek nations led to the defeat of the Persian forces at Marathon in 490 and later at the naval battle of Salamis.

Darius has been given the credit for the development of an imperial bureaucracy resulting in twenty satrapies administered by governors appointed by the royal court. The new system allowed for the reformation and practice of indigenous laws codified to allow for the specificity of legal requirements at a local level, but also to guarantee that the administration of each satrapy had a conduit for taxation and tribute. This likely propelled Judah's efforts at codification of civil and religious legislation in the Priestly document, giving increased significance to the Torah, temple, and Zadokite priesthood. When Alexander defeated the forces of Darius III (336–330 BCE) at Issus, the new Hellenistic empire and its later divisions controlled an enormous land mass that included not only the land mass of the Persian Empire but also extended west into Eastern Europe.

II.

Persian Culture and the Imperial Metanarrative

The Achaemenid rulers, like most emperors, conceived of a unified world order under their hegemonic control. However, cultural unification was not a part of this ideology. By allowing local peoples to continue their traditional social institutions and culture, coupled with the propaganda of the Persian monarchs being chosen to rule by the gods of their conquered colonies, the Persian kings projected for reasons of propaganda the image of religious tolerance that they hoped would dampen the desire to revolt among most colonies. They evolved an administrative system of governing their colonies (satrapies), flexible enough to cater to the variety of colonial languages, races, and religions, while also maintaining enough unity of government necessary to maintain the empire. Local rulers were allowed to preside over their kingdoms, although a Persian satrap was appointed to insure loyalty that would not allow revolt, civil order, and the payment of taxes.

The propaganda of the peaceful kingdom and the faithful worshipper chosen by the gods of the nations to rule the colonies cannot logically be reconciled with Persian religion and Avestan belief in Ahura Mazda as God and Creator and Zarathustra, his prophet. Ahura Mazda's nemesis, Angra Manyu, was the evil spirit, who opposed him. Even so it would have been unwise to attempt to impose Avestan religious beliefs and practices on the numerous and ancient peoples conquered and formed into provinces. In addition, the attempt to force Persian religion on the colonialists would compromise the integrity of the principle of stability. Thus, the Great Kings referred to themselves as the supporters of their colonies' temples and priesthoods and even contributed to their upkeep and renovation from the royal treasury. This meant that if the Achaemenids were worshippers of Avestan religion and Zoroastrian teachings, this religion remained limited to the Persian metropole and was not extended to the colonies. It is possible, although it cannot be proven, that the colonials were expected to honor Ahura Mazda as an act of loyalty to the empire.

Cessation of Exile

Beginning with Cyrus, the Achaemenid rulers brought to an end the policy of deportation and allowed conquered nations to continue having their own native rulers, although Persians were appointed to rule the satrapies established by Darius I. In the Cyrus Cylinder, to which we will return below, Cyrus blamed the Babylonian king Nabonidus for being an oppressive ruler, while he presented himself as the 'king of the world, great king, legitimate king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, and king of the four rims (of the earth)', whose rule was loved by Bel (Marduk) and Nebu (Nabu). Indeed, Marduk, so the cylinder proclaims, chose Cyrus to rule Babylon after the misrule of Nabonidus. In return for the support of Marduk, Nabonidus became his faithful devotee.

In addition, the Great Kings returned to the pillaged temples and sanctuaries the idols that had been taken as booty by the Babylonians, established new temples, and rebuilt sanctuaries that had fallen into disrepair. While tolerant of those nations who recognized their sovereignty, the Persian kings were brutal in their treatment of nations that were disloyal. The Achaemenids did not suppress local religions as long as they did not foment and advance revolutionary activities. It should not be overlooked that the support of local temples, if carried out, was a way to ensure the collection and payment of taxes. Regardless of seeking political advantages with their 'humane' policies, it is fair to say that hybridity in the general sense of the transformation of Persian culture

due to its contact with that of others and the changing of colonial cultures due to exposure to other native traditions was an extremely important feature of this empire.⁴ Indeed, for the Jews, the contest between two spirits, one evil and the other good, as elements of apocalyptic thinking, may have resulted in part from this period of Persian cultural hegemony.

Divine Sanction for Rulers

As previously noted, the Persian rulers considered themselves as the ones chosen by the gods of the nations they conquered to be their rulers.

He (i.e. Marduk) scrutinized all the countries; he looked around among his friends; a just prince after his own heart he took by his hand: Cyrus, the king of Anšan he appointed, he called his name to be ruler over all... Marduk, the great Lord who cares for his people, looked at his good works and his righteous heart with joy. He commanded him to move to his city Babylon... The 'liberated'... knelt before him, kissed his feet, rejoiced in his rule, his face was aglow.⁵

The Great King was the only bona fide king, meaning that there were no true vassal kings, only client vassals and dependent satraps approved by the royal administration to act on behalf of the Persian king himself. In addition, the Great King, while not divine, was chosen by the god Ahura Mazda and ruled at his pleasure.⁶ As is true in other empires, kingship was the greatest source of power in ancient Persia. One reason for adopting some of the cultural traditions of their Mesopotamian predecessors in imperial rule was to legitimize Achaemenid hegemony over the world and the kings themselves as the embodiments of imperial power. The use and reworking of Mesopotamian imagery into Persian symbolism produced a new, legitimizing iconography.⁷

4. Hybridity is also noticed in other areas: the coinage of the realm, the gold daric in which a running archer with a crown could be connected to the trading networks linking Persia to all of Asia Minor and even Greece; royal roads and stations which followed the Assyrian pattern; and the cavalry and infantry, armed with spears and bows, borrowed from the Greek Hoplite military tradition. Even the navies of Phoenicia and eastern Greek city-states were used to sailing the Mediterranean and other bodies of water, providing a new feature of economic life and the expansion of the empire and its metanarrative of superiority.

