

# Iran, Israel, and the Jews

Symbiosis and Conflict from the  
Achaemenids to the Islamic Republic

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# 1

## Negotiating Empire

### Living Jewishly under the Achaemenids in Persia and Palestine

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AARON KOLLER<sup>1</sup>

#### THE ACHAEMENID EMPIRE AND ITS JEWS

Beginning from a small area of Fārs in southwestern Iran, the Persians under the leadership of Cyrus began expanding their territory in 550 BCE. Just over a decade later, they controlled all of southwest Asia, from the Levant and Anatolia in the west through Kyrgyzstand. How this was accomplished is “one of the great conundrums of Cyrus’ rise to power.”<sup>2</sup> The bulk of the territorial gains came in 539, when the Persians took over

1. I am indebted to my colleagues and friends Joseph Angel, Ari Mermelstein, and Shira Hecht for very helpful comments on earlier drafts. I am also indebted to comments by Larry Schiffman for clarifying certain ways in which the Qumran texts may be brought to bear on these issues. Finally, thanks to Daniel Tsadik and Steven Fine for inviting me to participate in the *Iran and Israel* conference, and to Daniel for his astute editorial suggestions in turning the oral version into an article.

2. Matt Waters, “Cyrus and the Achaemenids,” *Iran* 42 (2004): 91–102 (quote from 92).

the Neo-Babylonian Empire. Having defeated the Babylonian armed resistance at Sippar, north of Babylon, the Persian army marched into Babylon and took it bloodlessly, as Cyrus narrates in his famous Cylinder.<sup>3</sup>

Among the populations inherited by Cyrus when he took over the Babylonian empire were Jews. A series of exiles in the late seventh and early sixth centuries had brought many thousands of Judeans to Mesopotamia and nearby areas. At this point, the vast majority of Jews lived in this region. The trauma of these events left its mark on the Jewish literature produced in the following century, including books such as Ezekiel.<sup>4</sup> During the Neo-Babylonian Empire, the Jews openly lamented their fate (cf. Psalm 137) and hoped for a restoration to the land of Israel (cf. especially Isaiah 40–55 and below).<sup>5</sup>

3. This text has often been held up as an ancient model of human rights and enlightened rule; this view is especially associated with the Shah of Iran, who often pointed to Cyrus as an Iranian ruler who spread human rights and religious tolerance throughout the world. This is a misreading of Cyrus' text and of the historical record. For a balanced discussion, see Josef Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia 550 BC—650 AD* (London: Tauris, 2006), 42–55, and Wiesehöfer's earlier polemic against the political use that has been made of Cyrus, "Kyros, der Schah und 2500 Jahre Menschenrechte. Historische Mythenbildung zur Zeit der Pahlavi-Dynastie," in *Mythen, Geschichte(n), Identitäten: Der Kampf um die Vergangenheit*, ed. Stephan Conermann (Schenefeld/Hamburg: EB, 1999), 55–68. For the text and translation, see Hanspeter Schaudig, *Die Inschriften Nabonids von Babylon und Kyros' des Großen, samt den in ihrem Umfeld entstandenen Tendenzschriften: Textausgabe und Grammatik* (AOAT 256; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2001). A good English translation by Irving Finkel is available on The British Museum's website ([http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/article\\_index/c/cyrus\\_cylinder\\_-\\_translation.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/article_index/c/cyrus_cylinder_-_translation.aspx)), and translations are available in recent anthologies of ancient Near Eastern texts as well.

4. For the "trauma" of the exile as seen in biblical literature, see Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, "Reassessing the Historical and Sociological Impact of the Babylonian Exile (597/587–539 BCE)," in *Exile*, ed. James M. Scott (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 7–36. For a broader view of the literature produced in response to the exile, see Jill Middlemas, *The Templeless Age: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the "Exile"* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007).

5. Terminology is a problem that haunts this essay. According to many scholars, the term "Jews" is inappropriate for the Iron Age (prior to 586 BCE). Some have argued cogently that even through the era of the Second Temple, the appropriate term should be "Judeans" rather than Jews. A thorough discussion is Steven Mason, "Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 38 (2007): 457–512. I retain the term "Jews" here, because the contrast between the residents of Yehud—the Judeans—and their co-religionists throughout the Persian Empire—here called the Jews—is a fundamentally important one.

When Cyrus took over the empire, he allowed the peoples conquered by the Babylonians to return to their ancestral homelands, as he claims in his Cylinder text and as confirmed by the biblical accounts.<sup>6</sup> For obvious reasons, therefore, the ascent of Cyrus was hailed by some Jews as evidence of the hand of God in history.

Still, for most Jews, as for most people in the Babylonian heartland, the transition from Babylonian rule to Persian rule did not affect everyday life.<sup>7</sup> For some Jews, however, Cyrus' policies had an immediate effect, and they took the opportunity to move westward to their people's former homeland, which was now incarnated as the Persian province of Yehud.<sup>8</sup> The biblical prophets Haggai and Zechariah encouraged the construction of a new Temple, which was dedicated around 515 BCE. If there were hopes among the Judeans that this would inaugurate a profoundly new political era, these hopes were complicated, and ultimately disappointed, by reality.<sup>9</sup>

If we survey the Jewish world in the late sixth and early fifth centuries, we find Jews centered in three regions of the world.<sup>10</sup> Some Jews lived in Egypt; we have documentation from the Jewish garrison in the southern border town of Elephantine and evidence of Jews elsewhere as

6. For a skeptical view of the biblical narratives about Cyrus, see Amélie Kuhrt, "The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid Imperial Policy," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 25 (1983): 83–97. Most scholars, even skeptical ones, see the biblical claims as plausible, however; cf., e.g., Bob Becking, "‘We All Returned as One!’: Critical Notes on the Myth of the Mass Return," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian period*, ed. Oded Lipschits and Manfred Oeming (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 3–18.

7. See, for instance, the statement in Michael Jursa, *Neo-Babylonian Legal and Administrative Documents: Typology, Contents and Archives* (Guides to the Mesopotamian Textual Record 1; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2005), 1. My thanks to Shalom Holtz for this reference.

8. Evidence for the existence of the province of Yehud in the late sixth and early fifth centuries comes from bullae stamped with the names of governors of the province; cf. Nahman Avigad, *Bullae and Seals from a Post-Exilic Judean Archive* (Qedem 4; Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1976).

9. For a good discussion of the relevant textual evidence for such hopes, see Wolter H. Rose, *Zemah and Zerubbabel: Messianic Expectations in the Early Postexilic Period* (Library Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 304; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000).

