



## JERUSALEM AND IRAN

**JERUSALEM AND IRAN.** Twice in its long history Jerusalem came under Persian rule, the first time in the early days of the Achaemenid Empire in the sixth century B.C.E., the second during the westward expansion of the Sasanian state in the early seventh century C.E. Both periods proved formative and entailed far reaching ramifications for the city and its inhabitants.

*In the Achaemenid period (539-332 B.C.E).* When Cyrus the Great conquered Babylonia in 539 B.C.E., the Jewish community there, which descended from those deported by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C.E., hailed him as God-sent liberator. This is immortalized in (cf. Ezra 1:1-2; see Bickerman):

In year one of the reign of Cyrus, king of Persia, so that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia, and the king made a proclamation throughout his kingdom, and put it [also] in writing, [saying]: "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord, the God of heaven, has given to me. And he has charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whosoever is there among you of all his people, the Lord his God be with him, and let him go up [to Jerusalem]. (2 Chronicles 36:22-23) Thus ends the canonized Hebrew Bible, a stunning conclusion which invests Jewish hopes of revival and of the rebuilding of Jerusalem's Temple in Persian royal initiative. As "Isaiah" indicates, the rise of the Achaemenids to power, as well as Cyrus's conquest of Babylon and his famed decree of 539 which encouraged the return of exiles from Babylon to Judah (Yehud in the satrapy of Transeuphratis; see [EBER NĀRĪ](#)), signaled, in Jewish eyes, the dawn of a new era in the history of



Jerusalem.

[The Lord] says of Cyrus: “He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose”; saying of Jerusalem, “She shall be built,” and of the Temple “Your foundation shall be laid.” Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped (Isaiah 44.28-45.1). Information about Jerusalem in the Persian period is scant (see Grabbe, pp. 13-36; Hope; Talmon), and the Hebrew Bible remains its main source (especially Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zachariah, Malachi, and “Isaiah”). Ezra 1:2-4 and 6:3-5 provides a Hebrew and Aramaic text of Cyrus’s declaration regarding the restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem. The Aramaic original refers to government subsidies for the envisioned “house of God,” to its measurements and building materials, and to its endowment, furnished from the gold and silver items which Nebuchadnezzar had removed from the temple in 586 B.C.E. Excavations in various areas of Jerusalem (City of David, Ophel, Tyropean Valley, Mount Zion, Ketef Hinnom, and Mamilla) point to the shrunken size of the city (between 130-40 *dunams* [1 *dunam* = about 1,000 m<sup>2</sup>], including 80 *dunams* dedicated to the temple precinct), and to its tiny population of some 1,500 people. (See Carter, pp. 136-48, on excavation sites in Jerusalem pertaining to the so-called First Persian period, 538-450 B.C.E, with map at p. 149 and comprehensive bibliography.)

In spite of an auspicious start, the resettlement and restoration of Jerusalem, especially the rebuilding of the city walls and of the destroyed temple, were slow and intermittent (Ezra 4:24, 6:7; see Schaper; Vanderkam, pp. 194-211). Most of the returning exiles elected to settle in the countryside, only gathering in Jerusalem to celebrate the high holidays (Ezra 3:1-2). Nor did they have sufficient means to engage in major enterprises of construction (Haggai 1:6). Internal divisions between the returning exiles and their own brethren, *Am Haaretz* “people of the land,” namely low-born Judahites who had not been exiled, isolated the newly established community, as did its tense relations with the syncretistic environment, which included Samaritans, Ammonites, Ashdodites, and Arabs (Ezra 4:1, 4; Neh. 2:10, 19, 4:1-3, 7:5, 13:23-24). The prophet Haggai (Hag. 1:9) chastises his co-religionists (in 522 B.C.E.) to resume efforts to build the Temple but later complains (in 516 B.C.E.) that the completed structure was vastly inferior to the (memories of the) great Solomonic sanctuary (Hag. 2:3).

Based on an increasingly strict Yahwist monotheism, the centrality of Jerusalem in the theology of the exilic settlers of Yehud (Zachariah 8:3) is



reflected in efforts to recreate the city as an exclusive Jewish space (“a holy city,” Neh. 11:1) housing an exclusive Jewish sanctuary. In spite of the paucity of finds of material culture from the Persian period in Jerusalem, the small number of idols found in Yehud in general hints at the ultimate success of the drive to establish monotheism throughout the province, including Jerusalem.