5. Galling, *TGI*, 83; cf. *TUAT* 1:408-10.

6. Whether or not the Achaemenid rulers were Zoroastrians is debated (see Boyce, *Zoroastrians* and *A History of Zoroastrianism*). The argument that Zoroastrianism was practiced by the Achaemenids is largely based on the presence of stone fire-holders, distinct to the religion. The prophet regarded fire to be the icon before which worshippers should stand and pray to Ahura Mazda.

7. Root, 'Lifting the Veil' in *Achaemenid History VIII*, 9-37; and Root, *The King and Kingship in Achaemenid Art*.

One important example of the reworking of tradition and its cultural refashioning is the ‘autobiographical’ inscription attributed to Darius I, located on a cliff of the mountain of Behistun (*bagastana*, ‘place of the gods’), which bordered the highway from Babylon to Ecbatana. The Behistun Inscription includes both a written and visual representation of Darius’ rise to power and the consolidation of his empire, and is a prime example of the Persian metanarrative. The narrative composition is exceptional among the different Achaemenid reliefs in emphasizing the motifs of victory, triumph, and the humiliating subjection of the enemy. Darius’ image stands above the conquered rulers to indicate his status as the Great King. Gautama, the pretender, who led the revolution in Babylon, lies prostrate while the other rulers are standing with neck collars. The divine legitimation of Darius is emphasized by the symbol of the god Ahura Mazda above him. Written in three versions (Akkadian, Old Persian, and Islamite), the narrative speaks of Ahura Mazda’s election of Darius I to gain his historical victories and to rule the colonies subjugated by invasion and conquest:

I.7. King Darius says: These are the countries which are subject to me; by the grace of Ahura Mazda they became subject to me; they brought tribute unto me. Whatsoever commands have been laid on them by me, by night or by day, have been performed by them.

I.9. King Darius says: Ahura Mazda has granted unto me this empire. Ahura Mazda brought me help, until I gained this empire; by the grace of Ahura Mazda do I hold this empire.

IV.56. King Darius says: This is what I have done, by the grace of Ahura Mazda have I always acted. Whosoever shall read this inscription hereafter, let that which I have done be believed. You must not hold it to be lies.

IV.58. King Darius says: By the grace of Ahura Mazda I did much more, which is not graven in this inscription.

IV.63. King Darius says: On this account Ahura Mazda brought me help, and all the other gods, all that there are, because I was not wicked, nor was I a liar, nor was I a despot, neither I nor any of my family. I have ruled according to righteousness. Neither to the weak nor to the powerful did I do wrong. Whosoever helped my house, him I favored; he who was hostile, him I destroyed.

IV.70. King Darius says: By the grace of Ahura Mazda this is the inscription which I have made. Besides, it was in Aryan script, and it was composed on clay tablets and on parchment. Besides, a sculptured figure of myself I made. Besides, I made my lineage. And it was inscribed and was read off before me. Afterwards this inscription I sent off everywhere among the provinces. The people united worked upon it.⁸

8. King and Thompson, *The Sculptures and Inscription of Darius the Great*.

The formulation of a cylinder narrative was typically Babylonian and stands within a Mesopotamian tradition that may be traced back to the third millennium BCE. Mesopotamian kings spoke of their divine election and righteousness when beginning their reigns. The Cyrus Cylinder, mentioned previously, is an example of a specific Mesopotamian literary genre, the royal building inscription, which was unknown in Old Persian literature. The narrative illustrates how Cyrus' scribes co-opted local Mesopotamian traditions and symbols to legitimize his control of Babylon. Many elements of the text of this cylinder were drawn from traditional Mesopotamian themes: the indictment of the wicked predecessor whom the gods have abandoned; the new king has been chosen by the gods; he rules justly and rectifies the wrongs of his predecessor; he addresses the welfare of the people for which he has been chosen; the sanctuaries of the gods are rebuilt or restored while offerings to the gods are provided or even increased; divine blessings are solicited; and repairs are to be made to the city which has come under his rule.

The Cyrus Cylinder demonstrates the divine legitimation of the first Persian ruler over Babylon and follows the typical form of dedication:

An incompetent person (Nabonidus) was installed to exercise lordship over his country. [...] he imposed upon them. An imitation of Esagila he ma[de], for Ur and the rest of the sacred centers, improper rituals [] daily he recited. Irreverently, he put an end to the regular offerings; he established in the sacred centers. By his own plan, he did away with the worship of Marduk, the king of the gods; he continually did evil against his (Marduk's) city... Upon (hearing) their cries, the lord of the gods became furiously angry [and he left] their borders... He surveyed and looked throughout all the lands, searching for a righteous king whom he would support. He called out his name: Cyrus, king of Anshan; he pronounced his names to be king over all (the world). He (Marduk) made the land of Gutium and all the Umman-manda bow in submission at his feet. And he (Cyrus) shepherded with justice and righteousness all the black-headed people, over whom he (Marduk) had given him victory... He ordered him to march to his city Babylon... His vast army, whose number, like the water of the rivers, cannot be known, marched at his side fully armed. He made him enter his city Babylon without fighting or battle; he saved Babylon from hardship. He delivered Nabonidus, the king who did not revere him, into his hands.

