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Revisiting the Book of Esther: Assessing the Historical Significance of the Masoretic Version for the Achaemenian History

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Revisiting *the Book of Esther*: Assessing the Historical Significance of the Masoretic Version for the Achaemenian History

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Abstract

Most modern scholars consider the Book of Esther to be a kind of historical novel; hence, the historicity of many of its characters and events is highly debatable. While the present study does not intend to defend the historicity of the book, it does review it again by using sources that have received less attention in this regard. That the Book of Esther has a lot of Persian realia in it is not news, but most scholars have debated its historical value by comparing the book with classical sources. However, the present article aims to show how a significant part of the historical material of the Book of Esther is in line with evidence that if not all, but most of the classical sources are unaware of, and accepting this fact means that the author of the Masoretic Esther had direct or indirect access to sources associated with the Persian state. In order to prove this issue, using the descriptive-analytical method based on library studies, the primary focus of this article has been on sources other than the Greek ones, mainly Achaemenian royal inscriptions, and economic and legal documents found in different parts of the Persian Empire.

Keywords: The Masoretic Version of the Book of Esther; The Persian Empire; The Bible; Achaemenian.

Introduction

In studying any matter related to the Achaemenian Empire, historians encounter a large number of documents and sources that vary in terms of language and character while in terms of time and geography, they are scattered. The Hebrew Bible is one of the most significant sources in this regard, which due to being written from a Jewish point of view and having a religious nature should be read carefully along with other historical sources such as classical ones. Although the Greek sources do not say much about the Persians' policy toward the Jews, their information concerning some of the rules, customs, and administrative system of the Persian Empire can be compared with some parts of the Hebrew Bible.

So far, biblical scholars have studied *the Book of Esther* from various angles, and their primary focus, of course, has been on its place in the history of Judaism; but few have tried to use it for the Achaemenian history. In almost every commentary written on *the Book of Esther* since the 20th century, its historicity has been discussed, and although many documents have been found from the Achaemenian Empire since then, still the Classic works are more used than the Achaemenian evidence by researchers. Older commentaries such as Paton's work (1908) pays very little attention to the Achaemenian evidence, but later scholars such as Fox (1991) have tried to compensate for this deficiency, *albeit* in a limited way. As it was said in the abstract, today almost all Biblical scholars consider the Book of Esther, not a historical work, but a novel, and this has led many researchers to focus more on the theology, literary, structural, and stylistic features of the Book of Esther (see Levenson, 1997; Berlin, 2001; Koller, 2014),

not its historicity. None of the authors of the mentioned works are experts in the history of the Achaemenian Empire, and therefore, they have not considered the Achaemenian evidence as they should be. Among the proficients of this field, Llewellyn-Jones (2013) has made the most use of the Book of Esther, although his primary focus has been on the court's customs. Since almost the entire story of Esther takes place in the Achaemenian court, a large part of its content is about the court customs and ceremonies of the Great King; however, most of the verses examined in this article are related to the Achaemenian administrative system.

It should be noted that the more the independence of the historical content of the Masoretic Esther from Greek sources is proven, the more significant it is as a historical source for Achaemenian history. Therefore, the most vital issue that the current research deals with is the parallels between the Masoretic Esther and evidence directly related to the Achaemenian Empire. What is the origin of the parallels between the Book of Esther and the Achaemenian evidence? To answer this question, there is no choice but to compare the contents of the book with sources independent from the Greek ones. We know that some verses of the Book of Esther are reminiscent of some narratives and stories found in classical sources (see Stiehl, 1956: 6-9; Bickermann, 1985: 202-210; Fox, 1991: 144-145; Johnson, 2005: 575-576), however, since the primary focus of this study is on non-Greek sources, the reason behind these resemblances is not of central importance in the present article, but the conclusion presented at the end leaves much to be desired in this regard.

Before using the Book of Esther as a source for Achaemenian studies, the oldest version of this book as well as the

