

JEWES AND ZOROASTRIANS

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Treatment of Jews

Josef Wiesehöfer has removed years of misunderstanding and inaccuracy about this subject in a very factual way:

“After a brief phase of uncertainty and repression under Ardashir, which can be fully explained by the change in dynasty, the good relations between the Jews and the Parthian authorities, Shapur I and the exiliarchs and rabbis came to an understanding by which the Jews were granted more freedom of movement ---- Shapur’s antagonism against Odaenthus of Palmyra, who had destroyed the Jewish centre of Nehardea when he invaded Babylonia, may have enhanced the favourable relationship between the king and his Jewish subjects. Despite Kirdir’s assertion to the contrary, we hear nothing about persecutions in the Jewish records.”¹

The same sentiment is expressed by several Jewish historians.

“In the wars between Rome and Shapur II, the Jews, unlike the Christians were decidedly loyal in their attitude, with the exception of a few Messianic groups. The later massive repression by the state under Yazdgird II and Peroz was not a sign of religious intolerance, but was clearly a result of political actions by which the Jews expressed their attitude of imminent anticipation of the Messiah, whose appearance they connected with the 400th anniversary of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. On this occasion, Iranian sources mention attacks by the Jews of Isfahan on the city’s Magi. Later persecutions were also politically motivated. Khosrow’s general Mahbad killed the Jewish followers of the pretender to the throne Bahram Chubin, and a further Messianic revolt in Babylonia was

1 Josef Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia*, London: I.B. Taurus, 1996

ruthlessly put down in 640. At the beginning of the seventh century, the Jews watched the Sasanian offensive against Byzantium with great expectancy and joyfully welcomed the conquest of Jerusalem.” (*op. cit.*, p. 215).

Jews and Jewish monotheism

In the *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series*, 149, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992, N.P. Lemche's study of “the God of Hosea,” focusing on the way exilic and/or post-exilic editing of Hosea, show that the battle for monotheism continued even in that relatively late period. Various papers in this Journal center on the issue of how did the ancients deal with contrast of racial purity and its linkage with sanctity, on the one hand, and the emphasis on the otherness of God, the one and universal Creator, before whom pale the distinctions between races, on the other? Even here there are at least some similarities between the Israelis and the Persians in facing and resolving this issue and it is quite possible both learned to resolve the issue by comparing notes consciously or unconsciously with one another's experiences in this regard.

Jewish and Zoroastrian monotheism

In *The Rise of Yahwism: The Roots of Israelite Monotheism* (Leuven: Pasters Press, 1997), J. C. De Moor analyzes the use of theophonic personal names before David's reign (pp. 10-40) and concludes they show a preference for the god El, although there were a large number of Yahwistic names too. He decipheres the original meaning of the fable of Jotham (*Judges* 9:7-19) as polytheists vigorously protesting any claim to YHWH's exclusive kingship over all the gods (pp. 271-309). In his final chapter, “YHWH-El, God of the Fathers” (pp. 310-369), he posits that the battle for supremacy between YHWH-El and Baal explains the vestiges of Baalism in the early sources.

Judaism during the Persian rule

Other scholars have also noted this phenomenon, for instance, F. E. Greenspahn, in “Why Prophecy Ceased” (*The Journal of Biblical Literature*, 10, 1989, pp. 37-49).

Jon L. Berquist's findings came close to proving my thesis of some Iranian influence, indirect, this phenomenon on historical and political

grounds though perhaps not on theological basis – *Judaism in Persia's Shadow – A Social and Historical Approach*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1995. Berquist posits that Persia's legacy goes far beyond its imperial conquests as colonization during the Persian period contributed to a new development – formation of smaller societies and when Alexander conquered the Persian Empire, he and his successors readily adopted the Persian administrative system (I may add very much like the Arab conquerors did later on) and which had already shaped the social character of these colonized societies. The colonial Judea “took advantage of the Persian system of administration to create its own distinctive temple system” and all that was necessary to maintain it “During the years of the Pax Persica”, observes Berquist, “Yehud (which I may add is a Persian word for Judea) developed into a society with a religion very strongly connected to subsequent and even modern forms of religion. The roots of formative Judaism and Christianity are clearly evident in the religious changes and innovations of the Persian period.” (p. 233).

