

Review

Persian Royal–Judaean Elite Engagements in the Teispid and Achaemenid Empire: The King’s Acolytes, Jason M. Silverman (The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies, 690), London: Bloomsbury (Imprint: T&T Clark), 2019, ISBN 978-0-5676-8853-8 (hbk), 351 pp.

The Teispid and Achaemenid rulers (559–331 BCE) had a canny way of co-opting the support and loyalty of the many local rulers and elites they encountered as their empire expanded from central Iran out to Greece in the west and Pakistan in the east. Mutually beneficial relationships between the ruler and the elite among the ruled can be traced to the reign of Cyrus the Great at the beginning of the history of the Persian Empire and remained in play until the fall of Darius III at its end. Silverman’s intriguing and intelligent book, a follow-up to his excellent *Persepolis and Jerusalem* (2014)¹ puts the microscope onto the elite of Judah and the literature created during the period of the construction of the Second Temple, in particular First Zechariah (pp. 1–8) and Second Isaiah (pp. 40–55). Within these texts he looks for traces of Persian imperial ideology and the ramifications of the Persian presence in the construction of Judaism. Judaean reactions to the restoration of the Temple

¹Jason M. Silverman, *Persepolis and Jerusalem: Iranian Influence on the Apocalyptic Hermeneutic*. The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies, 558. London: Bloomsbury (Imprint: T&T Clark), 2014.

are placed in a wider perspective of elite interactions with the Persian monarchy, offering a microhistory of ruler–ruled interactions. All of this is handled with skill and sophistication and with considerable success; arguments are logically placed and systematically expanded and concluded, leaving the reader with little doubt that the Achaemenid presence in the literature of Second Temple Judaism was profoundly centered.

A difficulty arises in Silverman’s adherence to the presence of Zoroastrianism in Achaemenid imperial theology (he is especially interested in Old Persian creation theology). The picture of a flourishing Zoroastrian faith, supported and spread by the royal house, is unsupportable. One of the questions which absorbs scholars is whether the Achaemenids were Zoroastrians or not. A comparative approach between the beliefs and rituals of contemporary Zoroastrianism and what we know of the religious practices of the Achaemenid Persians supports the notion that they were indeed Zoroastrian. However—and this point needs stressing—the absence of a clear set of criteria for what Zoroastrianism was in the Achaemenid period makes it hard to be certain that the Achaemenids were of that faith. After all, even the term “Zoroastrian” is a relatively modern one; before the nineteenth century the adherents of the teaching of Zarathustra did not necessarily see themselves as Zoroastrians *per se*. Moreover, until we have a coherent definition of what was required in order to be considered a “Zoroastrian” in Achaemenid antiquity, we cannot demarcate the Achaemenids as Zoroastrians. If, for instance, a criterion for being Zoroastrian was to follow the teachings of Zarathustra, then Darius and the rest of the Achaemenids failed the test of faith, for there is not one mention of the prophet in any Achaemenid-period text. It also remains a great unknown as to whether the Achaemenid elements of “Zoroastrianism” were inherited or adopted. It is clear that the Achaemenid’s supreme god Ahuramazda was conceived as being the royal god *par excellence*, given that the intimate relationship between the deity and the ruler is reiterated repeatedly in the royal inscriptions. But this still does not qualify the Achaemenid kings as “Zoroastrians” in our understanding.

Ahuramazda was the champion of the Achaemenid clan, and the Great King was expected, under the auspices of the Magi, to carry out the prayers and rituals in Ahuramazda’s honor. Each and every Great King was Ahuramazda’s chosen one and functioned as mediator between heaven and earth. In the early Achaemenid royal inscriptions, from the reign of Darius I onwards, Ahuramazda alone was named as the supreme deity, but occasionally he was mentioned alongside “all the gods” or “the other gods who are,” or as simply as the “greatest of the gods.” In one of the tablets from Persepolis he appears with the *baga* (“gods”), proving that other deities were worshipped alongside him too. The Persepolis texts show how the royal administration supplied cultic necessities for the worship of numerous deities, both Iranian and Elamite. While Ahuramazda is omnipresent in the royal inscriptions, his name occurs only ten times in the Persepolis Fortification tablets.

The Achaemenids chose to sponsor the cults of a mixed group of gods, some Iranian and others Elamite. The mix of deities are best defined as a Persian pantheon, and the coagulation of Indo-European and Mesopotamian gods and goddesses supports the

notion that the Achaemenids had a proclivity to mix and merge ancient Iranian and ancient Elamite concepts of the divine and the rituals of their worship. These important findings, the center of current research on Persian religion, is absent from Silverman's work. Instead there is a compulsion to regard Achaemenid "religion" as a mature reflection of a developed form of Zoroastrianism. This viewpoint privileges the idea that a holistic form of Zoroastrian theology existed under the Achaemenids and was disseminated wholesale in their propaganda; it was not.

That aside, Silverman's *Persian Royal–Judaeae Elite Engagements* is a bold and stimulating read, rich in detail, embracing in its source-analysis, and enlightening in its overall approach. It is a delight to see the worlds of Biblical Studies and Iranian Studies drawn together so coherently (misgivings aside) and it is pleasing to know that the current volume will be joined by another in due course, making for a neat and useful "Persian trilogy."

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