10. A good survey of Jewish history (social, religious, and intellectual) can be found in Mayer Gruber, "Judeo-Persian Communities, ii. Achaemenid Period," in *Encyclopædia Iranica* (<http://www.iranica.com/articles/judeo-persian-communities-ii-achaemenid-period>).

well.<sup>11</sup> (Egypt was not part of Cyrus' empire, but was conquered by his son and successor, Cambyses, in 525 BCE.) The textual remains from the Jewish community at Elephantine, including letters and legal documents, have been thoroughly studied, and the archaeology of the site has provided valuable information about the community, too.<sup>12</sup> According to most scholars, this community was heterodox, their religion and culture strongly the result of an Israelite substratum overlaid with influences from their Egyptian surroundings.<sup>13</sup>

Many Jews, presumably motivated either by socio-economic factors or by ideological considerations, now lived in Yehud. It is difficult to say what it meant to live "Jewishly" within Achaemenid Yehud. Attempts at reconstructing life are plagued firstly by a lack of data,<sup>14</sup> and secondly by the irregularity of the data we do possess. Quantitatively speaking, the textual record seems substantial. We have the biblical texts of Haggai, Zechariah, Malakhi, the second half of the book of Isaiah, Ezra, Nehemiah, Daniel, Esther, and Chronicles, all of which either date from the Achaemenid Period or describe it. Apocryphal books such as 1 Esdras, Tobit, and Judith may also be relevant to varying degrees,<sup>15</sup> and some of the

11. For an accessible and thorough overview of these communities, see Joseph Méléze Modrzejewski, *The Jews of Egypt: From Rameses II to Emperor Hadrian*, trans. Robert Cornman; foreword by Shaye J.D. Cohen (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995), 21–44. The fullest discussion is still Bezalel Porten, *Archives from Elephantine: The Life of an Ancient Jewish Military Colony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

12 See Günter Dreyer et al., "Stadt und Tempel von Elephantine: 28./29./30. Grabungsbericht," *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts. Abteilung Kairo* 58 (2002) 157–225.

13 Cf. Porten, *Archives*, for example; contra Paul-Eugène Dion, "La religion des papyrus d'Éléphantine : un reflet du Juda d'avant l'exil," in *Kein Land für sich allein; Studien zum Kulturkontakt in Kanaan, Israel/Palästina und Ebirnâri für Manfred Weippert zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Ulrich Hübner und Ernst Axel Knauf (Freiburg, Switzerland: Universitätsverlag, 2002), 243–54.

14. The quantitative gaps are dramatic and led to serious miscalculations by later readers trying to reconstruct Achaemenid history from biblical literature: Jewish tradition by the first century CE already had compressed the Persian period of Jewish history to a mere 34 years, rather than the 206 one would expect (539–333). While there may be numerous factors driving this miscalculation, the paucity of data is a necessary prerequisite for such a view. See Joseph Tabory, "התקופה הפרסית בעיני חז"ל," *Millēt* 2 (1984): 65–77.

15. The book of Tobit will be dealt with below; although it may not be a Persian-era composition, it purports to describe life in the eastern Diaspora, allegedly under the Assyrians but undoubtedly from a later perspective. The dating of Judith is also

other literature preserved in Qumran also may date to the Persian period. In particular, the Aramaic texts such as the Pseudo-Daniel literature (4Q242–244) and the court tales labeled 4Q550 may have circulated in Jewish circles far and wide for centuries.<sup>16</sup>

Even the basics of political history are difficult to reconstruct, however. The plentiful archaeological data from Palestine is surveyed masterfully by Stern,<sup>17</sup> but it does not make for a narrative of the history.<sup>18</sup> Sometimes, even when we do have good archaeological evidence, our ability to exploit it for historiography is confounded by the lack of textual data. For example, we know there must have been military action in around 475 BCE, since many sites show destruction levels dated to then, but in the absence of texts, we do not know who was fighting or why. Although our corpus of epigraphic remains from the period is also substantial and continues to grow, it, too, does not provide us with anything like a running historical narrative. Despite his 200–page survey of the evidence available, Ephraim Stern wrote: “Although the Persian period is relatively late from the archaeological standpoint, it is one of the most obscure eras in Palestine and its history remains practically unknown.”<sup>19</sup>

The problem, in a nutshell, is that what we have is the equivalent of anecdotal evidence. From our sources we know of an event that occurred in the year 539 (Cyrus’ proclamation), something that happened two decades later (the dedication of the Temple), and some things that happened half a century after that (the activities of Ezra and Nehemiah in the 450s and 440s). But no attempt is made in any other surviving Jewish

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uncertain. For a fourth-century date of Judith, see the studies of Michael Heltzer collected in his *The Province of Judah and Jews in Persian Times (Some Connected Questions of the Persian Empire)* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Archaeological Center, 2008), 31–70, and Edward Lipiński, “The Province Yehud and Jews in the Achaemenid Empire,” *Studia Judaica* 12 (2009): 369–79, at 370–74. Although fascinating in many ways, the book of Judith will not be dealt with here, since it does not overtly deal with the issues which this paper focuses on.

16 See, for instance, Ursula Schattner-Rieser, *Laraméen des manuscrits de la mer Morte, I. Grammaire* (Instruments pour l’étude des langues de l’Orient ancien 5; Lausanne: Zèbre, 2004), 25. There is more that can be said here.

17 Ephraim Stern, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible*, Vol. II: *The Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian Periods, 732–332 BCE*, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 373–575.

18 For some of the problems, see David Biale, *Power & Powerlessness in Jewish History: the Jewish Tradition and the Myth of Passivity* (New York: Schocken, 1986), 18.

19 Stern, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible*, Vol. II, 360.

text to narrate the broad sweep of the nation's history, as had been done earlier by the authors of Kings for the history of Israel in the Iron Age.

Regarding social history, the situation is even more difficult. The only evidence available for the situation in Yehud is the literary remains, particularly the biblical narratives. This corpus presents a skewed picture, however: it focuses our attention almost entirely on Jerusalem, and almost entirely on the group that produced these texts, the group associated with Ezra and Nehemiah in the mid-fifth century BCE. If we inquire about interactions between the Jews of the texts and other groups, the dominant voice heard is that of the Ezra-Nehemiah group, who demanded that social intercourse with anyone other than the Judean returnees from Babylonia be strictly circumscribed.<sup>20</sup> But we do have contrary evidence, preserved within the same texts, that their view was not the only one, and possibly not a very popular one; furthermore, there exists evidence from other biblical texts of a more open attitude towards acceptance of foreigners into the community.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, demographic evidence suggests that the isolationist approach of Ezra and Nehemiah did not carry the day: the population of Yehud boomed over the following centuries, and some historians have argued that this growth can only be explained through large numbers of others joining the community.<sup>22</sup>

Still other Jews—by far the majority, in fact—remained in Mesopotamia and Persia proper. Our sources of information for these Jews and their communities are severely limited, however. In terms of their integration into society in ways other than geography, we have some evidence from the archive of the banker Murašu of the city of Nippur, dating from the second half of the fifth century BCE and first published in 1893.<sup>23</sup> Many Jews, identifiable by names such as Yehonatan and Ye-

20. Peter Ross Bedford, *Temple Restoration in Early Achaemenid Judah*, JSJ Sup 65 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 32–33, denies the historicity of these accounts; cf. also Lisbeth S. Fried, “The House of God Who Dwells in Jerusalem,” *JAOS* 126 (2006): 94–95.

