

The Institute of ARCHAEOLOGY Siegfried H. Horn Museum



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INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY
HORN ARCHAEOLOGICAL
MUSEUM
NEWSLETTER

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Persia Symposium

Some of the most interesting questions to which biblical scholars and archaeologists would like answers involve biblical history in relation to the Achaemenid Empire, better known as the Persian Empire. To at least partially answer these questions, Dr. Constance Gane, of Andrews University, directed her graduate students in presenting their respective research in the “Persia Symposium,” on February 26, 2018, as part of the Horn Museum Lecture Series.

Max Gordiienko, a PhD student in Old Testament studies, presented his research on Cyrus the Great, the founder and first king of the Achaemenid Empire, and his decree recorded in the book of Ezra. The majority of secular scholars claim that this decree (cf. Ezra 1:2-4) is Jewish propaganda, portraying Cyrus, being kind to the Jews, and showing respect for the Hebrew God. Points which raise a question of authenticity regarding the text of Ezra include: Cyrus as a convert; unclear motivation for issuing the edit; and explicit Jewish theology. In order to investigate the reality of these points, one must start with the historical documents of the Achaemenid period. One of the Susa Acropolis Tablets (Fragments MDP9), says “bronze shafts: the God received,” reflecting the practice that when Persians made an offering to the gods, at their temple, the donor received a document confirming its reception by the gods. The donor believed they were giving something directly to the gods. This is comparable to how when Cyrus returned the Temple utensils to the sanctuary, he believed that he was interacting directly with the God of Israel. Within the Harem Text (of Xerxes), there are also enlightening features, including: the king referring to his god as his creator, who made him king, introducing his name and title, mentioning his ancestors, his and their own building projects, and invoking the god’s protection for himself, his kingdom, and what was built by the king and his father; each point parallel to the format of the edict recorded in Ezra.

(cont'd on p. 2)



Talmadge Gerald, Omwocha Nyaribo, Dorian Alexander, Max Gordiienko, and Constance Gane.

When compared to one another, one finds similarities between Ezra 1:2-4, the Harem Text, and the Cyrus Cylinder. All three texts appear to follow the same general format: the king's name, title, and the source of his power, the reason for the decree, the sent people, the remaining people, and the invocation of blessings. All three texts present particular kings with their names; their building projects, and connect secular and religious events. Proposed solutions to the historicity of Cyrus' decree in Ezra, include; 1) that Cyrus believed in the God of Israel, but he did not reject other gods; without a conversion, 2) his acts were part of general imperial policy that rewarded the disloyalty of the Jews towards Babylonian rule, by sending them back to their homeland, with the expectation of good tax revenue in return, 3) in light of the phraseology of the Cyrus Cylinder, one might reasonably assume that when the decree was issued it was adapted to the needs of local populations, with the text of Ezra intentionally adapted with a Jewish phraseology, and likely edited before its proclamation, but not by biblical authors, and 4), if Cyrus was aware of Jewish messianic prophecies and their positive attitude toward him known, it is possible that while issuing his decree of liberation of various nations, he made an additional one in order to honor the God, whose prophets predicted his glorious victory. In conclusion, the decree of Cyrus in Ezra fits the Persian stylistic and historical context; consequently, the historicity of this decree is not in doubt.

Omwocha Nyaribo, a MDiv student, presented his research on the interpretation of "the star" in Matt 2:2 and its implications for the origin and identity of the Magi. The earliest-known use of the word Magi is in the trilingual inscription written by Darius I (ca. 522-486 BC), known as the Behistun Inscription. The plural *magi* comes from the singular Latin *magus*, taken directly from the Greek *magos*, which in turn is from an Old Persian loan word *magush*, with broad application in Greek and Roman texts. Its primary usage refers to the priests of the

Persian kings, but is also a pejorative for those who foretell the future, the latter of which we get the words "magic" and "magician." In the Achaemenid period, the Magi were generally understood as priests, whose roles included transmitting lore and traditions, performing rituals and sacrifices to ward off evil omens, and interpreting dreams and other omens.

The word *magi* in Matthew 2 is often translated as "wise men"; the Greek term *magus* defined as wise men and priests, with expertise in astrology, interpretation of dreams and various occultic arts, hence "magician." By 450 BC it is thought that Zoroastrian priests were Magi, scholars are divided as to the extent to which practices and rituals attributed to the Magi may be considered only Zoroastrian or not. Some see the Magi as the original Zoroastrian priests, others as the *daeva*-worshippers attacked by Xerxes.