time of its composition must first be clarified. Almost all scholars agree that of all the versions of the Book of Esther, the three Masoretic, Septuagint, and Greek Alpha are the oldest ones, so any attempt to find the oldest version should be made by comparing and contrasting these texts. The major differences between the Greek and Masoretic versions of the Book of Esther have led some scholars to consider the Greek version to be not a free translation of the Hebrew text, but a translation of another lost text (Hebrew or Aramaic) that they consider older than the extant Hebrew version. Nevertheless, until the middle of the 20th century, most Biblical and Jewish scholars saw this idea with skepticism, pondering the Masoretic text to be the most original version. Jacob Hoschander (1918: 2-7) considered the differences between the Greek and Masoretic versions to be solely due to the work of the translators, who translated the story of the Hebrew version with significant differences according to the circumstances of their time and place of residence. However, Hoschander's idea was reconsidered around the early 1940s. Charles C. Torrey (1944: 5-9) considered the Greek Alpha text to be older than Septuagint, stating that the two Greek versions were based on a lost Aramaic version older than the Masoretic text. This was a revolutionary claim, meaning that the oldest version of the Book of Esther was not the Masoretic text, but the Greek alpha. Later, Torrey's view was strengthened by the discovery of some fragments from one of the Qumran Caves that contained a story similar to that of Esther. Józef Tadeusz Milik (1992: 321-399) described the fragments as an archetype and prototype of Esther's story; yet, many scholars have rightly pointed out that there is no direct connection between these fragments and the story of Esther (White Crawford, 1996: 323) and so they cannot be considered as evidence for the existence of a text older than the Masoretic version (De Troyer, 2000: 422). Thus, the Masoretic text of the book of Esther is still the oldest extant version, and for this reason, it has been used in the present study.

The next step after identifying the oldest version of the Book of Esther is to determine the time of its composition, which is as challenging as the previous step. The text itself does not specify exactly when it was written; therefore, we must use linguistic and historical considerations. To begin with, it is good to emphasize that the book of Esther was definitely written after the Babylonian captivity and is linguistically classified in the Late Hebrew Bible Group (LBH) (for the late Hebrew elements in the Book of Esther see Ron Bergey, 1984: 66-78); however, it is not easy to determine how much recent is its Hebrew.

Given the tune of the text at the beginning of the book, it is clear that the author was writing years after when the story took place; in other words, the Masoretic text was certainly written after the reign of Xerxes. Another significant point about the Masoretic text is the absence of any Greek words, and the presence of some Persian and Aramaic words, which may be evidence of its composition before the Hellenistic period. On the other hand, since the historical errors of the text about the Persian Empire are great, some scholars have suggested its composition in that period to be improbable and thus considered it a product of the Hellenistic period (Fox, 1991:139). I, however, suggest not completely relying on the historical faults, since as it is shown in this article, in some verses, the author of the Masoretic text shows excellent familiarity with the Persian rules and customs.

The fact that the Masoretic text does not contain a single Greek word is significant and shows that even if the text was not written during the Persian period, it should not have been written long after the fall of the Achaemenian; therefore, the fourth or early 3rd century BC may be the best date for its composition.

Administrative Divisions and Boundaries of the Persian Empire

Esther, 1, 1: "This happened in the days of Ahasuerus, the same Ahasuerus who ruled over one hundred twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia".

The reference to "One hundred twenty-seven provinces" is one of the most controversial statements in the Book of Esther. Fox (1991: 139) believes that the author refers to provinces as the Achaemenian satrapies, and as no other account out of the Hebrew Bible supports this number, he takes this as proof of the Hellenistic date of composition for the MT text since he thinks it is improbable for a person who lived in the Persian period to make such a mistake. But what if by provinces, the author of the MT Esther did not mean satrapies, but the smaller divisions that constitute them?

First of all, it is better not to get too caught up in the number 127 because, as many scholars have pointed out, it is symbolic[1] and used only to emphasize the

immense power of Ahasuerus[2]. The Hebrew word מְדִינָה (mediynah/singular=-Medinot) in the Masoretic text means "provinces". The word مَدِينَة (Madinah) in Arabic means city but in the Biblical Hebrew refers to a broader territory like a province and district. This word has been used in the book of 1 Kings four times referring to the districts of the Kingdom of Israel (1 Kings, 20, 14; 15; 17; 19). Now, note how small was the Kingdom of Israel and imagine how much smaller its districts would have been. In the Book of Ezra, there is a reference to "the people of the province" (Ezra, 2, 1) and the province is Judea. In the Book of Lamentations Jerusalem is called "princess among the provinces" (Lamentations, 1, 1). In the Book of Daniel, there is an interesting refer-

the Mede rules over 120 satraps (Daniel, 6, 1). The number seven is also a symbol of complement in the Bible because Yahweh finishes the work of creation on the seventh day (Genesis, 2, 1-2) and dedicates the seventh day of the week to himself (Exodus, 20, 9-11). There can be no definite explanation about the relation between the 120 satraps of Darius the Mede in the book of Daniel and the 127 provinces ruled by Ahasuerus in the book of Esther.