21. Moshe Weinfeld, “The Universalist Ideology and the Separatist Ideology in the Period of the Return to Zion,” *Tarbiz* 33 (1964): 228–242 (Hebrew).

22. For further discussion of the various views in Persian-era Yehud regarding the acceptance and exclusion of foreigners of various types, see Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, “Between Ezra and Isaiah: Exclusion, Transformation, and Inclusion of the ‘Foreigner’ in Post-exilic Biblical Theology,” in *Ethnicity and the Bible*, ed. Mark G. Brett, Biblical Interpretation Series 19 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 117–142.

23. For a full presentation of this archive and the socio-economic history that can be culled from it, see Matthew W. Stolper, *Entrepreneurs and Empire: The Murašu Archive, the Murašu Firm, and Persian Rule in Babylonia* (Istanbul: Nederlands



dayah, appear in this archive, and these amount to something between 3% and 8% of the names in the texts.<sup>24</sup> To be sure, many Jews, even Jews with strong Jewish identities, did not have names readily identifiable as Jewish. One thinks, for example, of Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel, the leaders of the late sixth-century restoration, who bear Babylonian names; the characters Mordecai and Esther in the book of Esther also bear Babylonian (and, in Esther's case, possibly Persian), names.<sup>25</sup> The number of Jews in these texts is, therefore, likely higher.

On the basis of these economic texts, it can be concluded that by the late fifth century, at least some Jews had become fully integrated into Nippur economic life.<sup>26</sup> According to David Vanderhooft, this was not possible—or at least, possible only to a lesser degree—under the Neo-Babylonian Empire, but part of the Achaemenid policy was to encourage the participation of minorities in the bureaucracy in order to foster an atmosphere of loyalty.<sup>27</sup> The biblical book of Esther also depicts Jews such as Mordecai as playing a role in the Persian bureaucracy. We know that this is no mere literary conceit: a Jew, Abda-Yahu son of Barāka-Yāma, is identified as a Persian imperial tax collector (*dēku*) in a Persian-era cuneiform tablet.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, for the most part, the Jews named in the texts we have did not rise far in the ranks: they were minor functionaries, not powerful members of the bureaucracy.<sup>29</sup>

Clearly, not all the Jews integrated, even in the most basic, geographical sense. A collection of cuneiform tablets published since 1999

Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut, 1985).

24. See Michael David Coogan, *West Semitic Personal Names in the Murašu Documents*, HSM 7 (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1975), and the studies by Ran Zadok, *The Jews in Babylonia in the Chaldean and Achaemenian periods in the Light of the Babylonian Sources* (Tel-Aviv: Mifal Hashichpul, 1976); *On West Semites in Babylonia during the Chaldean and Achaemenian periods: An Onomastic Study* (Jerusalem: Wanaarta, 1977).

25. For one suggestion about the name of Esther, see Ran Zadok, "Notes on Esther," *ZAW* 98 (1986): 105–110.

26. Cf. Michael D. Coogan, "Life in the Diaspora: Jews at Nippur in the Fifth Century B.C.," *BA* 37 (1974): 6–12.

27. David S. Vanderhooft, "New Evidence Pertaining to the Transition from Neo-Babylonian to Achaemenid Administration in Palestine," in *Yahwism after the Exile: Perspectives on Israelite Religion in the Persian Era*, ed. Rainer Albertz and Bob Becking, *Studies in Theology and Religion* 5 (Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 2003), 219–35.

28. Joannès and Lemaire, "Trois tablettes cunéiformes," 27–28; see also Bedford, *Temple Restoration in Early Achaemenid Judah*, 47 n. 14.

29. Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*, *Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 69–70.

come from the community of āl-Yahūdu “the town of the Jews,” which was apparently a Jewish town in the vicinity of Nippur.<sup>30</sup> This indicates that at least some Judean refugees lived in voluntarily segregated areas. Most Jews were distributed in multi-ethnic and multi-cultural regions, however. The onomastic studies of Ran Zadok showed that Judean exiles lived throughout southern Mesopotamia, as well as areas farther north and east (including Susa).<sup>31</sup> Thus, as Haman is quoted in the biblical book of Esther as saying, the Judean exiles were both “spread throughout the land” and “separated.”

However, none of this really allows us to speak about what Jewish life was like in Achaemenid Mesopotamia and Persia. We have two types of evidence available: literary texts and “quotidian” texts.<sup>32</sup> The quotidian documentary texts have the advantage of not describing only the élites within society. Yet, these texts open such a limited window onto life that the evidence available is almost certainly not broadly representative. The literary texts, on the other hand, consist for the most part of meditations

30. Approximately half of the known tablets were published by Laurie E. Pearce and Cornelia Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer*, Cornell University Studies in Assyriology and Sumerology 28 (Bethesda, MD: CDL, 2014). The publication of the rest has been announced, but has not yet occurred. Earlier discussions include: F. Joannès, and André Lemaire, “Trois tablettes cunéiformes à onomastique ouest-sémitique (collection Sh. Moussaïeff) (Pls. I-II),” *Transeuphratène* 17 (1999): 17–34; Ran Zadok, *The Earliest Diaspora: Israelites and Judeans in pre-Hellenistic Mesopotamia*, Publications of the Diaspora Research Institute 151 (Tel Aviv: Diaspora Research Institute of Tel Aviv University, 2002), 33–35; Kathleen Abraham, “West Semitic and Judean Brides in Cuneiform Sources from the Sixth Century BCE: New Evidence from a Marriage Contract from Āl-Yahūdu,” *Archiv für Orientforschung* 51 (2005–2006): 198–219; Laurie Pearce, “New Evidence for Judaeans in Babylonia,” in *Judah and the Judaeans in the Persian Period*, ed. Oded Lipschits and Manfred Oeming (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 399–411; W. G. Lambert “A Document from a Community of Exiles in Babylonia,” in *New Seals and Inscriptions: Hebrew, Idumean, and Cuneiform*, ed. Meir Lubetski (Sheffield: Phoenix, 2007), 201–5; Kathleen Abraham, “The Reconstruction of Jewish Communities in the Persian Empire: The Āl-Yahūdu Clay Tablets,” in *Light and Shadows—The Catalog –The Story of Iran and the Jews*, ed. Hagai Segev and Asaf Schor (Tel Aviv: Beit Hatfutsot, 2011), and 33–35 and 264–61 (sic).

