

וְאֲנִי לֹא אֶחָדָם עַל-
הָעֵינַיִם הַגְּדוֹלָה אֲשֶׁר
יֵשׁ-בָּהּ הַרְבֵּה מִשָּׁת



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Introduction

Ancient Jewish Memories of Achaemenid Persia

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**INTRODUCTION:
ANCIENT JEWISH MEMORIES
OF ACHAEMENID PERSIA**

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This special issue, “Ancient Jewish Memories of Achaemenid Persia,” contains five essays related to a conference session of the same title that was organized at the European Association of Biblical Studies in Syracuse, Italy, 10–13 July 2023, by the research unit Perceptions and Receptions of Persia (PERSIAS). PERSIAS examines the imaginations of Persia in Jewish writings from different historical, geographical, social, and cultural contexts from the mid-sixth century BCE to the sixth century CE. The present essays focus in various ways on the literary and visual representations of multiple biblical characters from the Achaemenid Empire, including Nehemiah, Esther, Daniel, Zerubbabel, and other Persian authorities such as Achaemenid monarchs and government officials. Analyses of the selected ancient Jewish material from the Achaemenid, Hellenistic, and Sasanian periods contribute to a deeper understanding of the entanglements of these different groups in different imperial settings. As opposed to imperial hegemonic material, the representations of Persia in the Jewish material are produced from multiple subaltern points of view.

Laura Carlson Hasler and James Nati’s article, “Truth and Writing in Daniel: Memories of Persian Media,” argues that the book of Daniel depicts the Achaemenid Empire as a political and universal order that rested on writing and texts. As remembered in the Seleucid period, Persian media practices were worthy of being emulated and contrasted with Babylonian culture. Thus, recognizing Persian media practices as portrayed in the book of Daniel acknowledges that, in this book, not all empires are alike. Related to this are the various notions of truth in the representations of Babylon and Persia, whereby one encounters competing knowledge systems.

Maximilian Häberlein, in “Imagining Power and Kingship in 1 Esdras,” analyzes how the Persian king and court are depicted in 1 Esdras 3–4 (The Story of the Three Youths) as part

of a Hellenistic-period Jewish imagination. The author argues that the language of 1 Esdras and the depiction of the Persian court are consistent with those of Greek sources. How the Judean and Persian kings are depicted in the rest of the book is complicated by chapters 3–4, painting a composite and ambiguous picture of the power of the Persian king and the Judean positions towards it. 1 Esdras is thus read as a meditation on the concept of truth and the connection between truth and kingship. As such, this essay complements the discussion on truth in Daniel and its relationship to Persian discourses on this concept.

Deirdre Noelle Fulton's article, "Remembering the Achaemenids in the Character of Nehemiah," dates the final form of the book of Nehemiah to the Hellenistic period. The author reads the various reconfigurations of Nehemiah's relationship with the Persian powers as an index of shifting views on the foreign control of Jerusalem. The book of Nehemiah frames Nehemiah's building projects of the city and temple around Artaxerxes's authorization. In Hellenistic receptions of Nehemiah, that connection is loosened for different reasons in each text. For instance, Nehemiah is held up as a model of a good leader, and his connection to Persia is downplayed. In 1 Esdras, his role is relegated to one of the leading returnees who is consulted regarding a cultic matter, but with little power over Jerusalem's more extensive reconstruction. 2 Maccabees highlights Nehemiah's building projects to show a connection between the foundations of the Hasmonean dynasty and past leadership, while Sirach removes Persians from the narrative of Nehemiah altogether.

Ehud Ben Zvi and Jill Middlemas, in "Esther in Dura Europos," examine the depiction and placement of Esther in the synagogue paintings of Dura Europos, using tools from visual exegesis and memory studies. The authors draw on an exegetical tradition preserved in *Leviticus Rabbah* to argue that Esther was understood to be the mother of Darius who would facilitate the rebuilding of the Temple, thus explaining her location next to the niche for the ark in the synagogue, and as the counterpart of Samuel—who is depicted as anointing David on the other side. This article also reflects how cultural resistance and reconfiguration of the hegemonic center takes place in the mural (and in the book of Esther), by including Esther and Mordecai as prominent leading figures from the subaltern group.

Finally, Tova Ganzel's article, "The Judean Community within the Persian Imperial Framework: Insights from Biblical and Extrabiblical Sources," addresses the Persian period of Judean identity within the framework of imperial administration by connecting the portrayals of Judeans in Haggai, Zechariah, and Nehemiah with those in various cuneiform administrative documents from that period. By putting such disparate source material into dialogue, the author approaches the material as complementary regarding their engagement with imperial and local authorities, cult practices, and administrative status. The author stresses internal Judean tension and Judean positionality among sociopolitical challenges under Achaemenid rule.