Of note is the dynamic between the Chaldeans and the Magi between 605-562 BC during the age of Babylonian astrology and star religion. These astronomers (thought to be Magi) belonged to the ethnic group of the Chaldeans. Old Syriac and Greek texts refer to Daniel as the head of the Chaldean Magi (cf. Dan 2:48). Between the 4th-5th cent. BC, Chaldean astronomers determined the synodic period of the five classical planets (i.e., Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn), and Herodotus notes that the Magi dealt with celestial phenomena for Xerxes. The most important cuneiform Chaldean tablets were found in underground archives of the temple of Esagalia; with tablets that predicted day to day positions of the sun, the moon, planets, as well as almanacs and diaries which concerned astronomical and historical events. These almanacs may be a means by which the Magi gained their knowledge of the birth of the Messiah, and while it is unknown exactly how the Magi knew what the star meant, they traveled all the way to Bethlehem to worship this newborn king.

In terms of the Star of Bethlehem, the various suggestions include: angels, the Holy Spirit, and the conjunction of Jupiter

and Saturn, the latter as heralds of important religious and political events. Still others believe it was a comet, or a supernova. In conclusion, contrary to the popular opinion that portrays the Persian Magi as magicians and evildoers, it seems more logical to suggest that we view them as astronomers or religious leaders who were aware of the coming of the Messiah and actually understood the prophecies of Daniel and Balaam's prophecy of "the star" which was to come out of Jacob (cf. Num 24:17), that were esteemed by the Jewish people.

Dorian Alexander, a PhD student in Biblical Archaeology, presented his research on the historicity of the book of Esther, which is viewed by many scholars as non-historical, and often read as satire.

It can be inferred that the author of Esther lived in a Persian city because of his knowledge of Persian life, customs, vocabulary and court protocol. Persians drank as they deliberated matters of state, (cf. Esth 1:10-12). Seven men functioned as the immediate advisors to the king (cf. 1:13-14). Persian royal women could not only attend banquets (cf. 2:10-11) but also accompanied the king on hunts and even on military campaigns. Six-month "beauty treatments" for the women were a preparation intended for training in court decorum and protocol (cf. 2:12). The harem was guarded by a eunuch (cf. 2:14), and royal women could use their influence to intercede with the king (cf. 2:21-23; 7:3-6). Court officials could not meet with royal women alone (cf. 4:5-9); and no one of any position could approach the king without having been summoned (cf. 4:11).

Xerxes ruled Persia from 486-465 BC, and is best known for his failed invasion of Greece in 480 BC, around which time the events of Esther would have taken place. The 180-day banquet Xerxes hosted during his third year (ca. 483 BC) may have been an extended gathering of leaders to strategize the Greek invasion. Perhaps the sight of Queen Vashti was intended to inspire patriotism in men being asked to go to war. Xerxes did not take action to replace

Vashti until his sixth year (ca. 480 BC), probably because he was away for three years putting down a revolt in Babylon (ca. 482 BC) and leading the unsuccessful invasion of Greece. “Esther” is likely derived from Ishtar, and “Mordecai” is thought to be derived from Marduk(a). Herodotus specified that Xerxes’ queen was named Amestris, but this may in fact have been Esther, their names seemingly linguistically related. However, Amestris was described as a cruel despot. While Greek histories furnish no explanation for the brutal activities of Persian royal women, one must bear in mind that Esther asked for a second day for the Jews to make war in Susa and for the bodies of Haman’s sons to be hanged on display, which may seem quite cruel. A cuneiform tablet from Borsippa mentions a government official or scribe named Marduka in the context of a list of payments made to Persian officials, confirming the existence of a Persian royal official by that name.

While it cannot be said with certainty that we can confirm or deny the existence of the individual characters of Esther, the history of Persia during the reign of Xerxes, as well as the author’s thorough knowledge of Persian culture, provides evidence to suggest the probability of an historically-accurate setting for the biblical account.

Talmadge Gerald, a PhD student in Biblical Archaeology, presented his research on the Achaemenid religion of Zoroastrianism, and its implications regarding critical scholarship of the Hebrew Bible. Some critical scholars assume that the Achaemenid state religion of Zoroastrianism is the world’s oldest monotheistic religion, and that the Hebrew Bible was written after the Exile, during the Achaemenid Empire (ca. 5th-4th cent. BC). They contend that major thematic elements are shared between Zoroastrianism and the three Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). Theoretically, Zoroastrianism, being older, was the context and influence of the writers of the biblical text

Zoroastrianism is a monotheistic religion that originated in ancient Persia,

founded by the prophet Zoroaster (aka Zarathustra), who was given the divine revelations of the god Ahura Mazda. It is a dualistic religion, its two pillars being “Truth” and “Lie,” with fire commonly used in purification rituals, and survives to this day. Scholars variously place Zoroaster ca. 1000 BC, in the 6th cent. BC, or that he was never intended to be historical, making the historicity of the religion futile. Zoroastrianism as the state religion of Achaemenid Persia is based on written sources, such as the trilingual autobiographical Behistun Inscription authored by Darius I, and the inscriptions at Persepolis. The former gives information on two previous Achaemenid kings (Cyrus and Cambyses II), mentions the name Ahura Mazda, and claims that Darius was not “a follower of the Lie.” In Xerxes’ inscription at Persepolis, he mentions the destruction of temples devoted to the *Daevas* or “old gods,” in line with Avestan theology that rejects other religions and their gods of the “Lie.” In addition, Herodotus says Persian children were specifically educated in “riding, shooting, and speaking the truth.” However, while the concept of the dualistic functions of “Truth” and “Lie” seem to have been developed in the Achaemenid period and are evidence of Zoroastrian characteristics, there are nevertheless constant references to Elamite religion in royal sources like the Behistun Inscription.