I am Cyrus, king of the world, great king, mighty king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four quarters, son of Cambyses, great king, king of Anshan, descendant of Teispes, great king, king of Anshan, (of an) eternal line of kingship, whose rule Bel (i.e., Marduk) and Nabu love, whose kingship they desire for their hearts' pleasure.⁹

9. *ANET* (3) 315-15.

From these and other historical texts, one may catch a glimpse of one of the oldest strands of Avestan religion. It is also interesting that the call of Cyrus in Second Isaiah contains some of the features embedded in this cylinder (Isa. 44:28–45:1).

Persian Culture

The Persians adopted many of the customs of other peoples of the region, initially taking on those of the Elamites, one of the first people they had conquered. Later, they also incorporated aspects of customs from the Medes, Assyrians, Babylonians, and Egyptians. While the many cultures of the empire indicate that there was no attempt to force Persian values and standards on those they conquered, there are some indications of influence that lead to the ever-developing hybridity of Judah's forms of literature, art, and religious ideology. Due to the presence of Persians in commerce and trade, the location of Persian garrisons of troops, and the necessity to write and speak Aramaic, changes were occurring in which cultural traditions from Judah's past were necessarily reformulated. However, these changes were not simply for reasons of accommodation, but also included the subversive dimension of disassembling Persian rule.

Persian Military Power

The Persian army was one of considerable size and power, able to defeat the national armies of the east and those of the west, with the exception of the Greek city-states in Europe where imperial expansion ground to a halt. Consisting of a metropole and a confederation of client states organized since Darius I into a system of satrapies with their Persian overlords and the authority of the Great King, the Persian Empire could field a very large army. It comprised a multicultural military composed of the combination of many conscripted troops from the colonies, hired mercenaries from outside the empire, and the Persian army itself with each satrapy having a thousand Persian troops. The weakness of this army, however, when convened for battle, was in its inability to form a cohesive force, which, joined with new conscripts and hired mercenaries, was unable to defeat the well-coordinated armies of the Greek city-states and later to withstand the invasion of the Macedonian army of Alexander the Great. The Persians used the Phoenician and eastern Greek navies to create a formidable force for waging battles on the high seas, although again this fleet was outperformed by the combined navies of the Western Greeks, beginning with the decisive Persian defeat at Salamis.

The size of the Persian professional army itself was rather small. The regular army of the Persian Empire contained an elite corps known as the Immortals, since theoretically when one died another replaced him. The Immortals numbered 10,000. At the heart of this 10,000 was an even more elite royal bodyguard of 1,000 whose primary duty was to protect the Great King. The army followed a decimal pattern. Divisions of 10,000 were divided into battalions of 1,000, companies of 100, and squads of 10. The bow was the chief Persian weapon, fired over what was known as a 'shield wall' formed by battalions of Persian troops, while chariots were often outfitted with rotating scythes making them a fearsome contingent of military power. It was, though, plagued by disunity due to the large number of conscripts, different battle tactics, and many different languages. Nevertheless, the Great King's military power was enormous and was itself an intimidating force that would discourage internal rebellion, defeat any outbreaks, and bring to heel most foreign armies. The exception was the hoplites of the Greek city-states who were equipped with heavy armor and used the battle formation of the phalanxes, which provided maximum power for the infantry armed with metal shields, short swords, and spears. The hoplite infantry was supplemented by cavalry and archers.

To maintain order in the dependent satrapies, the empire established garrisons of Persian and hired soldiers in strategic locations to discourage any rebellions within the local populations. In the southern part of the satrapy of Abar Nahara, which included tiny Judah, garrisons and fortresses were not only positioned in or near significantly located cities and towns, but also especially on the coastal plain and the Way of the Sea to defend against any possible Egyptian incursions into Judah. Indeed Egyptian uprisings did occur during the fifth and fourth centuries BCE that led to temporary independence. While these small fortresses and garrisons were not large enough to resist an Egyptian invasion, they would have controlled any local uprisings in the villages and towns of Judah and served the first line of defense against possible Egyptian incursions.¹⁰

The Economics of the Persian Empire

From the surviving records of Achaemenid Persia, Darius I is identified as the Great King who realized that the success of his empire was based on building a strong economy requiring standardization of coinage and measurements, a system of international trade that would produce wealth

10. Betlyon, 'Neo-Babylonian Military Operations Other Than War', 276-77.

not only for Persian citizens but also for the royal treasury, a system of interconnecting roads that allowed for the movement of troops and caravans of commerce, and the use of Phoenician and eastern Greek shipping under the empire's control to expedite trade and on occasion for the conducting of war throughout the Mediterranean world.

The standardization of measurements for weight, volume, and length, which included the 'royal' cubit, some 33.6 cm in length, is attributed to Darius I. The royal cubit was slightly lengthened in the reigns of later rulers, since Herodotus indicates the length for the Persian cubit is three fingers longer than the common cubit (*Histories* 1.178). The coinage of the empire made use of silver and gold precious metals along with copper, while banking houses were established under Darius' initiative. Canals were also built in order to irrigate fields in agricultural areas that included arable land in remote places throughout the empire. A large canal that connected the Nile and the Red Sea for the movement of boats and ships was constructed during the reign of Darius I.

