



‘EZRĀ, BOOK OF

‘EZRĀ, BOOK OF, canonical biblical book emanating from the early portion of the Second Temple period (515 B.C.E.-70 C.E.) of Jewish history. Despite bearing the name of “Ezrā,” the title character only figures in the final chapters (7-10) of the book. Therein ‘Ezrā is portrayed as an emissary of the Achaemenian monarch Artaxerxes I charged with restoring the Temple cultus at Jerusalem for the benefit of both the citizenry of the province of Yehud and the royal family. The preceding six chapters of the book introduce the mission of ‘Ezrā by describing previous failed attempts to reconstitute the Temple service during the reigns of Cyrus, Darius I, and Xerxes. Hence the book of ‘Ezrā provides potentially valuable testimony for the role played by the central Persian administration in managing provincial affairs during the Achaemenid period.

Of especial significance for assessing the historical worth of the book is the person and office of ‘Ezrā himself. While some have argued that “Ezrā” is a fictional character (e.g., Torrey), the general consensus accepts his historicity. ‘Ezrā is identified as a “priest” and “scribe” in the official commission addressed to him by Artaxerxes (7.12-26). He is dispatched from Babylon with a contingent of fellow Israelites, including authorized Temple personnel, in order “to inspect (the province of) Yehud and (the city of) Jerusalem (to determine their concordance) with the law of your God which you possess” (7.14). He also bears financial subsidies contributed by both the Persian administration and the Jewish inhabitants of Babylon for the restoration of the Temple cultus. ‘Ezrā moreover is granted full authority to appoint magistrates



and judges to insure compliance with “the law of your God” and “the law of the king” (7.25-26).

The authenticity of such a commission was forcefully defended by Schaefer (1930a), and in spite of criticisms, remains a viable position today. The office of “scribe” (Aramaic *sāprā*) should not be confused with mere clerical duties. It marked a lofty status in administrative circles of the ancient Near East, as is attested by the same title (in almost identical language to that of ‘Ezrā 7.6) being ascribed to the legendary Ahiqar at the court of Esarhaddon. Moreover, an important extrabiblical parallel to the office and mission of ‘Ezrā occurs within the context of the Achaemenid administration of Egypt. The figure of Udjahorresnet, also described as “priest” and “scribe,” is given similar charges and responsibilities regarding the restoration of native cultus and civil order during the reigns of Cambyses and Darius I (Blenkinsopp).

Another important feature of the book of ‘Ezrā is its apparent preservation of authentic Aramaic versions of decrees issued by Cyrus (6.3-5; compare 1.2-4), Darius I (6.6-12), and Artaxerxes I (4.17-22), interspersed with correspondence emanating from local Persian governmental officials based in Samaria (4.11-16; 5.7-17). The essential authenticity of these documents was vigorously championed by Meyer and Schaefer (1930b), and the cogency of their arguments continues to be recognized by most biblical scholars. They pointed to the numerous parallels in literary form and expression that link the ‘Ezrā documents with recovered examples of authentic Aramaic governmental correspondence unearthed in Egypt (see Cowley and Driver). They noted the high percentage of Akkadian and Iranian loan-words appearing in the correspondence and the decrees, suggesting that the ‘Ezrā documents had been translated from official archival copies. They also utilized Achaemenid royal inscriptions to demonstrate that certain expressions or syntagms once thought “Jewish” were actually common ancient Near Eastern formulae.

Despite these arguments, objections continue to be raised against the reliability of the ‘Ezrā documents (Grabbe, p. 35). Perhaps the most compelling is the undeniable presence of Jewish religious and cultic expressions within the governmental records, especially in 7.12-26 (see Meyer, p. 65). Could Achaemenian officials have possibly been cognizant of all the different nuances of conception and expression employed by the various local cults under their administration? Schaefer suggested that ‘Ezrā himself was responsible for adapting the official decree of 7.12-26 to a Jewish context (1930a, pp. 54-55). While this is possible, it is nevertheless evident from the



Udjahorresnet inscription, the Egyptian *Demotic Chronicle* (see Blenkinsopp), and the Jewish Aramaic correspondence from Elephantine that Achaemenid rulers displayed a keen interest in the ordering of native religious affairs in distant foreign provinces. The 'Ezrā documents augment this evidence.

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