31. See Zadok, *The Earliest Diaspora*, 29–45, 46–47.

32. The term “quotidian” for the texts that are produced in the course of daily life and allow us to reconstruct that life is drawn from the study of this type of text from a later period by Baruch Levine, “Quotidian Documents from the Judean Desert,” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls at 60: Scholarly Contributions of New York University Faculty and Alumni*, ed. Lawrence H. Schiffman and Shani Tzoref, STDJ 89 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 199–215.

on, and studies of, individual lives and individual issues. They come from the elites of society, and while these lives are explored in more detail, the figures involved cannot be taken as typical.

Neither of these bodies of evidence, then, allows us to fully explore what *ordinary* life was like. What was the social standing of the Jews? From another perspective, how did the Jews perceive themselves within Persian society, and how were they, in turn, perceived? We read in the Bible, for instance, of Neḥemiah, a high-ranking bureaucrat in fifth-century Susa, who felt a strong enough affiliation with the Jewish community in the province of Yehud that he convinced the king to re-assign him there. But were his sentiments commonplace? Did other Jews in Susa pay attention to the news out of Jerusalem? Is he unique in our literary corpus because he was unique, or because the vicissitudes of history bequeathed to us an erratic literary legacy? The preservation of his narrative means that certain groups found his story compelling,<sup>33</sup> but did the Jews back in Persia have a different view? Did they, like Neḥemiah, think of Yehud as their proper homeland? Perhaps they could have claimed, as some later Babylonian Jews did, that they were already dwelling in an ancestral homeland, and point to Genesis for evidence of Abraham's origins in Ur.<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, the voices of Jews from the Achaemenid Empire are mostly mute.

This discussion highlights the basic point: it is not possible, given the available evidence, to produce any sort of serious description of *Jewish life* in the Achaemenid Empire. We can say some assorted things about *life for Jews*, but what it meant to live as a Jew, what it meant to live a Jewish life within the Achaemenid imperial context of either the eastern Diaspora or Yehud, is not recoverable.<sup>35</sup> In short, when we as historians

33. The position that the canon is the product of the ideological forces that shaped it was strongly argued by Morton Smith, *Palestinian Parties and Politics that Shaped the Old Testament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971). My thanks to Ari Mermelstein for urging me to consider his arguments in this context.

34. The Bavli (b. Pesahim 87b) compares God's exile of the Jews to a husband who is angry at his wife, so he sends her "to her mother's home." This striking claim on the part of the Babylonian rabbis is discussed by Isaiah Gafni, *Land, Center and Diaspora: Jewish Constructs in Late Antiquity*, *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* Supplements 21 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 52–55.

35. Some recent essays show this clearly. Mary Joan Winn Leith devotes two paragraphs to the Jews in Babylonia in her survey of the history of Israel in the Persian period ("Israel among the nations: the Persian period," in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. Michael D. Coogan [New York: Oxford University Press, 1998], 413–14), and Mayer Gruber concludes his essay on the subject of Iranian Jews in the

seek answers for the questions which most readily appeal to us—about daily life, cultural and religious values and practices, social realities and interactions, and so on—we find that the available evidence is not interested in providing answers.<sup>36</sup> The questions possible for other periods, earlier and later, because of the richer documentary remains, are simply not answerable for Persian period Jewish societies.<sup>37</sup>

## SKETCHING RELIGIOUS HISTORY

Only glimpses of the social history of the Jews in the Achaemenid empire, then, can be sketched with the evidence currently available. Perhaps instead of imposing the questions we would like to ask on the available evidence, we should allow the available evidence to dictate the questions to be asked. Instead of asking questions about Jewish life as lived by the people, we will turn our attention to Jewish life as *thought* and *believed*. Since what we have available is religiously-oriented literature, let us now give up on the quest for a social historical perspective, and look instead for insights from the realm of ideas.

The literature reveals a range of views on central philosophical and theological issues, and it may be possible to discern within this literature differences between the Jewish cultures in the eastern diaspora and in Palestine (at least as imagined by those producing the literature). It should

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Achaemenid period by terming it an “obscure period” (“The Achaemenid Period,” in *Esther’s Children: A Portrait of Iranian Jews*, ed. Houman Sarshar [Philadelphia: Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History in association with the Jewish Publication Society, 2002], 3–12).

36. Keith Whitelam, “Recreating the History of Israel,” *JSOT* 35 (1985): 45–70, at 53–54, criticizes history which focuses on reconstructing lists of high priests but does not “investigate the situation of Palestine vis-à-vis the Persian empire, particularly changing trade patterns, or to outline changes in settlement patterns in Palestine as a result of the change in political hegemony.” H. G. M. Williamson, “Early Post-Exilic Judaeon History,” in *Studies in Persian Period History and Historiography*, *Forschungen zum Alten Testament* 38 (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2004), 9–12, defends “traditional” scholarship against these charges.

37. Recently, there was a bold attempt at a social history of Phoenicia in the Persian Period: cf. Vadim S. Jigoulov, *The Social History of Achaemenid Phoenicia: Being a Phoenician, Negotiating Empires*, BibleWorld (London: Equinox, 2010). Even Jigoulov’s work remains at a far more general level of analysis than what is envisioned here; his achievement is in ascertaining the level of integration of the various Phoenician cities with one another and in the Achaemenid Empire as a whole, rather than how individuals or families negotiated the conflicting identities of “Phoenician” (and even “Sidonian”) and “Persian.”

be noted, however, that although a number of studies have explored the dynamics of the Homeland–Diaspora relations in this period,<sup>38</sup> one could well ask whether there really is any difference between “homeland” and “diaspora” when both are ruled by a foreign empire—indeed, the very *same* empire.<sup>39</sup> The upshot of the following discussion is that despite well-deserved skepticism on this point, there indeed seems to be some differences between homeland and diaspora, even in such circumstances.

In what follows, a number of ideologies found within the texts at our disposal will be surveyed. The texts to be discussed all have something to say about a fundamental issue: the role of God in the world. It is, I think, readily apparent why this was an important issue in a time when the people who considered themselves God’s chosen ones found themselves scattered throughout the known world, negotiating lives ruled by forces which appeared powerful enough to challenge God himself.