Tribute from defeated kingdoms and tribes as well as a system that led to the collection of taxes from the different satrapies provided a substantial amount of the wealth enjoyed by the Persian court. While satrapies could issue coinage in copper and silver, only the Great King had the authority to issue gold coins (the daric). Satrapies foolish enough to mint and use golden coinage were considered defiant to the rule of the royal court and would suffer the full brunt of royal military force.

Political Administration and Struggle during the Persian Period

Although Persian propaganda tells of a universal rule, the empire itself was organized into a system of satrapies by Darius I (521–486 BCE), the son-in-law of Cyrus II. As long as loyalty to the Achaemenid court was demonstrably evident and taxes were paid, each satrapy possessed a significant amount of local freedom and responsibility in its own military and civil affairs. Although the Persian king and his court sat atop the hierarchic structure of the empire, the traditions of local nations who submitted to Persian rule were generally respected. The position of satrap was held by a Persian and was hereditary. Local administrators for the most part carried out the local matters of civil and social institutions of the different ethnic groups within each satrapy. During the administrative overhaul of the empire, orchestrated by Darius I (Herodotus 3.88–95), Judah was situated within the satrapy of Abar Nahara (Ezra 4:10–11, 16–17, 20; 8:36; Neh. 2:7, 9). The political, administrative changes came to have important implications for the social history of Judah. The states of

Judah, Gaza, Ashdod, Samaria, and Arabia were the provinces (*medînôt*) of the satrapy along with their smaller national divisions (*pělakîm*) throughout the history of the later Persian Empire.

III. Judah as a Persian Colony¹¹

The lack of extensive literary sources and archaeological data pertaining to Judah makes it difficult to reconstruct historically this period of Jewish history and to be precise in interpreting the different responses of various political groups to Persian hegemony and cultural influence. The Priestly document's final redaction, the completion of the composition and redaction of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History, Chronicles, Ezra–Nehemiah, several prophetic texts (Third Isaiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi), an emerging apocalyptic (e.g., Isaiah 24–27), and some of the writings, in particular the Psalter and the final form of the book of Proverbs, provide some suggestive indications of the social and religious life of this period of the Second Temple. The ideological agenda of these texts highlights Jerusalem, the high priesthood, the Torah, scribalism, and anticipate a rebirth of the Davidic dynasty and independence from the empire. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah, which among the four Chronistic writings appear to have been finalized during the later Persian period, offer at times different scenarios and dates, leading to increased difficulty in reconstructing even the major events of the Persian period. We are limited to generalizations that represent Jewish life in Persia, the significant returns from exile in the late sixth century mentioned in the Deuteronomistic History and I Chronicles, the commissioning of Ezra and Nehemiah, and several prophetic proclamations. Yet there are some cultural materials in the forms of Persian inscriptions, papyri (especially from Elephantine), and coins that, when combined with the writings of Ezra, Nehemiah, and a few other biblical texts, allow an imperfect picture to emerge, at least of resistance versus accommodation.

The question to address to these texts and archaeological data here concerns the Jewish response to Persian imperial control and cultural influence. Save for the possibility of an early attempt at insurrection during the time of the contested transfer of power to Darius I, acquiescence to Persian rule was the norm. At issue were resistance and cultural hybridity in Judaism during these two centuries of imperial rule.

11. Carter, *The Emergence of Yehud in the Persian Period*.

The Economy of Judah

Upon his conquest of Babylon and the collapse of the entire Babylonian Empire, Cyrus II gave the exiles who had languished for a half century in Babylonia permission to return home to reoccupy and eventually rebuild Judah and Jerusalem, if they chose to do so. They began in 538 BCE, the first of several journeys homeward, possessing limited Persian support and that of Jews in other regions for rebuilding the temple and reinstating the sacrificial cult after the return. Jewish villages and farms were reestablished, with ownership given to the heirs of the exiles and not to either the 'people of the land' or the foreigners who had settled in Judah during the period of the Babylonian captivity. The economy was largely agricultural, providing food for the local population and trade items for manufactured goods. The Persians returned to the policy of the Assyrians by rebuilding the destroyed cities and temples of their satrapies, and they added the policy permitting the establishment of local constitutions for the different countries comprising the colonies of the empire. This resulted not only in a rebuilt temple that became part of the economic engine of the Jewish colony, but also the establishment of the Priestly code as a significant part of the official constitution for Judaism.

The temple in the post-exilic period was an important institution for economic stimulus, especially for the city of Jerusalem. The rebuilding of the sanctuary would have involved employing numerous laborers and skilled craftsmen and a substantial number of priests for its operations, but the temple would also have generated economic activity in the form of merchants and shops selling wares to visiting pilgrims and of farms producing animals, grains, and wine for sacrifices and gifts. Further, the temple tax that came from all communities, including those located in the diaspora, would have added much-needed revenue. Indeed, the temple seems eventually to have become something of a national bank and treasury, evidenced by foreign rulers occasionally looting it to enhance their treasures and pay for the burden of military campaigns.

One historical factor leading to the growth in significance of the temple in Jerusalem occurred when Darius II gained the throne in 423 BCE and ruled until 404 BCE. Facing rebellions in Media, Anatolia, and Syria, the satrap of Egypt left the country to quell these revolts. This led to scattered resistance in Egypt. Two letters from the military colony of Elephantine sent to the governor of Judah and the two sons of Sanballat, governor of Samaria, complain of the destruction of the YHWH temple in the colony by Egyptian rebels. This led to an increased role of the high priest of Jerusalem's temple, since the Persians, ending this pogrom, required that only he could preside at the offering of animal sacrifices.