[2] This is a theme that can be seen throughout the book of Esther and I would like to call it "The magnificence of the Persian king", something that the author of Esther uses to impress his readers. The reference to the 127 provinces is such a case, or the great banquet in Susa which lasts for 187 days (Esther, 1, 4), or that every girl in the king's harem was to be under cosmetic treatment for 12 months before seeing the king (Esther, 2, 12) and other similar instances. The numbers presented in these cases are nothing but literary exaggeration and all that the author of Esther cares about is that his readers understand how powerful and wealthy the Persian king was.

[1] It should be noted that the only occurrence of this number in the whole Hebrew Bible is here in the book of Esther. But if we consider this number as 120+7, then the symbolic meaning reveals itself. The number 120 is repeated several times in the Hebrew Bible. Yahweh sets the human life at 120 years (Genesis, 6, 3), Moses lives for 120 years (Deuteronomy, 34, 7), when Solomon brings the Ark of Covenant to Jerusalem, 120 priests accompany him (2 Chronicles, 5, 12) and Darius

ence to the "province of Elam" (Daniel, 8, 2) and this is the sole use of the word מְדִינָה in the Hebrew Bible approximately identical to the famous satrapies of the Persian Empire. Again, the same word is used in the same book to refer to the province of Judea (Daniel, 11, 24). These cases clearly show the variety of the usage of the word מְדִינָה in the Hebrew Bible. Sometimes it refers to small districts of a small kingdom such as Israel, sometimes indicates the larger parts such as Judea, and sometimes describes much larger territories like the satrapy of Elam; but if we exclude the sole case of "province of Elam" in the Book of Daniel, it becomes clear that it mostly refers to small areas such as the province of Judea. This leads us to investigate the smaller administrative divisions within the satrapies.

The most well-known administrative divisions of the Achaemenian Empire were the satrapies. Herodotus reports that it was Darius the Great who after suppressing all the rebellions of the initial years of his reign, divided the empire into twenty governmental provinces called satrapies by the Persians (Herodotus, III, 89-97). The word satrapy (σατράπης=satráppēs) is a Greek form of the Old Persian xŝaÇapāvā, a title that has been attested firmly since the time of Cyrus the Great (Briant, 1996: 73-74) and Darius the Great speaks of it two times at the very beginning of his reign in the Behistun inscription when referring to satraps of Bactria (DB, III, 13-14) and Arachosia (DB, III, 56). On the other hand, we have the lists of subject nations and lands (Old Persian=dahyāva) in many royal inscriptions that of course cannot necessarily be considered administrative units (Tuplin, 1987:113). The greatest number of subject nations mentioned in the royal inscriptions is thirty-one (XPh, §3, 13-28), not

much more than the number of satrapies reported by Herodotus.

Hyparch (Ancient Greek=hyparchus) is a title well attested in several Greek sources (for instance, see Herodotus, III, 120; Herodotus, IV, 166; Herodotus, V, 27; Thucydides, VIII, 31, 2), a subordinate of the satrap, probably indicating an administrative unit smaller than the satrapies which are especially linked to military efforts (Tuplin, 1987: 121). We also know that Achaemeniian Egypt was divided into smaller districts or provinces, each ruled by an Iranian frataraka (governor) (Wiesehöfer, 1991: 305). Certainly, some (if not all) satrapies of the Persian Empire were divided into smaller administrative units. This was because of the vastness of these satrapies some of them like Babylonia and Egypt, were themselves great empires before falling to the Persians. It seems that the Persians did not make significant changes in the former administrative systems; in other words, the emergence of the satrapy system did not necessarily make the preexisting administrative units disappear. Taking Palestine as an example, it is evident that the administrative system of the Assyrian and Babylonian periods continued to a great extent during the Persian rule. This land was at first, part of the satrapy of "Babylonia and Beyond the River" and later the satrapy of Assyria[1] (Akkadian=Ebēr

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[1] A very important event that took place during the Achaemenian period was the application of the name Assyria (Old Persian Aθyrā) for all the lands between the Euphrates River and the Mediterranean Sea, it was this satrapy that Alexander the Great, following the Persian kings, called it Syria, while the main land of Assyria was located in the north of Mesopotamia. Despite this change, many documents obtained from this land during the Persian period show that the pre-Achae-

nāri), consisted of smaller provinces such as Judea and Samaria which the history of their division goes back to before the Achaemenian period (Rainey, 1969: 64-65).