Schematically, three views can be seen. According to one view, God acted through human monarchs, and therefore, working for the human monarchs was, indeed, a way of serving God in the world; this is the view of Ezra and Nehemiah, for example. On a second view, God had withdrawn, and the world was now bifurcated: there was the present reality, in which chaos reigned, and a beatific reality in metaphysical existence elsewhere, in which divine order reigned. According to this view, truly religious people would focus their attention and energies on the

38. See the provocative arguments of Peter R. Bedford, “Diaspora: Homeland Relations in Ezra–Nehemiah,” *Vetus Testamentum* 52 (2002): 147–65, who argues that the community in Yehud remained dependent on the Diaspora, and the discussion in John Kessler, “The Diaspora in Zechariah 1–8 and Ezra–Nehemiah: The Role of History, Social Location, and Tradition in the Formulation of Identity,” in *Community Identity in Judean Historiography: Biblical and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Gary N. Knoppers and Kenneth A. Ristau (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 119–45. Note the comments of Bustenay Oded, “Exile—Homeland Relations during the Exilic Period and Restoration,” in *Teshūrôt LaAvishur: Studies in the Bible and the Ancient Near East, in Hebrew and Semitic Languages—Festschrift Presented to Prof. Yitzhak Avishur on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. Michael Heltzer and Meir Malul (Tel Aviv–Jaffa: Archaeological Center Publications, 2004), 153\*–160\*, at 157\* (“beyond the evidence and are even hazardous”).

39. Martin Hengel influentially argued that in the Hellenistic period, there should not be a presumption of difference between Judaism in Palestine and Judaism elsewhere. See Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974 [2nd German ed., 1973]), 103–6, for a summary statement of this position. While his methodological strictures and many of his insights are well taken, I think close inspection shows that there *were* differences among the various Jewish communities throughout the latter half of the first millennium BCE.

otherworldly existence and forsake the disarray of the present reality. This perspective is found in much of the Jewish apocalyptic literature. Yet a third view, found especially in the book of Esther, was that the world was somewhat chaotic, but could be—and had to be—navigated by human effort in order to ensure Jewish survival in this new order, since there was no alternative. Interestingly, it is this third view that proved the most difficult for the Jews living in Achaemenid Yehud to accept.

*View 1: God Works through the King*

Representing the first view—that there was a confluence of wills between the human monarchs and God—are first and foremost the Jews who returned to Yehud, both in the late sixth century and in the mid-fifth century, associated with the Ezra-Neḥemiah movement.<sup>40</sup> Of course, this type of thinking has roots in earlier Israelite thought. In the late eighth century, Isaiah claimed that Assyria was the rod of God's wrath,<sup>41</sup> and in the early sixth century, Jeremiah conceived of the Babylonians as the arm of God (see especially Jeremiah 25 and 27).<sup>42</sup> In the Persian Period, this

40. Sara Japhet, "Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel against the Background of the Historical and Religious Tendencies of Ezra-Neḥemiah: Part 1," *ZAW* 94 (1982): 66–98, reprinted in and cited from Japhet, *From the Rivers of Babylon to the Highlands of Judah: Collected Studies on the Restoration Period* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 53–84, at 59. Erich Gruen, "Persia through the Jewish Looking Glass," in *Jewish Perspectives on Hellenistic Rulers*, ed. Tessa Rajak, Sarah Pearce, James Aitken, and Jennifer Dines (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 53–75, and elsewhere in his writings, has contested this point. He argues that Jewish literature generally is at best cynical and at worse hostile towards the Persians rulers and concludes: "The doltish Ahasuerus [of Esther] bears a close resemblance to the inept and occasionally ridiculous Achaemenids who people the pages of Ezra-Neḥemiah, 1 Esdras, Daniel 6, and the Greek additions to Daniel" (69). His readings seem overly cynical, however, and the authority of the king in Ezra-Neḥemiah seems to be depicted as appropriate and unquestioned.

41. See especially Baruch A. Levine, "Woe, Assyria, Staff of My Anger! (Isa 10:15)—Biblical Monotheism through the Interlational-Political Lens," *Eretz Israel* 27 (2003): 136–42 (Hebrew); Levine, "Assyrian Ideology and Israelite Monotheism," *Iraq* 67 (2005): 411–27.

42. For a nuanced discussion of this view in Jeremiah, with an excellent discussion which situates it within the theological positions found elsewhere, see Dalit Rom-Shiloni, "God and Man at War: Responses to the Destruction of the First Temple," in *War and Peace*, ed. Shlomo Avineri (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 2009), 1–11 (Hebrew), and at greater length, Rom-Shiloni, *God in a Time of Destruction and Exiles: Biblical Theology* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2009). On this motif in Jeremiah 27–29 in



view is the most popular one in the biblical texts. It is clearly expressed in the discussion in Ezra and Nehemiah of the Temple: according to these books, the Temple was built at the behest of God, through Persian imperial decree and with Persian financial support.<sup>43</sup> It is also the view of the prophet whose words are preserved in Isaiah 44, where God speaks of Cyrus as “my appointed one” (משיחי).<sup>44</sup>

Although the situation in the book of Daniel is more complex, there, too, we find the view that the monarch, when deserving, is granted his power by God. Such a view is presented clearly in the very first verses of Daniel 1, where after reporting that Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem, the text claims that God handed victory, including some of the temple vessels, to him. Thus, the book claims from the very beginning that the king, powerful as he may appear, is a puppet of God.

Indeed, a major theme in the stories that follow is precisely this point, which is made in varying dramatic ways. Perhaps most poignant is the image of the king in Daniel 4, reduced to animal status because of his hubris and restored to his humanity (and his monarchy) only when he recognizes the power of God. Although the Daniel stories also mock the kings and seem to adopt a skeptical attitude towards their power, it is also clear that the stories take for granted their authority in the world—as long as they do not challenge God or those who serve him.<sup>45</sup> Chronologi-

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particular, and the question of the relationship of these chapters to the rest of the book of Jeremiah on the one hand, and to Daniel (see the next paragraph) on the other, see Paul-Alain Beaulieu, “The Babylonian Background of the Motif of the Fiery Furnace in Daniel 3,” *JBL* 128 (2009): 273–90, esp. 288–90.

43. This point is made by many; cf. for example, Japhet, “Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel,” and David L. Petersen, “The Temple in Persian Period Prophetic Texts,” in *Second Temple Studies 1: Persian Period*, ed. Philip R. Davies, JSOT Sup 117 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 125–44, at 131–32.

44. I am indebted to Ari Mermelstein for the significance of Deutero-Isaiah for this point.

45. For a more nuanced discussion of the image of the empire in the book of Daniel, see Sharon Pace, “Diaspora Dangers, Diaspora Dreams,” in *Studies in the Hebrew Bible, Qumran, and the Septuagint Presented to Eugene Ulrich*, ed. Peter W. Flint, Emanuel Tov, and James C. VanderKam, Vetus Testamentum Supplements 102 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 21–59. She concludes: “The author thus presents a nuanced examination of foreign laws that can be kept and foreign laws that should be abhorred . . . Even a sympathetic king, such as Darius (Daniel 6) may not be able to protect the community against those who hate and fear them—how much more so a king who despises them” (58–59). It should be emphasized (as Ari Mermelstein reiterated to me) that Daniel differs from the other books in its attitude towards the foreign king. This is a theme explored in great detail recently by Erich Gruen, who argued that many of the biblical

cally prior to the biblical story, the same perspective is apparently found in the Aramaic Jewish known as the Prayer of Nabonidus, which tells of the Babylonian king Nabonidus extolling the virtues of God because a Jewish exorcist was able to cure him of his physical maladies by encouraging him to worship God.