This in effect ended the prominence of this Egyptian Jewish temple and led to the elimination of the most important rival sanctuary to the international one in Jerusalem.

However, there were also instances of recorded social injustices during the Persian period. The wealthy failed in their social responsibilities to provide adequate support for the small landowners, tenant farmers, and day workers. Owners of small farms often faced the necessity of mortgaging and even selling their farms. The wealthy Jews required these working poor to pay high interest rates who at times even had to sell their children into slavery in order to exist (Neh. 5:2-5). The additional Persian taxation, when added to local poverty, often resulted in the break-up of households. Meanwhile, vast accumulations of wealth, especially in the Persian court, but also among the wealthy in the local satrapies, including Abar Nahara and its *medînôt*, were an economic reality in Persia. Nehemiah's reform was an attempt to confront these injustices. He required that lands be returned to the original owners who had been forced to sell them and that large debts were to be cancelled. How much of this actually occurred is a matter of contention among interpreters.

Persian Rule of Judah

The Persian court in ruling its empire also required the service of intermediaries who would enjoy a more privileged social rank, greater authority, and financial rewards for their activities that facilitated imperial rule. Thus, the Great Kings allowed Jewish governors (at first descendants of the royal house of David) to administer the internal operations of Judah as part of the larger satrapy. This governor was directly under the oversight and authority of a Persian satrap backed by a military unit stationed near the capital. In addition to the Jewish governor who dealt with civil matters, the high priest and the Zadokite hierarchy also held enviable positions in both shaping internal legal matters through the interpretation of the Torah and in the economic power of the temple generated through gifts, sacrifices, tithes, and festivals. Prior to the reform of Ezra, Malachi (during the fifth century BCE) indicates that sacrificial worship and the giving of tithes had declined and that divorce and the intermarriage of Jewish men with foreign women had increased, resulting in a crisis for the tiny state's identity as a Jewish nation (2:10-17). The leadership of the Judean community after the series of late sixth-century returns of the exiles was divided between a political leader, initially Zerubbabel who was clearly a Jewish resident in Babylon prior to his return, and the 'high priest' Jeshua or Joshua ben

Jehozadak (the name varies in the texts but refers to the same individual). The title *hakkohen haggadol* (high priest, chief priest; Hag. 1:1; Zech. 3:1) appears for the first time here and indicates the extraordinary significance of the priesthood in its role during the Second Temple period. Sheshbazzar, a 'prince of Judah' and presumably a descendant of David, led the first returnees to Judah following the decree of liberation by Cyrus (Ezra 1:8).

The fictionalized narrative of the Chronistic literature stresses the unity of Judaism, for Ezra sought to eliminate foreign intrusions into Yahwistic national religion. Historically, however, Judaism likely was far more fragmented as different groups competed socially and religiously for internal influence. These groups included the *Zadokite* priesthood and the local administration headed by a Persian appointed governor, both of which were loyal to the Persian metropole; *scribes* who worked within the local administration as well as teachers likely paid by the wealthy; *prophets* who addressed internal social and religious issues and imperial matters that would have included inciting some political resistance (Haggai, Zechariah, and elements of Malachi); and finally *apocalyptic seers* (e.g., Isaiah 24–27). The more radical opponents to Persian rule used a hidden transcript to address the woeful conditions suffered under the empire and thus pointed to a new future in which liberation and independence from foreign power would be divinely granted. If one were to step outside the people of Judah to the locals of the diaspora a far greater diversity would be encountered.

The Persians supported the governorships of local leaders (including several descended from the dynasty of David) as long as they were loyal to the Persians, Zadokite control of religious affairs especially associated with the temple, and the codification of the Priestly source as the basis for the reform of Ezra. Thus a conservative religious tradition of Torah, the Zadokite priesthood, the Jerusalem temple, and indigenous leadership on a local level were the pillars of the political structure of Second Temple Judah. The Chronicler indicates that the official and priestly leaders after Haggai and Zechariah apparently gave allegiance to the Persians by being content to accept foreign rule in exchange for economic, social, and political rewards. Opposition to this came from the undercurrent of some revolutionary prophets and apocalyptic seers (see discussion below).

However, there are indications that Jewish leaders who accommodated themselves to their master's domination still raged at their position as 'slaves' to the Great King. In a public proclamation, in his great prayer of repentance in Nehemiah 9 presented before the assembled Jews on the twenty-fourth day of the seventh month (perhaps Yom Kippur), Ezra,

bristling from the effects of Persian oppression and colonizing images of imperial superiority, protests to YHWH, 'Here we are, slaves to this day—slaves in the land you gave to our ancestors' (Neh. 9:36). This suggests that the composers and editors of the Chronistic literature considered the Persians to be oppressive rulers, and this may have been a consistent theme throughout the period.

When Alexander's army entered Egypt, it met limited resistance. This was likely true of Judah, save for the opposition of Gaza commanded by a Persian ruler (Josephus, *Ant.* 11.8). If Josephus is at least partially correct in his summary, there was generally widespread Jewish enthusiasm when Alexander's Greeks conquered the Levant, especially, if this account is to be believed, when he acknowledged the deity represented by the high priest who came with a priestly delegation to pay him homage and to attempt to keep him from destroying Jerusalem and the temple. Josephus also presents Alexander as one who allowed the Jews in Judah and in other countries to practice their own customs. Inviting any Jews to join his army, many did and fought against the king's enemies (*Ant.* 11.326-339).