As Berquist observes, the writings Deutero-Isaiah “did influence Yehud's religious thought” and regarded the advent of the Pax Persica as God's design for restoring Judea. The social and ideological differences between the native Judeans and those that returned to Judea from the Babylonian exile centered around the notion held by the exiles that the Persian administration was “in the Yehudites' best interests and according to the will of God.” (p. 234). Haggai, Zechariah and Third Isaiah endeavored to allay the native Judeans' fear of the Persian bureaucrats interfering in the local matters or the Persian army's passage through Judea disrupting their land. When the temple was finally built in Jerusalem during the reign of Darius I, it not only became the center for the worship of Yahweh but, as the other half of the temple represented the Persian administration, it also came to represent, if not also inevitably spread, the dominance of Persian ideology. The administrative policies of Darius I allowed Yaheuism to become the official religion of Judea “with powers to enforce its positions” insofar as it did not undermine the official Persian policy. Moreover, the law code established by Darius I led to the prominence and power of priesthood at the expense of the governorship, which may have led to the canonization of the Pentateuch and ultimately to a religion of texts and of interpretation of those texts. The temple which was built and funded by Darius I became a powerful Persian presence in Judea strongly supported by the exiles returning from Babylon. (p. 235).

The withering of local political apparatus “combined with Persia's lack of desire to manipulate all facets of colonial social life” led to the

growth of pluralism which Berquist believes was quite accentuated by the inability of the temple to enforce its dictates and beliefs, despite being very dominant. Various international contacts gained by Judea during the Persian period further strengthened the rise of pluralism, "allowing the growth of a wide variety of visions and interpretations within the growing body of Yehudite religious experience." Even though the law codes promulgated by Darius gave rise to the publication of the Pentateuch as the Law of the King as well as the Torah of God, canonization in no way could arrest the advance of pluralism which spread at a phenomenal pace. As the priesthood, though still powerful, lost its absolute hold over religion, other religious ideas came to be expressed in different texts such as wisdom literature and apocalyptic, though the priests continued to publish psalms, etc.

Berquist finds it much more possible to reconstruct this popular religion for the Persian period than for any other period in Israel's history (p. 236), even though the extant evidence seems biased against it as much of its protests against the prevailing religion may have been either destroyed by the priesthood or never put in writing by the lower classes who held them. Berquist posits that the Persian rule allowed a free rein and an increase in the range of ideological expressions in Judaism and "created the setting for the transition into even later forms of religion." As the priesthood and governorship functioned independently of each other after finally parting company, the temple retained its powerful presence throughout the Persian period. Writing down of various texts led to an established canon which in turn led to formative Judaism as a people of a book. Such developments encourages the belief "that the past times of God's direct interaction with the people were times in the past." Echoing Berquist maintains "God no longer dealt directly with human individuals. Instead, God spoke to subsequent generations through the scriptures and through those qualified to interpret the scriptures," which resulted in the formation of Mishnah and Talmud. However, the canon also developed apocalyptic. Wisdom and short stories that were not rendered in written form BEFORE the Persian period, which in turn fostered the trend towards pluralism and internationalism. Canonization made it possible for Judaism to exist outside of the temple as well as in distant regions as a Diaspora religion.

Berquist also ascribes the roots and foundations of early Christianity to the same period since Christianity started as a particular brand of formative Judaism and came to experience many of the same experiences as Judaism such as starting as a nongovernmental religion and furthering canonization by developing the New Testament, thereby not abandoning the Old Testament but rather augmenting and

extending it. However, after the first century Christianity too closed its canon and God again ceased to speak directly to humans. “The Persian period's acceptance of pluralism continued into early Christianity, which accepted several different narratives about its founder, Jesus, and placed four contradictory stories into its canon of the New Testament.” Moreover, some Jesus sayings may well reflect the continuation of wisdom tradition and the parables portray the short stories. And Mark 13 portrays the apocalyptic trend. The Jesus movement held popular religion as its main pillar and it easily filled in the gap between the traditional and popular religion prevalent at the time (pp. 237-9).

Berquist concludes that both formative Judaism as we know today as well as nascent Christianity were influenced by the socio-religious conditions prevailing in Judea under the Persian rule. “The intervening centuries change many of the details, but the influence remained.” The Hellenistic kingdoms and even the Roman empire, though at a lesser extent, “carried over many of the governmental patterns of the Persians.” Thus, both Judaism and Christianity were rooted in “a content of radical pluralism that gave rise to a multiplicity of faith expressions and their roots trace back” to the Persian rule. (p. 240).

Thus, what Berquist notes indicates direct or indirect Persian influence in the sudden cessation of prophecy during the Persian rule, though apparently it will be hard, rather impossible, to prove what particular set of Persian beliefs or actions may have contributed to it, besides of course inner changes and developments, as noted within the Israelis religion itself. In the end, however, whatever the truth may be in this matter, it is not surprising to find that this new phase of Israeli religion brought it ideologically closer to the ideology other Persian religions and possibly made it amenable to adopt its important concepts by their roots lying hidden in their own ancient texts.