The word אֲחַשְׁדַּרְפְּנֵי־ (aḥashdarpenim), the Hebrew form of the Old Persian xŝaÇapāvā meaning "satraps" actually occurs in the third chapter of the Book of Esther: "Then the king's secretaries were summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, and an edict, according to all that Haman commanded, was written to the king's satraps and the governors over all the provinces …" (Esther, 3, 12). This verse is a key to understand the function of "provinces" mentioned in the first verse of the book since the author makes a clear distinction between "the king's satraps" and "the governors over all the provinces". The Hebrew word הַפַּחֹות (happaḥowt), meaning "the governors" proves that the author of the MT Esther was well acquainted with the title peḥā, used for people such as Sheshbazzar (Ezra, 5, 14) and Zerubbabel (Haggai, 1:1, 14; 2:2, 21; Ezra, 6:7) in the Hebrew Bible, and more individuals on jar handle stamps, seals or bullae found from Palestine (Vanderhooft, 2003: 231). The title is attested in Babylonian texts as piḥātu (Briant, 1996: 500) and although in some instances it seems to be identical with satrap, based on its frequent use for provincial governors, it is clear that it was different from satrap. The fact that in this verse the author of the MT Esther has used this title, not aḥašdarpenîm (satraps) for provinces (mediynah) proves that the "provinces" mentioned in the first verse of the book, must not be equated with satrapies. Taking these two verses together (Esther 1:1; 3:12) and excluding the symbolic function of the number 127,

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menian term Eber Nari was still in use.

it can be concluded that the author of the MT Esther was to a great extent familiar with the administrative divisions of the Persian Empire.

Another issue that adds to the historical significance of the first verse of the Book of Esther is the eastern and western borders of the Persian Empire, which are marked by India and Ethiopia, respectively. The statement "from India to Ethiopia" has not been given the attention it deserves, since it is accurate in terms of both history and geography. Indeed, in the time of Xerxes I, both India and Ethiopia were part of the Persian Empire and the king himself in a list of subject nations in his famous Daiva inscription mentions India (Old Persian: Hiduŝ) and Ethiopia (Old Persian: Kūŝia) (XPh, 25&28). However, by India, he merely refers to the Indus Valley region (modern Pakistan), conquered by his father Darius the Great and the Ethiopians too paid tribute to the Persian king since the time of Darius. Note that this is the first time that we encounter the land of India in the Hebrew Bible and the Hebrew מֵהֹדּוּ (hoddu) meaning India indicates its Iranian origin.

Xerxes in Susa in Third Year of his Reign
Esther, 1, 3: "In the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all his officials and ministers. The army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were present".

That Ahasuerus seats on his royal throne at Susa in the third year of his reign shows that this was not an enthronement and the questions that arise are where he was and what he was doing in the previous two years of his reign? The Book of Esther is completely silent in this regard. However, a Babylonian document dated to the early 483 BC, the

third year of Xerxes' reign, proves that he was in Susa on that time (Olmstead, 1948: 230-231). This perfectly matches the statement of the Book of Esther from a chronological point of view. Regarding the reason behind Xerxes' feast, we have no choice but to speculate, and since this is associated with the political history of the Achaemenian, we must rely heavily on the classical sources, while one of Xerxes' inscriptions can also be used as an auxiliary resource.

According to the Greek sources, Xerxes had older brothers who could challenge him for the throne. Xerxes himself also informs us of these brothers in his so-called Haram inscription: "Other sons of Darius there were, (but)-thus unto Ahuramazda was the desire- Darius my father made me the greatest after himself. When my father Darius went away from the throne, by the will of Ahuramazda I became king in my father's throne" (XPf, §4. 27-36). Herodotus informs us of Artobarzanes, Darius' eldest son from his first wife who was Xerxes' most important rival. Finally, Xerxes won his father's favor with the help of Demaratus of Sparta (Herodotus, VII, 3). Following Herodotus' narrative, after the death of Darius, Xerxes became king with no extra tension with his brothers. According to Plutarch (Plutarch, *Moralia*, 173B & C) and Justin (Justin, II.10. 1-11), after Darius' death, Ariaramnes, who was Xerxes' brother and ruler of Bactria, came to Media to claim the throne but eventually acknowledged Xerxes' kingship peacefully. All in all, it seems that although Xerxes had brothers who could challenge him as a successor, Darius the Great chose him and after his death, Xerxes claimed the throne without any serious rivalry. However, Xerxes had to subdue Egyptians who revolted in the final years of Darius' reign immediately, and we know that Egypt was secured by

January 484 BC (Olmstead, 1948: 235). On the other, from the mentioned Babylonian document which proves the presence of Xerxes at Susa in early 483 BC, we may deduce that Xerxes' feast mentioned in the Book of Esther was a celebration of his victory over Egypt.