Militarism and Colonial Power

The reinstitution of a small Jewish military fortress for protection against local enemies and to oversee civil order along with strategically located Persian fortresses garrisons maintained stability throughout the period, although the Persians held the upper hand even in local military affairs. Persian garrisons were needed to protect the highways along the Way of the Sea and the King's Highway, especially due to the continuing threat of the Egyptians who continued their efforts to drive out the Persians from the Land of the Nile. While these small outposts were not large enough to contain for long a well armed, large Egyptian invasion force, they could fight a delaying action until more substantial Persian forces and conscripts would quell the revolt. However well equipped a Jewish army may have been, its small size meant that Judah's only hope for a successful revolution depended on a restless, colonial Egypt seeking to drive the Persians back into Mesopotamia.

Haggai and Zechariah do suggest that in 519 BCE Judah may have joined the rebellion against the Persians that followed the death of Cambyses in 522 BCE and the contested accession to the throne by Darius I in the same year. His ascension was met with stiff resistance led internally by Gautama, a Median priest who pretended to be the dead younger brother of Cambyses II, Smerda, who had apparently been assassinated three years earlier by the Median sacerdotal leaders opposing

the Achaemenid dynasty. This civil war was accompanied by the rebellion of governors of several satrapies including those of Elam, Babylon, and Egypt, before Darius I was finally able to put down the attempted revolution. While the texts of these two Jewish prophets lack some clarity in regard to revolutionary activity, it is possible that Jewish zealots, inspired by prophetic prediction, may have pushed Judah to rebel in order to establish an independent state under a restored dynasty of David. Indeed the ability to communicate in Hebrew may have encouraged the rebels to compose hidden transcripts that were less susceptible to interception and reading. In Hag. 2:23, Zerubbabel was the original 'signet ring', a royal symbol, and zealots may have seized their opportunity during the power struggle following the demise of Cambyses. This may have been the motivation these two nationalistic prophets used to push for the completion of the temple, since they regarded this as a prerequisite for independence. What happened to this governor, who never again is mentioned, and to the assumed rebels can only be imagined, but the Persians were known to deal harshly with disloyal subject nations and their leaders.

When Xerxes I (486–465 BCE) ascended the Persian throne, he soon faced an Egyptian rebellion that ultimately was put down by 483 BCE. The letter of accusation against Judah and Jerusalem in Ezra 4:6–16 suggests Jewish participation in this revolt. This is a further indication that loyalty to the Great King was not always a constant feature of Jewish life in the empire. Eventually, the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt by Governor Nehemiah sometime near the end of the fifth and the early part of the fourth century BCE.

Presented in the Jewish metanarrative as the cupbearer of Artaxerxes II (Neh. 1:11; cf. Gen. 40:1, 2, 5, 9, 13, 20, 21, 23; 41:9; 2 Kgs 10:5; 2 Chr. 9:4), Nehemiah may reflect the roles of the legendary Ahiqar, a sage who was said to be the cupbearer and keeper of the signet ring and the financial secretary of Sennacherib and Esarhaddon. Tobit 1:2 notes this Aramaic sage was second in authority only to the king himself. Thus Nehemiah perhaps would have been a counselor who possessed significant official authority. In seeking the king's permission to undertake the mission to Jerusalem to rebuild its fortifications (Neh. 2:5), Nehemiah demonstrated proper reverence in the royal presence (2:2). Having received royal authorization, he came to Jerusalem as governor in the twentieth year of the reign of Artaxerxes II (ca. 384 BCE) to erect fortifications by rebuilding walls and gates (Neh. 1:3). This rebuilt city in the hill country would have provided the Persians some security in maintaining their control of the southern part of the Levant and in protecting against any future Egyptian rebellion. Should revolt occur

and the city be taken by Egyptians aligned with Jewish cohorts, it could function as a place of defense against invading Persian forces. The Egyptians eventually succeeded in driving out the Persians for a short period (404 BCE to 343 BCE) and the strengthening of Jerusalem's fortifications would have provided the Persians a place of additional defense. There is no record of Jewish participation in this revolt.

The rebuilding of Jerusalem's fortifications also provided defense against local enemies, including the Samaritans and the 'people of the land' who had not participated in the Babylonian exile and had been relegated to insignificance politically and religiously by the Achaemenid rulers. Other enemies included Tobias of Ammon, Geshem, an Arab sheik from southern Judea or the Negev, and a Jewish landowner east of the Jordan river (Neh. 3:33–4:17; 6:1–19).

A Jewish Metanarrative and Divine Legitimation

There is significant evidence for cultural hermeneutics at work among different groups during this period of Judaism centered in Judah. The appropriate texts for examination were composed by social groups who were the offspring of parents, grandparents, and great grandparents who had been subject to forced removal during the period of captivity in Babylon. In addition, Jewish families consisted of those who remained in Judah during the exile and those who lived a largely marginal existence in the diaspora during the sixth through most of the fourth centuries BCE. Finally, Jewish families who remained in Babylonia after the return also left some indication of their presence, as noted, for example, in the Murashû papyri. This Murashû family rose to prominence in the banking business.