At the site of Naqsh-e Rostam, located 12 km west of Persepolis, four Achaemenid kings (Darius, Xerxes, Artaxerxes I, and Darius II) are thought to be buried in the tombs there. There are several features at this site that are attributed to Zoroastrianism. The structure known as *Ka’ba-ye Zartosht*, thought to be the oldest fire temple; is theoretically a type of building that continues in use today in Zoroastrian worship. However, such an identification is unlikely since there is little room in the structure to perform rituals. Furthermore, Herodotus says the Persians worshipped in open-air temples of which the *Ka’ba-ye Zartosht* is not. In addition, each tomb at the site

portrays the king, the god Ahura Mazda, and an image believed by some scholars to represent a ritualistic use of fire.

However, alongside these is an image of the moon, which is not part of Zoroastrian symbolism. With regards to the religion’s sacred texts, the language of the *Avesta* is from the family of Indo-Iranian languages; of which Avestan and Persian are considered the oldest. The Avestan alphabet has clear influence from Aramaic and Old Persian, and is believed to have been formed in the 5th-6th cent. AD. The earliest Avestan manuscript dates to the 13th-14th century. The Avestan corpus is divided into the Old Avestan Texts, with 17 hymns believed to have been written by Zoroaster himself, and the Young Avestan Texts. The *Avesta* was in oral form until ca. 5th cent. AD, and later canonized in the 13th century, over a millennium after a Bible written in the 6th-5th cent. BC, from the critical perspective. In addition, the *Avesta* makes no claims to historical context like the Bible.

The claim of Zoroastrian influence on the Bible focuses on major themes (Satan, creation, angels, demons, final judgement, heaven and hell, resurrection, and the Savior) shared by the two faiths. However, while they are similar in name, they are by no means so in substance. Several books of the Bible have loanwords and cultural references from periods that are relevant to the prose in the text. For example, Egyptian loanwords and references are found in areas of the text that take place in and around Egypt, i.e., Genesis and Exodus. There are several Persian loanwords and cultural references used in the books Daniel, Nehemiah, Ezra, and Esther. This feature is not a unusual, as it shows that the authors had intimate knowledge of the time period in which the narrative took place. However, there are no Persian loanwords, names, or cultural references used in the Pentateuch. This would not have been the case if it was composed during the Achaemenid period. (Dorian Alexander)



RANDOM SURVEY

Amphitheater at Portus:

A 2nd cent. AD amphitheater, part of Portus, that succeeded Ostia as the main port of the Roman Empire, located at the mouth of the Tiber River, has recently been relocated. Originally discovered in the 1860s, and remaining basically undisturbed ever since, archaeologists have excavated a number of luxurious rooms, with marble floors, a colonnaded garden, a carved marble head, possibly of Ulysses, and a palace with a three-seat latrine, near the amphitheater, all part one of this large ancient maritime infrastructure.

Crossword Puzzle Discovered at Smyrna:

Archaeologists have recently found a crossword puzzle carved in a wall of the basilica in the agora (marketplace) of ancient Smyrna. Some scholars have suggested that early Christians communicated in such puzzles, but others think it more likely that they were produced by salespeople working in the booths to entertain themselves during their spare time.

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Third Wall Found?

Archaeologists have recently located the site of the third wall of Herodian Jerusalem, that was breached by the Romans, under Titus, when they conquered the city, in AD 70. While preparing for modern building activities in the in the Russian compound, archaeologists found the ground covered with large ballista stones, along with a 1.9 m (6.2') wide section of the wall. Ceramics here date to the Roman period. A watchtower was also discovered along the wall. Construction was begun by Agrippa I, King of Judea, (r. AD 41-44) and finished in AD 66, at the beginning of the revolt.

X-rays and Greek Art:

In ancient Greece the black-figure ware lekythos was mass produced for the Festival of Athena. Researchers using synchrotron x-ray fluorescence have now uncovered some of the steps in this process. The x-ray beams revealed the color chemistry, with e.g., a calcium-based additive producing white, adding an additional step. This raised questions about the firing process due to the absence of zinc in the black regions. It is now assumed that a zinc additive was key to achieving the black figures in the heating process.

Neolithic in Jordan:

A study in the Azraq Basin suggests that hunter-gatherers maintained a dietary strategy balancing wetland plants and seasonal grasses as they adopted a sedentary lifestyle during the Neolithic period as opposed to the traditional view of adopting cereals and grains.

N E W S L E T T E R



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