The Seven Officials of Persia and Media

Esther, 1, 14: "and those next to him (Ahasuerus) were Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven officials of Persia and Media, who had access to the king, and sat first in the kingdom".

In the *Book of Ezra*, we read about the seven counselors of king Artaxerxes (Ezra, 7, 14), and "the seven officials of Persia and Media" in the Book of Esther are probably Ahasuerus' trusted counsel men. This theme of seven officials accompanying the Persian king is not limited to the Hebrew Bible since the Greek sources also attest to it. Xenophon reports that when Cyrus the Younger wanted to decide the fate of his traitor servant Orontas, he convened "seven of the noblest Persians among his attendants" (Xenophon, *Anabasis*, I, 4, 6). Thus, the same as Ahasuerus in the Book of Esther, Cyrus the Younger in Xenophon's narrative also takes council with his seven trusted counselors. But how about the Iranian evidence? Is there any proof from the Persian side about the existence of the seven officials or noblemen? A careful study of Herodotus and its comparison with the Behistun inscription can be helpful in this regard.

Herodotus mentions six companions of Darius the Great who helped him reach the throne. Thus, in his narrative, there is no mention of seven counselors of the king, but six Persian noblemen with Darius himself (the next Achaemenian king) who rise against Gaumata

(the false Smerdis) (Herodotus, III, 84). Fortunately, we have the testimony of Darius himself about the Persian noblemen who helped him against the false Smerdis. In the Behistun inscription, he enumerates six men who were present when he killed Gaumata: Vidafarnā (Greek: Intaphernes), Utāna (Greek: Otanes), Gaubaruva (Greek: Gobryas), Vidarna (Greek: Hydranes), Bagabuxša (Greek: Magabyzus) and Ardumanish (DB IV, §68, 4.80-86). Of course, all of these men were later highly honored and received special privileges by Darius for their assistance. According to Herodotus, Achaemenian queens were always chosen only from the households of these noblemen (Herodotus, III, 84). He also reports that when Darius became king, gave his companions a very special privilege: "they were allowed to come into the king's presence without announcement given if the king was not with one of his wives" (Herodotus, III, 118).

The seven officials of Persia and Media in the Book of Esther also had a similar status. They were the most important officials in the empire because they were "next to him (Ahasuerus)" and "sat first in the kingdom" and they also "had access to the king". Visiting the king was not easy at all, ordinarily, the king was inaccessible to his people and as it will be discussed later, and even the queen was obliged to follow certain rules to meet him. That the seven officials had access to the king, means that they were so trusted that could converse with the king personally. Walther Hinz (1976: 105) describes the work of these seven officials as an imperial council: "A group of seven highest dignitaries, with whom he (the Great King) discussed the most important affairs of state, stood by the Great King as advisors, probably from the earliest times". He also attributes certain

Achaemenian offices to the members of this council: the lance bearer of the king, the marshal of the court, the commander of the guards, the draper of the king, the imperial inspector, the grand judge, and the grand eunuch (Hinz, 1976:108). While there is absolutely no document in regard to how this imperial council actually worked, this speculation of Hinz about its members is not improbable, since these officials (except perhaps the grand eunuch) had the most important jobs, and their job required to be in constant contact with the king.

The Irrevocability of Laws of Persians and Medes

Esther, 1, 19: "If it pleases the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be altered, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she".

There are three main sources to study the status of laws in the Persian Empire. First are the many economic, commercial, and judicial documents found from different parts of the empire, second is the Achaemenian royal inscriptions and the last is the information provided by classical sources and the Hebrew Bible. What we learn from these sources is that there were general rules, especially in regard to the Persian administration system, common all over the Persian Empire. Along with these laws that all the peoples of the Persian Empire had to obey, there were also local rules which differed from one country to another. The Hebrew word דָּת (dat) which means law is originally derived from the Old Persian dāta with exactly the same meaning. Darius the Great and Xerxes both have used dāta in their inscriptions,