Jewish groups who were descendants of exiles developed various means of survival with their culture intact. Literature with different expressions of prophetic proclamations, ritual resistance in cultic celebrations, and hymns point to some mimicry comprising the desire to rule their own destiny. Mimicry is also evident in the expression of hopes for a future, universal king.

A more accommodating approach, in which living with the empire was the primary option, became important in texts written by reactionaries like Ezra and Nehemiah or their narrators. The particular elements of the cultural and religious metanarrative and divine legitimation of the temple city of Jerusalem, the temple itself, and the Torah were emphasized in particular by Zadokite priests, their scribes, and some, though not all, of the local sages. However, there are still indications of mimicry as a subversive force in the literature of the reactionaries. This is

indicated by the Chronistic sources that chaff at Persian hegemony and point to a revisionist history of David as a foreword to the re-establishment of the Jewish monarchy and self-rule.

The Jewish metanarrative of the period, incorporated in the Chronist, narrates the imperial commissioning of the priestly scribe Ezra to travel to Jerusalem to instigate a wide-ranging social and religious reform.¹² He was followed shortly thereafter by Nehemiah, who was given the imperial responsibility to rebuild the city walls and to provide a military installation to withstand Egyptian and Philistine incursions into the area.

According to the book of Ezra, the scribe and priest bearing this name was commissioned by Artaxerxes II in the seventh year of his rule, ca. 398 BCE, to travel to Jerusalem and to lead a reform of Judaism especially in the city of Jerusalem (Ezra 7:7). Given extensive powers over all Jews living in Abar Nahara, Ezra was sent to establish and codify the laws of the Torah and to see that they were instituted in Jewish social and religious life. The narrative presents him as a religious and social conservative who sought to remove foreign influence on Jewish life by ordering the divorce of Jewish men married to non-Jewish women and to prohibit worship of other gods. Ezra prohibited marriages to non-Jewish women and required divorce from foreign women, since he determined they polluted the 'holy seed' (Ezra 9:1-2; Neh. 9:2). Daniel Smith-Christopher sees Ezra–Nehemiah as examples of cultural resistance and Ezra 1–7 as a statement of deference masking more subtle forms of subversive resistance.¹³ Brett adds that these texts reflect not just resistance to the empire, but also conflict between children of exile and everyone else who did not go into captivity, including Jews who mixed with outside peoples, Moabites, Egyptians, and Samaritans.¹⁴ For these books of Ezra and Nehemiah, only the exiles and their descendants are identified with the true heirs of Israel. While the exclusivist hermeneutics of Ezra and Nehemiah may have had their origins in cultural resistance adopted by certain Jewish groups against the empire in order to survive as an ethnic group, this religious faith could be co-opted for other political purposes, including the rejection and dispossession of non-Jewish minorities residing in Judah. Social ordinances or religious practices not legitimated by the Priestly document and Ezra's own understanding of Torah were to be eliminated. The objectives of Ezra's reform, which included the restoration of the temple cultus, the codification of the law,

12. For the development of the Ezra tradition, see Kratz, 'Ezra-Priest and Scribe'.

13. Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*, 45.

14. Brett, *Decolonizing God*.

and the assumption of power by former exilic families, were designed by the Persians to squelch internal conflict, to achieve internal stability, and provide a people easily ruled. Stability was important due to Judah's strategic location along the major highways from Egypt to Mesopotamia. This situation compares to the reform ordered by the Persian authorities that was carried out by the Egyptian scribe and priest Udjahorresnet, commissioned by Darius I. This Egyptian official oversaw the restoration of the cult at Sais and the codification of Egyptian law into the spoken and read languages of Aramaic and Demotic.¹⁵

One of the ways that the Chronistic literature sets forth the ideology of resistance was the recording of public transcripts in the form of edicts of Persian rulers (Cyrus II, Darius I, and Artaxerxes II). These related to the return, the rebuilding of the temple, and the Persian financial support of both the construction and the sacrificial court. The first decree is attributed to Cyrus II and is written in Hebrew (Ezra 1:2-4):

Thus says King Cyrus of Persia; YHWH, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has commanded me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Yehud. Any among those of you who are of his people, may their God be with them!— are allowed to go up to Jerusalem in Yehud and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel, who is the God in Jerusalem; and let all survivors, in whatever place they dwell, be assisted by the people of their place with silver and gold, with goods and with animals, besides freewill offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem.

This edict, supposedly dictated, translated, and then quoted by Ezra to the Jewish public, presents the Great King as acknowledging YHWH as the God of Heaven. It compares to other decrees and inscriptions of Persian rulers assuming the role of devotees to foreign gods (cf. the Behistun Stone and the Cyrus Cylinder discussed above). This policy, if historical, would have been intentional propaganda to establish order through the divine legitimation of the gods of nations conquered and ruled, in this case YHWH. Hence, while it is possibly a fictional account, there is no need to conclude that this proclamation is necessarily false. Rather it is possibly a public transcript made available for an audience who knew not only Aramaic but also a limited amount of Hebrew, which still remained the sacred language.

A similar edict is attributed to Cyrus by Darius II in Ezra 6:3-5 and is written in Aramaic, although it lacks the ideological recognition of YHWH as the God of Heaven. While there is no reference in this decree to the return or to the Persian financial support of the sacrificial cult,

15. Blenkinsopp, 'The Mission of Udjahorresnet and Those of Ezra and Nehemiah'.

details of the plans concerning the size of the temple are given, along with directions to send back to this temple the vessels taken by Nebuchadnezzar II.