Under the guidance of Nehemiah, an enterprising Jewish governor who arrived in Yehud in the middle of the fifth century (the date is debated), Jerusalem’s walls were partially restored, although their precise outline remains a matter of controversy among archeologists. Nehemiah refers to a number of gates of Jerusalem: Valley gate, Dung gate, Fountain gate, Sheep gate, Fish gate, Old gate, Horse gate, East gate, and Muster gate. Since Nehemiah claims that it took fifty-two days to complete the rebuilding of the city wall (Neh. 6:15), it seems clear that the rampart embraced a rather small area, perhaps about half of the pre-exilic city. His name, however, remained intimately linked with the great endeavor of the restoration of the city (*Ben Sirah* 49.13).

To resettle the city with exilic Jews, Nehemiah resorted to the imposition of lots (Neh. 11:1), which brought to Jerusalem one out of ten men, each with his family. The concerted efforts to make Jerusalem Jewish again were extended to a campaign against intermarriage, which took place in the course of a popular assembly in Jerusalem summoned by Ezra the scribe (Ezra 9, from mid-fifth cent.?). Although the drive to separate Jewish men from their “non-Jewish” wives appears to have been unsuccessful, it marked an important stage in transforming Jerusalem into a city with a distinct Jewish identity. Nehemiah’s re-imposition of Sabbath rules (Neh. 13:8-22), which included the closure of the city gates to commerce and extended to the “cleansing” of the Temple of priests who married “foreign women” (Neh. 13:28-30), likewise contributed to the reshaping of Jerusalem’s character according to Torah rules (see Sivan-Zlotnick).

Under the Achaemenids Jerusalem enjoyed an unusual degree of autonomy, which enabled men like Nehemiah and Ezra to recreate Jerusalem and Yehud as a ‘Temple-state’, namely an entity nominally controlled by Persia but locally managed by Jewish temple priests and scribes according to Jewish law. Documents from Egypt (see Porten and Yardeni) indicate that Jews in Egypt looked for advice and support from Jerusalem (see ELEPHANTINE), and numismatic evidence points to local minting of coins which bore the name of the province (Yehud) in Hebrew script, as well as Jewish symbols, an unusual



phenomenon which reflects both the degree of Jerusalem's autonomy and the Jews' own sense of distinct identity.

*The Sasanians in Jerusalem, 614-628 C.E.* In spite of its brief duration, the Persian conquest and occupation of Jerusalem by the Sasanian army in 614 generated an extraordinary spat of literary works by Jews and Christians alike (Baras, pp. 300-49; Flusin, pp. 151-64; Dauphin, II, pp. 352-60; for archeological evidence, see Magness). For Palestinian Christians the passage into non-Christian hands of a city which Constantine had resolutely turned into an exclusive Christian space some three centuries earlier was a shattering blow, as was the transfer of the true cross to Ctesiphon. Christians also resented the collaboration between Persians and Jews in the early stages of the Sasanian invasion. (On Jewish-Christian polemics as centered on Jerusalem, see Stemberger; Wilken.) Inner divisions among Christians in Jerusalem led to a brief Persian siege in 614 which reportedly culminated in a massive massacre of the city's Christian inhabitants with widespread destruction of Christian sanctuaries. The extent of the damage to human life and to structures is still debated. It seems considerably smaller than the Christian sources suggest. Moreover, barely few months after the conquest, the Persians allowed the Jerusalemite church to gather donations for restoration projects.

For Jews, the coming of the Persians signaled a new era of messianic proportion, after centuries of legal persecution by Byzantine emperors, including a ban on living in Jerusalem. Little known but of special interest are the *piyyutim* (poems composed to accompany service in the synagogue) of the period which touch on the Persian invasion of Palestine, in general, and particularly on Jewish messianic hopes in conjunction with Jerusalem (Yahalom; Sivan). Some *piyyutim* emphasize the continuing affinity between Judaism, Jerusalem, and the temple. Others delineate the resumption of liturgical services in Persian Jerusalem, the emergence of new 'messianic' Jewish leadership, and the execution of this figure by order of the Persian authorities. All in all, little is known of the Sasanian occupation of Jerusalem. What seems clear is that the shift of Persian support from Jews to Christians on the eve of the invasion of Egypt (618/19) entailed the withdrawal of Jewish privileges. The premature death of the 'messiah' (in 618?) signaled the tragic end of hopes of Jewish national revival for centuries. In Jewish memory, the events in Persian Jerusalem between 614 and 618 became beacons of calamity and disappointment. Kosrow II was no Cyrus.



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