Darius to describe his law (DB §8.23; DNa, §3.21; DSe, §4.37) and Xerxes the law of Ahuramazda (XPh, §4d, 49&52). At the first glance, it may be deduced that here we are confronting two kinds of law, a king's law and a divine law based on the supremacy of the Iranian god Ahuramazda; however, a careful study of the extant documents shows that the situation was more complex. There was not a single divine law in the Achaemenian Empire, but many. Each nation, to a great extent, was free to follow its own traditional laws which normally were derived from its traditional religion and gods. The Book of Ezra provides very good evidence in this regard, where the Persian king sends Ezra to establish the laws of the Jewish god Yahweh in Jerusalem (Ezra, 7, 11-14). Similarly, the divine law in Egypt was highly dependent on the Egyptian gods and religions, while in Mesopotamia, still many rules of the Assyrian and Babylonian gods were valued. The king's law, on the other hand, was more general, exactly equal to the king's word, command, or edict, and it specifically aimed to establish the king's control over his empire. It was probably because of this law that the term dāta entered the language of many peoples of the Persian Empire, in semantic contexts beyond the native Jewish, Mesopotamian, and other conceptions of "law" (Schmitt, 1994: 115).

The Mesopotamian documents are a very important source to understand the role of the King's dāta in the conquered countries. Although the Persian conquest of Babylonia did not cause a sudden great change in the lives of the conquered people, gradually significant changes occurred. From the reign of Darius the Great onward, Iranian judges and legal terms such as dāta (law), dātabara (law bearer), iprasaku- (investigator), and mitiprāsu (interrogator) appear in Baby-

lonian documents (Dandamaev, 1994:. 231-232). Note that not all of the people with these titles were necessarily Iranians, but the existence of these Iranian titles in Babylonia had a direct connection with the establishment of the King's law in order to guarantee the king's control.

A significant question that arises as to which type of laws did the laws of the Persians and the Medes in the Book of Esther belong? Is the book talking about the imperial laws, established by the Persians and the Medes all over the empire? Or it merely refers to the traditional laws of the Persians and the Medes themselves? At the first glance, the statement "the laws of the Persians and the Medes" may lead us to think that these are the traditional laws of the Persians and the Medes, but I suggest that they indicate the imperial laws established by the Persian authorities to preserve the Persian control over the empire. The evidence to approve this lies in Memucan's argument about the devastating effects of Vashti's defiance. There, he does not talk about Persia and Media, but about the whole Persian Empire. Thus, in order to prevent an imperial crisis, an imperial law needed to pass.

Scholars have long pointed out the improbability of the irrevocability of the laws of the Persians and the Medes (Moore, 1971: 11; Fox, 1991: 22); I, however, suggest a historical kernel for it, and that is the extreme strictness of the Persian government regarding the implementation of laws. Not only have Greek sources repeatedly mentioned the severe punishment of those who have disobeyed the laws of the Persian authorities, but even Darius the Great in the Behistun inscription has also indicated the terrible fate of the lawless rebels (DB, §32; §33). Herodotus reports that on one occasion, Darius I saved the life of a corrupted judge be-

cause his services to the royal house were more than his harm (Herodotus, VII, 194) and this was according to a Persian law which bided the king to not execute someone until it has been proven that the offender's wrongful acts are more than his services (Herodotus, I, 137). Thus, it is likely that this strictness of the Persians in the matter of law inspired the author of the MT Esther to create the theme of the irrevocability of the laws of the Persians and the Medes.

An Edict in Many Languages

Esther, 1, 22: "He (Ahasuerus) sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, declaring that every man should be master in his own house".

The Persian Empire was a multilingual empire and while Aramaic acted as its lingua franca, other languages and scripts such as Babylonian, Old Persian, Elamite, Demotic, Egyptian hieroglyph, Greek, etc. were also used in different parts of the Empire. Most of the Achaemenian royal inscriptions are trilingual and bilingual and it was this characteristic of them that enabled the orientalists to decipher different cuneiform scripts (see Harper, 1893: 294-297). A very good example of a multilingual royal edict is Darius' Behistun inscription, located in the west of Iran on the main route to Mesopotamia, written in three different languages and scripts: Old Persian, Babylonian, and Elamite. Moreover, another Babylonian version of this inscription has been found in Mesopotamia on clay tablets (Seidl, 1999: 101-114) and there is also an Aramaic copy of it on papyri found in Egypt (Cowley, 1923: 248-271). It is evident that Darius the Great wanted the whole empire to be aware of his legitimacy, so he ordered his scribes to write different versions of the Behis-

tun inscription in different languages and then sent them to different parts of his empire: "Afterward this inscription was sent by me everywhere among the provinces; the people universally were pleased" (DB, §70, 90-92). It seems that the author of the MT Esther was quite familiar with this multilinguistic character of the Persian Empire, as in this verse and also in Esther 3:12, the edict of the king is written and published in different scripts and languages.