Finally an edict of Artaxerxes II in Aramaic is mentioned in 7:12-26 that gives Ezra the authority to lead another group of Persian Jews who so desired to return to Jerusalem and to take with them the silver and gold of Babylonia. In this text the king has authorized free will offerings to the temple of 'their God' that may be used to purchase items of sacrifice and offerings. Ezra is also given the authority to tax the Jews in the satrapy, Abar Nahara, for the temple. If historically accurate, this Persian legitimation would enhance local stability by the establishment of one authentic state religion.

Prophetic Resistance to Persian Imperialism and Public Transcripts: Haggai and Zechariah

During the initial ascension to the throne of Darius I (550–546 BCE), the fourth Achaemenid king, there was significant opposition to his rule at its onset and even later on. Most scholars assert that he was challenged by Bardiya, who laid claim to his being the younger son of Cyrus the Great and brother of Cambyses II (530–522 BCE, succeeding his father Cyrus as king).¹⁶ Various nations opposed his reign, but these were quickly subdued.

Haggai is one of the Twelve Minor Prophets, active eighteen years after Cyrus allowed Jewish captives to return to their homeland. During this period, Zerubbabel had been appointed governor of Judah and Jehohaz served in the role of High Priest (1:14).

The metanarrative of Haggai had at its center the rebuilding of the temple, the magnificence of which would surpass even the first one, and God's 'shaking of the heavens', suggesting revolution throughout the empire. Shezbazzar, who led the first captives home, following Cyrus' decree of liberation, may well have led them to begin to rebuild the temple (Ezra 5:14-15), but by the time of Haggai's oracles, this effort

16. The death of Cambyses, following his conquest of Egypt, and failed attempts to move south to take Cush and west to defeat Libya, is disputed. Based on accounts of Greek historians including Ctesias and particularly Herodotus, he returned to Persia to put down a coup by his brother Bardiya, appointed satrap by his father Cyrus as of some of the far-eastern provinces, he committed suicide, due to despondence, or accident. A minor view by Greek historians was According to many ancient historians, the man who led the coup resulting in his temporary enthronement was an imposter, pretending to be Bardiya, was likely a magus, perhaps a Zoroastrian priest named, Gaumata.

had ceased. In Haggai's metanarrative, drought had led to economic devastation. The conclusion of this drought, likely drawing on past tradition (cf. Elijah, 1 Kgs 17:1-7), so the prophet asserts, will occur only with the rebuilding of the temple.

The second feature of the metanarrative is a new Davidic ruler, in Haggai's case Zerubbabel, literally 'branch of God'. A descendant of David who enjoyed the appointment of the Persian court to serve as governor of Judah, Zerubbabel was singled out as the servant of YHWH, a common royal title, and as God's 'signet ring' (Hag. 2:23). The signet ring pointed to God's ring worn on his right hand. Thus the king benefited from YHWH's approval. Due to the uprisings in the empire that YHWH would precipitate, the Persian Empire would fall. In the prophet's judgment, God would make Zerubbabel the new Davidic ruler.

The last element of Haggai's metanarrative concerns the high priest, in his case Joshua, the son of Jehozadak. This points to a diarchic structure of leadership that endures until the Greek kingdoms. The high priest was in charge of the temple, its worship, and its maintenance. The pilgrimage festivals, the collection of the tithes and gifts from Jews in the diaspora, the sacrifices and gifts of Jews in Judea, the serving as a bank for local wealth, and the maintenance of the facilities made the temple and its priests of upper echelon status quite affluent.

IV.

Conclusion:

Unity and Diversity in Judaism in the Persian Empire

Judaism in the Persian period was heterogeneous. Jewish communities, separated by geography and culture, were found throughout the ancient Near East during the period of Persian hegemony. In addition to Judah, those Jews living in Babylon, Egypt, and Samaria had substantial communities, but it is questionable how much religious loyalty to Jerusalem and its temple would have existed. The relationship of diasporan communities to Judaism in Judah was often only tangential. Efforts at unity were made by scribes under the oversight of the Zadokite priests to shape a canon of authoritative literature that placed emphasis especially on the Torah, the temple, the city of Jerusalem, and monotheism. Obviously, not everyone viewed these elements in exactly the same way: they were important to some Jews but not to others. For example, monotheism was clearly affirmed in the literature of the period and yet

did not lead to the ending of tolerance for, much less the eradication of, the polytheism of other religions. Even the religion of YHWH was not monolithic in location and ritual practice. For example, the solar shrine at Lachish, a YHWH sanctuary, was erected during the Persian period. The devotion to the temple in Jerusalem did not eliminate either the construction or operation of other temples in Samaria, Leontopolis, Elephantine, and during the late Ptolemaic period the one built by Qasr el-Abd of Hyrcanus, son of Joseph ben Tobiah, in Araq el-Emir in Transjordan. It is clear that there were many high places, including Dan, where the hill continued well into the Hellenistic period. Other outdoor shrines that carried on their rituals and worship into the Hellenistic period included those found in Carmel, Hermon, and Tabor. Prophecy and the development of apocalyptic literature, not always attuned to sanctuary worship and ritual, added to the cultural and political mix. It was a significant force among Jews in Judah and the various locations of the diaspora, although resistance formed among reactionaries like Ezra and Nehemiah who were prone to resist any foreign incursions into Jewish religious and cultural life.