In all these texts, therefore, the king's power is recognized, but it is claimed that this immense royal power is actually subject to the will of God. The readers of these texts can therefore conclude that if the king is successfully wielding his power, it is at the pleasure of God that he does so. His actions then carry with them the divine imprimatur of legitimacy.

It is noteworthy that the voices in the early Achaemenid period that most vehemently argue this viewpoint come from the east. The stories of Daniel are likely of Mesopotamian origin, and Ezra and Nehemiah themselves are from the eastern Diaspora. It is not surprising that the Jews of the east would adopt this perspective on history, since it is not only well-entrenched in earlier Jewish literature, but also precisely what the Persian kings themselves argued!<sup>46</sup> Of course, there are differences: Darius in his Behistun inscription attributes his actions to Ahuramazda, whereas Ezra and the other biblical authors claim that it is the God of Israel who controls even foreign kings, thus subverting and co-opting the Persian ideology. The basic claim that the king's actions are the means by which the divine will is executed in the world, however, is both the view of the Persian propaganda and the view of some Jews, especially those close to the center of Persian power.<sup>47</sup>

Despite some deep rifts between Ezra and Nehemiah and the populace in Jerusalem,<sup>48</sup> these leaders were at least partly successful in impos-

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books were satirizing the imperial monarchs. For Daniel, this is undoubtedly true. See above, n. 38, as well as the second half of Gruen's *Diaspora: Jews Amidst Greeks and Romans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

46. See James Bowitck, "Characters in Stone: Royal Ideology and Yehudite Identity in the Behistun Inscription and the Book of Haggai," in *Community Identity in Judean Historiography: Biblical and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Gary N. Knoppers and Kenneth A. Ristau (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 87–117, at 106–7.

47. According to Elie Assis, the presence of God in Jerusalem in the late sixth century BCE was a point debated by Haggai and his audience: they feared/believed that God had abandoned them, and Haggai argued that he was present and awaiting a house. Cf. Assis, "To Build or not to Build? A Dispute between Haggai and His People (Hag 1)," *ZAW* 119 (2007): 514–27.

48. For which see especially Weinfeld, "The Universalistic Ideology and the Separatist Ideology." More recent discussions can be found in Joachim Schafer, *Priester und Leviten in achämenidischenJuda: Studien zur Kult- und Sozialgeschichte Israels*



ing their vision of Judaism. This may have been in part because of the power of their historiosophy: they saw divine action in the activities of the Empire—whom they, conveniently, represented.<sup>49</sup> In the following centuries, this view is presented in Jewish texts produced in Palestine, as well. Chronicles, for example, takes this approach to history, ending its narration of history (in its very last chapter) with the assertion that both the exile at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar and the restoration ordered by Cyrus were performed in fulfillment of the will of God.<sup>50</sup> More fundamentally, it has been argued that Solomon, the ideal Israelite king according to Chronicles, is described in that book in a way meant to be reminiscent of the Achaemenid kings.<sup>51</sup> I would suggest that the prerequisite to this depiction may well be that the Achaemenid kings—like Solomon—were seen to be God’s chosen earthly rulers.<sup>52</sup> Thus, Ezra and Nehemiah’s vision of God’s active role in the world, through the medium of the kings, is the one that dominates the last books of the Bible.

#### *View 2: God Has Withdrawn from the World and Rules in Heaven*

Other literature of the time, which also has roots in the east but flourished in the west, emphasizes an apocalyptic worldview in which the “real” world, the valuable world, is other than the present world. The early examples of the Jewish apocalyptic literature, such as the oldest parts of the Enoch literature, have strong roots in Mesopotamian culture.<sup>53</sup> It is

*in persischer Zeit*, *Forschungen zum Alten Testament* 31 (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2000), and Peter Ross Bedford, *Temple Restoration in Early Achaemenid Judah*, *Journal for the Study of Judaism Supplements* 65 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), especially 10–27. Bedford argues that there were no serious conflicts.

49. For a similar view argued from a different perspective, see Vanderhooft, “New Evidence Pertaining to the Transition,” 219–35.

50. Joseph Angel pointed out the relevance of 2 Chron 36 here to me.

51. For a thorough discussion of this argument, see Helen Dixon, “Writing Persepolis in Judah: Achaemenid Kingship in Chronicles,” in *Images and Prophecy in the Ancient Eastern Mediterranean*, ed. Martti Nissinen and Charles E. Carter, *Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testament* 233 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 163–94.

52. Interestingly, Solomon and the Persian king (Xerxes) are compared with regard to their power in the Babylonian Talmud (Megillah 11a–b). According to the dominant view there, the power of Xerxes was greater than that of Solomon.

53. That this literature is based on Mesopotamian traditions has long been noted; see, for instance, John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 46. For the issues

an open question where these motifs of eastern origin were put into their current literary contexts. Recent scholarship has tended to see the oldest parts of the literature itself as originating in Mesopotamia,<sup>54</sup> although there is no doubt that the texts as we have them are Judean in origin.

Combining Mesopotamian traditions, Biblical figures, and Jewish oral lore with a sharply dichotomizing approach to the world, this literature has a very different view of God's involvement in the world. It contends that divine justice and fairness exist in the world, but that these are restricted to the heavenly realms, which are still directly controlled by God. The earthly existence experienced mundanely has been ceded by God to mundane forces and so is unpredictable and hardly worth anything.<sup>55</sup>

One implication of this approach can be seen in the attitude towards the Second Temple adopted by some Jewish writers of the time. According to these writers, the construction of this Temple, which was initiated at the behest of a Persian king rather than an autonomous Davidic monarch, does not signal the end of the period of exile. Indeed,

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involved and other views, see especially James C. VanderKam, *Enoch and the Growth of an Apocalyptic Tradition*, Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series 16 (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1984). VanderKam argues that the Astronomical Book (chapters 72–82) is likely eastern (102; and see the discussion on 91–106 and 189), but the AB is the least apocalyptic of the Enochic sources. For detailed discussions of the Mesopotamian backgrounds of the primary motifs in the early Enoch literature, see Helge S. Kvanvig, *Roots of Apocalyptic: The Mesopotamian Background of the Enoch Figure and of the Son of Man*, Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament 61 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1988), and Amar Annus, "On the Origin of Watchers: A Comparative Study of the Antediluvian Wisdom in Mesopotamian and Jewish Traditions," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 19 (2010): 277–320. For a methodologically sound discussion of the dates of Enoch literature, see Gabriele Boccaccini, *Roots of Rabbinic Judaism: An Intellectual History, From Ezekiel to Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 93–103, arguing for a fifth–fourth-century date.