The Persepolis Archives prove that the scribes in Persepolis mastered several languages (Glassner, 2021: 741). These were ordinary scribes who worked in the administrative sphere and should not be considered the same as the king's secretaries (סֹפְרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ) who wrote the king's edicts. Due to the multilingual character of the empire, sometimes, such as in the Behistun case, the edicts were to be written in different languages. Darius the Great at the end of the Behistun inscription says that: "This inscription was written and the written document was read off to me" (DB, §70. 4.90-91). One cannot expect that it was ordinary scribes who wrote Darius' edict. Since the word of the king needed to be read precisely, only the most professional scribes who were experts in several languages could fulfill the task. Similarly, we can expect that the satraps also had special scribes whose duty was to write and translate their orders and also functioned as an intermediate between them and the king (Tuplin, 1987: 118).

Book(s) of Chronicles and Book(s) of Benefactors

Esther, 2, 23: "When the affair was investigated and found to be so, both the men were hanged on the gallows. It was recorded in the book of the annals in the presence of the king".

The phrase "the book of chronicles" occurs several times in the Hebrew Bible, many times referring to the kings of Judah and Israel. It is in the Book of Ezra that for the first time the phrase appears regarding the Persian Empire. There, the adversaries of the Jews write a warning to king Artaxerxes and ask him: "so that a search may be made in the annals of your ancestors. You will discover in the annals that this is a rebellious city, hurtful to kings and provinces and that sedition was stirred up in it from long ago". It is evident that the Book of Ezra is talking about some sort of history book (or books) in which the past events were recorded in it, but the case in the Book of Esther is not clear.

Herodotus introduces a custom in the Persian court, which accordingly the names of the benefactors of the royal house were written in it (Herodotus, III, 140) and also mentions a Persian word for these benefactors, "orange" (Greek: οροσάγγαι) (Herodotus, VIII, 85). George Rawlinson (1860: 331) has suggested Avestan *Khur Sangha "worthy of praise or record" for the root of this word while Walter Wybergh How and Joseph Wells (2008: 686) suggest the Old Persian *var, 'to guard and *khaŝāyata 'king'. According to Thucydides, when Xerxes was pleased with the actions of the famous Spartan general, Pausanias sent him a letter with this theme: "Thus saith King Xerxes to Pausanias. For the men whom you have saved for me across the sea from Byzantium, an obligation is laid up for you in our house, recorded forever" (Thucydides, I, 129.3). It seems that this rewarding system played a pivotal role in the Achaemenian political ideology and Xenophon attributes its foundation to Cyrus the Great: "He (Cyrus) thought that they would be 'yet better men if they knew that they would be judged by their

actions and rewarded accordingly" (Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, II, 2, 21). Nevertheless, the oldest evidence for this rewarding and subsequently punishing system is Darius' word in the Behistun inscription: "Within these countries, the man who was excellent, him I rewarded well; (him) who was evil, him I punished well" (DB, §8.1. 20-22).

A comparison between the opening verses of the sixth chapter of Esther (Esther, 6, 1-4) and the Greek accounts clearly shows that the book in which Mordecai's name and the deed were recorded, was a book of benefactors, although the author of the MT Esther does not use the explicit word. On the other hand, in the last chapter of Esther, the author introduces "the annals of the kings of Media and Persia" (Esther, 10, 1). Moore (1971: 99) suggests that here the author of Esther is probably referring to a history book about the Persian kings written from a Jewish point of view, I, however, reject this idea and propose that he is talking about some sort of royal Persian history books, like the ones which the Book of Ezra mentions (Ezra, 4, 15). It is not clear whether the author of the Book of Esther was aware of the existence of such historical books in the Persian court, or whether he referred to such books merely to provide a historical background for his story. Anyhow, in the case of the book of benefactors, we have the Greek evidence but when it comes to Achaemenian history books, serious doubts arise.

The King's Golden Scepter

Esther, 5, 2: "As soon as the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won his favor and he held out to her the golden scepter that was in his hand. Then Esther approached and touched the top of the scepter".

The application of the golden scep-

ter in the audience ceremony is significant since it is a theme only found in the Book of Esther. Actually, in the famous treasury relief in Persepolis which depicts an audience scene, the king is holding a long scepter in his right hand while sitting on a royal throne. Again, in another relief in the East doorjamb of the eastern doorway of the southern wall of the Hall of a Hundred Columns in Persepolis, we see the king sitting on his royal throne holding a long scepter in his right hand. Although it is difficult to discern the practical application of the king's scepter based on the Persepolis reliefs, the information provided by the Book of Esther in this regard can be quite true.

