



# BIBLE I. AS A SOURCE FOR MEDIAN AND ACHAEMENID HISTORY

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## BIBLE

### i. The Bible as a Source for Median and Achaemenid History

The old biblical texts arose in various historic periods. Except for some parts of the books of Ezra and Daniel, composed in Aramaic, all these texts are written in Hebrew.

The books of the prophets Nahum and Habakkuk, who lived approximately at the same time in the seventh century b.c., describe the imminent downfall of Assyria. Nahum describes the expected catastrophe of Nineveh, which was captured by the Medes and Babylonians in 612 b.c., and Habakkuk tells about the capture of Assur in 614 b.c. by the Medes. Possibly, the prophecies in both works belong to the time when Assyria still existed but her fate seemed decided (for literature, see O. Eissfeldt, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, 3rd ed., Tübingen, 1964, pp. 558-71).

Chapters 40 to 55 of the book of Isaiah (Deutero-Isaiah) describe events of approximately 547-539 b.c. when the decline of the Neo-Babylonian kingdom had begun and the Persian army of Cyrus the Great was attacking



Mesopotamia or preparing for war with it. These chapters express hope that Cyrus will destroy the power of Babylon and permit the captive Jews to return to their homeland and to reconstruct their temple in Jerusalem. The main parts of the chapters 56 to 66 of the book of Isaiah (Trito-Isaiah) belong to the period of Persian rule and deal with the problems of the temple congregation in Jerusalem before the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah (for literature, see S. Smith, *Isaiah Chapters XL-LV, Literary Criticism and History*, London, 1944, pp. 1-23; Eissfeldt, *Einleitung*, pp. 444-59; G. Wanke, "Prophecy and Psalms in the Persian Period," in *Cambridge History of Judaism I*, Cambridge, 1984, pp. 169-72).

The book of Ezekiel, who lived in Babylon in the beginning of the sixth century b.c., contains important information about the political history of the Near East of this time (for literature, see Eissfeldt, *Einleitung*, pp. 492-515).

Some parts of the book of Haggai are exactly dated, specifically with the second year of the reign of Darius I (between August and December 520 b.c.), when this prophet approached the governor of Judah, Zerubbabel, the high priest, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem with appeals, urging them to restore the temple. This work is complemented by the book of Zechariah, Haggai's contemporary, who made identical calls between the second and fourth years of the reign of Darius I, i.e., in 520-518 b.c. (for literature, see Eissfeldt, *Einleitung*, pp. 575-95; G. Wanke, "Prophecy and Psalms," pp. 164-69).

The book of Ezra, a scribal priest appointed in the seventh year of Artaxerxes (most probably Artaxerxes I is meant, i.e., 458 b.c.) governor of Judah, contains two independent records in Aramaic and Hebrew of the decree of Cyrus given in 538 b.c. which permitted the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. According to the opinion of E. Meyer, now commonly accepted, the Aramaic parts of the book of Ezra (6:3-5), being composed in the administrative language of the Persian empire, are authentic documents of the highest importance (see E. Meyer, *Entstehung des Judentums*, Halle, 1896, p. 65). As for Cyrus's decree in the same work, composed in Hebrew (Ezra 1:2-4; cf. II Chronicles 36:22-23), E. Bickerman has shown that this is also a genuine record. The difference between the Aramaic and Hebrew texts is that the first was a memorandum to the royal treasurer and the latter a royal proclamation addressed to the Jews and published by the heralds (see E. Bickerman, *Studies in Jewish and Christian History I*, Leiden, 1976, pp. 72-108; see also H. H. Schaeder, *Esra der Schreiber*, Tübingen, 1930; F. Rosenthal, *Die aramäische Forschung seit Th. Nöldeke's Veröffentlichungen*, Leiden, 1939, pp. 63-68; J. M.



Myers, *Ezra. Nehemiah*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 14, Garden City, New York, 1981, pp. XXX-LXXXIII).

The book of Nehemiah, governor of Judah in the 20th-32nd years of Artaxerxes (probably Artaxerxes I is meant, i.e., 444-432 b.c.), is in content like the book of Ezra and relates the history of the Jews in the Persian period, mostly about the restoration of the Jerusalem temple (see Myers, *Ezra. Nehemiah*, pp. XXXII-XXXV, XLI-XLVI, LXXIV-LXXXIII).

The book of Daniel is a historical novel about events of the second half of the sixth century b.c. (mostly about the fall of the Neo-Babylonian kingdom in 539 b.c.) but was composed much later, in 167-163 b.c. during the severe persecutions of the local population of Judea by Antiochus IV Epiphanes (see Eissfeldt, *Einleitung*, pp. 693-718; E. Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Bible*, New York, 1967, p. 127). From the book of Daniel it can be seen that later Jewish tradition about the Achaemenid period was unreliable. For instance, the whole Achaemenid period is said to have lasted only 52 years instead of the actual 228. The succession of kings contains much confusion. Thus, according to this tradition Darius was a Mede, the son of Xerxes, and attained the throne at the age of 62, and was then succeeded by Cyrus (for literature, see H. H. Rowley, *Darius the Mede and the Four World Empires in the Book of Daniel*, Cardiff, 1935, repr. 1964, pp. XIII-XXXIV; cf. also G. F. Hasel, "The Book of Daniel: Evidences Relating to Persons and Chronology," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 19, 1981, pp. 37-49; W. H. Shea, "Nabonidus, Belshazzar, and the Book of Daniel: an Update," *ibid.*, 20, 1982, pp. 133-49; *idem*, "Darius the Mede: an Update," *ibid.*, 20, 1982, pp. 229-47).

The book of Esther is also a historical novel, which narrates the fate of the Jewish diaspora in the fifth century b.c. under [Ahasuerus](#) (i.e., [Xerxes I](#)). The plot of the novel takes place at the Achaemenid court in the city of Susa. The author is well acquainted with the topography of this city and quotes names of Persians (Memucan, etc.), Elamites (Haman), and Babylonians (Mordecai). Vashti, the wife of Xerxes, refuses to appear at a reception given by her husband before his guests and as a result is deprived of her position as the queen, and the Jewess Esther, the niece of Mordecai, takes her place. Mordecai, according to the novel, had already been taken into Babylonian captivity by Nebuchadnezzar (who would have been more than a hundred years old under Xerxes). Although this novel appeared in the second century b.c. and has little historical material, in several parts of it a reliable tradition was used: the details of the life-style of the royal court and clerical work and the description



of Persian customs contained in the book of Esther are confirmed by independent sources (see Bickerman, *Four Strange Books*, pp. 169-240; Eissfeldt, *Einleitung*, pp. 684-93; C. A. Moore, *Esther*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 7B, Garden City, New York, 1979, pp. XVI-LXXII).

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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Given in the text.