54. See especially the work of Siam Bhayro, in his monograph *The Shemihazah and Asael Narrative of 1 Enoch 6–11: Introduction, Text, Translation and Commentary with Reference to Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical Antecedents*, Alter Orient und Altes Testament 322; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2005), and in brief in his article, "Noah's Library: Sources for 1 Enoch 6–11," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 15 (2006): 163–77. See also Henry K. Drawnel, "Between Akkadian *Tupšarrūtu* and Aramaic ܬܡܪܬܐ: Some Notes on the Social Context of Early Enochic Literature," *Revue d'Qumran* 24 (2010): 373–403. Drawnel argues that the Mesopotamian traditions were likely adopted directly by Jewish scholars trained in Babylonian scribal culture, although the materials may have been mediated by Aramaic tradents (see esp. p. 396).

55. See the discussion in Boccaccini, *Roots of Rabbinic Judaism*, 91–92.

the triumphant return of God to his city, which had been described by Ezekiel, was still expected.<sup>56</sup> According to these texts, the exile was actually *still in progress* even after 515, even though a Temple was technically was operating in Jerusalem.<sup>57</sup> The world as perceived by these authors was one that had been abandoned by God, and one could not now expect to encounter him there. For the time being, such encounters could only be had on other levels of reality; only in the future could God be expected to take control of the world again.

*View 3: God Is Absent from, or Hidden in the World*

The third view, that the world was chaotic but could be successfully navigated, was the viewpoint of the book of Esther. In my view, this is a Persian Jewish composition from late Achaemenid times, although this is an issue that cannot be discussed in detail here.<sup>58</sup> According to Esther, far from being God's earthly representative, the Persian king is a buffoon!<sup>59</sup> He is incomparably powerful, capable of authorizing genocide with the simple impression of his ring, but this does not show that he is reflecting God's will. On the contrary, his power can be harnessed by anyone who learns how to manipulate the king and manipulate the system. In the story of Esther, the Persian Empire is a terrifying behemoth. It is

56. See Joseph Angel, *Otherworldly and Eschatological Priesthood in the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah 86 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 102.

57. See Bradley C. Gregory, "The Postexilic Exile in Third Isaiah: Isaiah 61:1–3 in Light of Second Temple Hermeneutics," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126 (2007): 475–96, esp. 489–92, who discusses early texts such as Isaiah 61 and Ezra–Nehemiah, as well as later texts such as Daniel 9, 1 Enoch, T. Levi 16–17, and CD 1:5–11. See also the earlier study (regarding later literature) by Michael A. Knibb, "The Exile in the Literature of the Intertestamental Period," *Heythrop Journal* 17 (1976): 253–72.

58. That Esther's provenance is the eastern Diaspora (Mesopotamia or Persia itself) has long been the dominant view. See, for a sampling of references, Elsie R. Stern, "Esther and the Politics of Diaspora," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 100 (2010): 25–53, at 25 nn. 1–2. Stern herself suggests that Esther was written in Palestine as an imagination of what life might be like in the Diaspora. Her only argument in favor of a Palestinian provenance is the language, Hebrew, but this is a weak reed on which to lean. Another recent paper, by Jean-Daniel Macchi ("Le livred'Esther: regard hellénistique sur le pouvoir et le monde perses," *Transeuphratène* 30 [2005]: 97–135), argues that the book is a later Hellenistic work from Egypt, reflecting back on the Persian Empire. For further discussion, see Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

59. Gruen, *Diaspora: Jews Amidst Greeks and Romans* (above, n.43), 145–48.

terrifying not because it is evil; Ahasuerus is not portrayed as evil. It is terrifying because it is, at bottom, a soulless bureaucracy. If a genocidal madman happens to get the ear of the king, catastrophe may follow. But all is not lost. One must be prepared to outmaneuver; one must learn to navigate the bureaucracy and manipulate the behemoth if one is to survive and thrive in a world such as this.<sup>60</sup> Reliance on God is not an option: the best-known fact about the Hebrew text of Esther—and a fact that is fundamental to understanding its politics—is that God is never mentioned. Within the world of the story, God does not exist.<sup>61</sup>

One can argue, I believe, that the book of Esther is strongly asserting views on many issues, which were consciously reactions to the opinions in circulation in many Jewish circles, but a detailed analysis of this possibility belongs elsewhere.<sup>62</sup> For the moment, it will suffice to say that Esther's politics are straightforward, if radical: the elite exiles must live in Susa, because it is only through their intervention in the upper echelons

60. It is not only the book of Esther that thus mocks the Persian king while standing in awe of his power. Steven Weitzman has analyzed the image of the king and the empire in 1 Esdras, and come to similar results. Both the book of Ezra and the book of 1 Esdras provide explanations for the return of the cultic vessels to the Jerusalem temple. But whereas the Ezra story the king is the originator of all beneficence and the Jews are merely the passive recipients, in 1 Esdras the Persian king plays a passive role. Indeed, not only does the story mock the king (as argued by Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism*, 166–167), but also the mockery allows Zerubbabel to win the king's favor—and in the end the Jews are dependent on winning the king's favor (Weitzman, *Surviving Sacrilege*, 29–32).

61. The exact theological claims being made by the book of Esther are not so simply summarized. It is open to discussion if the book means to (a) claim that God is operating behind the scenes, (b) question whether God is actively playing a role, or (c) strongly asserting that God is uninvolved in the world. For the literary question of whether God was originally in the *text* of Esther, see recently Kristin de Troyer and Leah Rediger Schulte, "Is God Absent or Present in the Book of Esther? An Old Problem Revisited," in *The Presence and Absence of God: Claremont Studies in the Philosophy of Religion, Conference 2008*, ed. Ingolf U. Dalferth, Religion in Philosophy and Theology 42 (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2009), 35–40.

62. In particular, I have in mind the issues of the centrality of Jerusalem, the return of the exiles to Yehud, the segregation of the Judean community from others, the significance of the Law, the use of Hebrew, and, most fundamentally, who was considered a loyal Judean. In *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought*, I argue that on all of these issues, as well as other less central ones, the author of Esther is consciously and robustly responding to views found in other biblical and non-biblical books, and that therefore (a) the initial responses to the book of Esther were predictably negative, (b) it took a drastic change in political and social realities to make Esther canonical, and (c) the Rabbis, who inherited the same problematic book but now with canonical status, had to work hard to read it in ways that undermined much of its original radical nature.

of the Persian bureaucracy that the Jews everywhere—including Yehud itself—can be spared massacre and annihilation.<sup>63</sup> Jerusalem once was the center (Esther 2:7), but the center of power is now neither in Jerusalem nor in heaven, but in the halls of the Persian palace.