The Persian-Median Couple

In classical sources, the name of the Persians has been mentioned along with the Medes many times and sometimes Greek authors considered them the same. This mentioning of the Persians and the Medes together is also attested in the MT Esther five times: "The army of Persia and Media" (Esther, 1, 3), "the seven officials of Persia and Media" (Esther, 1, 14), "the noble ladies of Persia and Media" (Esther, 1, 18), "the laws of the Persians and the Medes" (Esther, 1, 19) and "the kings of Media and Persia" (Esther, 10, 2). These references are quite interesting as if the Persians and the Medes could not be separated from each other at all[1], and

as is explained below, this Persian-Median couple in the Book of Esther has a completely historical root that can be examined with the help of the Iranian evidence.

It is best, to begin with, the countries' lists of Achaemenian royal inscriptions. Ten Achaemenian inscriptions provide, three of them (DSe, DNa, XPh) include Media as the first, in four of them (DSab, A2Pa, DNe, DPe) it stands at the second, in one of them (DSaa) as the third, in another one (DSm) as the ninth and the Bistoon inscription as the tenth country[2]. Clear evidence of the importance of Media is also provided by a very interesting statement by Darius the Great in one of his inscriptions at Persepolis (DPg), where he introduces himself as king of "Persia, Media, and other countries" (Lecoq, 1997: 229). The fact that here Darius mentions only Persia and Media and does not bother himself to mention other countries by name and merely refers to them as "other countries", clearly proves the high status of Media for the great king, and Pierre Briant (1996: 193) rightly says "this statement indicates that the Persian-Media couple is cemented not only by a common history but also on the closeness of their ethno-cultural and linguistic ties". Therefore, the royal inscriptions prove the importance of Media, and consequently the Medes. In a general conclusion based on the royal inscriptions, one could say that the lands

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[1] More interestingly, a similar theme is repeated in other biblical books. In the book of Daniel, the Jewish prophet informs Belshazzar that "your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians" (Daniel, 5, 25-28). Later, in the same book, "the law of the Medes and the Persians" is mentioned three times (Daniel, 6, 8; 12; 15). In the book of Judith, the reaction of the Persians and Medes to Judith's boldness is mentioned together (Judith, 15, 10). In the first book of Maccabees,

the last Achaemenian king is introduced as "king Darius of the Persians and the Medes" (1 Maccabees, I, 1).

[2] The reason why Media is mentioned as the ninth and tenth country in the Incomplete inscription on glazed bricks of Susa (DSm) and the Behistun (DB) inscriptions respectively, is probably because of some political changes in a part of Darius' reign, see Imanpour, 2009: 36-38.

of Persia, Media, and Elam constituted the heart and center of the empire.

Persepolis fortification tablets also indicate the importance of the Medes. Although there is only one (this number is based on published texts until 2009) mention of the Medes in these tablets (Hallock, 1969: 360), this should not mislead us in any way, because the Persians and Elamites also have a very small presence. This cannot be a coincidence and should be explained from the point of view of the Persepolis administrative system, in which, the Persians, Medes, and Elamites were considered "us" and therefore needed not to be mentioned; While other ethnic groups were considered as "others" and had to be mentioned precisely (Henkelman and Stolper, 2009: 278).

Conclusion

In this article, some verses of the Book of Esther were examined according to the sources, documents, and evidence obtained from the Achaemenian Empire. Since the primary focus of the present study was not on the classical works, it can be concluded that the historical material of the Masoretic version of the Book of Esther is not influenced by Greek sources, or to be more cautious, at least a considerable part of it comes from sources other than the classical works.

This shows that the Masoretic version of the Book of Esther was written in the late Achaemenian period or the early Hellenistic period when Greek works and language had not yet influenced the Jews as much as they should have. More importantly, this conclusion implies that the parallels between the Book of Esther and Greek sources both emanated from common sources that should be identified and that the author of the Masoretic version, had direct or indirect access to sources associated with the Persian estate. It is evident that the author of the Masoretic version of the Book of Esther was familiar with some of the details of the administrative system, rules, and customs of the Achaemenian Empire and court. This makes it more difficult to justify the gross historical errors of the Book of Esther, which have been pointed out many times by various scholars because it is very unlikely that anyone who knew so much about the Persian Empire would make such mistakes. In some verses, the author of the Book of Esther shows such familiarity with the Persian Empire and court that it surprises the reader and at the same time makes such mistakes that the historicity of the whole story becomes doubtful. Considering all these facts, it seems that the author of the Masoretic Esther has deliberately sacrificed history for the story.

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