Perhaps not so surprisingly, we have indications that Esther received a rather cool reaction in Palestine. Esther is the only biblical book of which no copies were found at Qumran, which is not plausibly an accident.<sup>64</sup> Rather than assuming sectarian opposition to the book (which may also have existed), it seems likely that in this respect the sect of the Dead Sea Scrolls reflect the situation more generally in Jewish Palestine. After all, Esther prescribes a festival for all Jews without so much as paying lip service to the priests or other leaders in Jerusalem.<sup>65</sup> In Hasmonean times, the priests in Jerusalem issued a “revised and improved” edition of the book of Esther (now available as “Greek Esther,” part of the Apocrypha), which corrected some of its many wrongs.<sup>66</sup> In their version of the story, God was now a major character in the story, intimately and actively participating in the events of history; Esther and Mordecai both offer long and heartfelt prayers; Esther expresses her deep sorrow at her predicament, trapped as she is in a foreign palace; Mordecai is re-cast as a prophetic dreamer in the mode of Joseph.

Besides all these issues, the fundamental worldview of the book may have also been deemed unacceptable by the Jews of Yehud. Support for the claim that this view propounded by Esther—that the world is unpredictable but it is all that we have—made it an objectionable book, comes from the apocryphal book of Tobit. This is a book likely produced in Palestine,<sup>67</sup> but it depicts life in the exile. For the author of Tobit, exilic

63. That Jerusalem was in danger is emphasized by Ramban (Nahmanides) in his commentary on the Bavli, beginning of Megillah: he argues, indeed, that the Jews in Jerusalem were *more* in danger than the Jews elsewhere, since he knows from the narratives of Ezra-Nehemiah that Jerusalem’s walls were not completed until the reign of Artaxerxes.

64. For some comments, see Isaac Kalimi, “The Book of Esther and the Dead Sea Scrolls’ Community,” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 60 (2004): 101–6.

65. As a contrast, we know from the preserved letters that the Jews of fifth-century Elephantine had turned to the priests of Jerusalem for approval when they needed political and religious assistance.

66. This does indicate that there were readers of the book of Esther for whose benefit the priests wanted to improve it. Who these readers were and why the original, problematic version of the text wound up in the canon of the Hebrew Bible, is discussed more extensively in the monograph referred to above (n. 62).

67. The provenance of Tobit has long been debated. Jozef T. Milik, “La patrie de

life is fundamentally topsy-turvy. Amy-Jill Levine puts the perspective of Tobit nicely:

In exile, dead bodies lie in the streets and those who inter them are punished; demons fall in love with women and kill their husbands; even righteousness is no guarantee of stability, as both Tobit and his nephew Ahikar (cf. 14:10) realize. In the diaspora, no immediately clear solid ground for self-definition exists.<sup>68</sup>

According to Tobit, life in the homeland presumably was different. The life described is an exilic malady—which, for the author, may have been all the more reason Jews should live in Palestine!

With Tobit's description of life in exile, the book of Esther would not disagree: life *is* unpredictable, full of reversals, subject to the whim of an erratic and irrational all-powerful monarch. The author of Esther would have only one quibble with Tobit's claim: he would say that is an accurate portrayal of life not just in exile, but *everywhere* under the Persians, even in the homeland. Indeed, according to Esther, the residents of Jerusalem, too, would have been massacred were it not for the heroism of the Persian Esther and Mordecai. Success *anywhere* is guaranteed not

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Tobie," *Revue Biblique* 73 (1966): 522–30, argued that the book was originally Samaritan, but was later re-edited in Galilean pro-Jerusalemite circles. For recent cogent and important arguments that the book is from Eretz Israel, based on the legal traditions evident therein, see Devorah Dimant, "Tobit in Galilee," in *Homeland and Exile: Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Honour of Bustenay Oded*, ed. Gershon Galil, Mark Geller, and Alan Millard, *Vetus Testamentum Supplements* 130 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 347–59; "The Book of Tobit and the Qumran Halakhah," in *The Dynamics of Language and Exegesis at Qumran*, ed. Devorah Dimant and Reinhard G. Kratz, *Forschungen zum Alten Testament* 2/35 (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2009), 121–43. See the discussion, which goes in a similar direction, in Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Tobit, Commentaries on Early Jewish Literature* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), 53–54; the discussion in John J. Collins, "The Judaism of the Book of Tobit," in *The Book of Tobit—Text, Tradition, Theology: Papers of the First International Conference on the Deuteronomical Books, Pépa, Hungary, 20–21 May, 2004*, ed. Géza G. Xeravits and József Zsengellér, *Journal for the Study of Judaism Supplements* 98 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 23–40, is also valuable.

68. Amy-Jill Levine, "Diaspora as Metaphor: Bodies and Boundaries in the Book of Tobit," in *Diaspora Jews and Judaism: Essays in Honor of, and in Dialogue with A. Thomas Kraabel*, ed. J. Andrew Overman and Robert S. MacLennan, *South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism* 41 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1992), 105–17, at 105; see also 113–17. Cf. also Beate Ego, "The Book of Tobit and the Diaspora," in *The Book of Tobit—Text, Tradition, Theology: Papers of the First International Conference on the Deuteronomical Books, Pépa, Hungary, 20–21 May, 2004*, ed. Géza G. Xeravits and József Zsengellér, *Journal for the Study of Judaism Supplements* 98 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 41–54.



by righteousness, but by good fortune and skillful negotiation of complex realities. Tobit may be conceived of as a Palestinian response to Esther: “That may be *your* life,” Tobit may say, “but that’s because you are in exile. Here in the Promised Land life works the way it is supposed to.” I am not sure Esther would agree.

## CONCLUSIONS

In concluding, it should again be emphasized that ideas traced here can only be said with certainty to represent the views of the elites who composed the literature discussed here. The beliefs and ideals of the masses cannot be discerned from this literature, which for the most part eschews descriptions of everyday life and focuses on the extraordinary. Thus, what can be said is that the literati among the Jews of Yehud were prepared to believe one of two things about God and the world. They were happy to be told that far from being absent in the world, God was operating through the medium of the Persian monarch. This actually solved multiple problems, since it explained the theological conundrum of God’s retreat from the world while demoting the Persian king to the role of a puppet. The Judeans were also prepared to accept that the world as it stood was hopelessly corrupt, and that God had retracted his dominion to the heavens alone. Thus, the apocalyptic literature was attractive, as it posited that there was another world in which God reigned, and there would be a future existence in which the balance of right and wrong, good and evil, would be restored.

The radical cynicism of the book of Esther, however, found no readers in Jewish Palestine. This book argued that the world was without direction, and that the only way to make one’s way through the world was to learn to navigate the system. The original text of Esther became popular (and indeed, canonical) only after circumstances had changed. Prior to that, it was alternately ignored, disputed, and corrected. The author of the original book may not have appreciated the attempts to reform his radicalism, but he may have smiled knowingly at the unpredictable turns that life and literature take.