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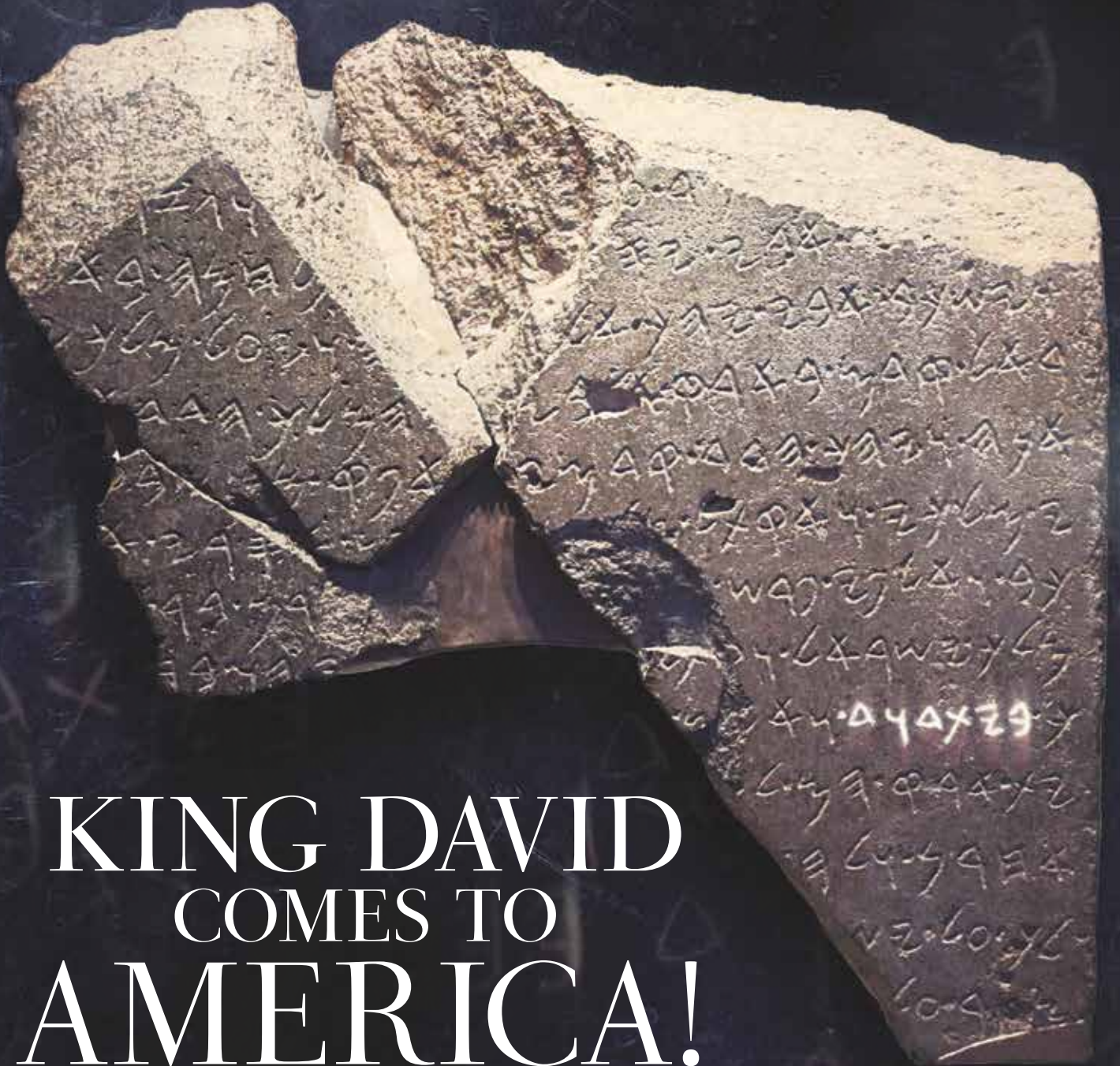
ARMSTRONG INSTITUTE OF BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

The magazine of the

STONES SPEAK



JULY-AUGUST 2024



KING DAVID COMES TO AMERICA!

KINGDOM OF DAVID AND SOLOMON DISCOVERED

LET THE STONES SPEAK

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FROM THE EDITOR | GERALD FLURRY

OUR EXHIBIT KING DAVID COMPL

Bringing the ‘house of David’ to Armstrong Auditorium

KING DAVID HAS THE LONGEST biography of any biblical personality. He is a pivotal figure in the Hebrew Bible and Jewish history. And yet in the world of academia and archaeology, he is one of the most controversial figures.

In the 1980s, biblical minimalists began working to relegate King David to a myth, questioning his existence and the historical reality of what the Bible records about him. In his 1992 book *In Search of ‘Ancient Israel,’* Philip Davies wrote: “Whoever is living in the Palestinian highlands around 1000 B.C.E. [King David’s time period], they do not think, look or act like the people the biblical writers have put there. They are literary creations.” This had become the mainstream belief among academics at the time.

Yet as is so often the case, an ever growing body of archaeological and historical evidence is proving the Bible right and these scholars wrong.

Virtually all of the evidence about Israel’s most famous king is presented in our archaeological exhibit, which is now open in Edmond, Oklahoma: “Kingdom of David and Solomon Discovered.”

If you can’t visit the exhibit in person, be sure to request our special exhibit issue of *Let the Stones Speak*,

ON IS NOW ETE!



The Tel Dan Stele will be on display at Armstrong Auditorium in Oklahoma.

which explores the evidence for David and Solomon's kingdom in detail. This issue is now available in Hebrew. If you live in Israel and would like a Hebrew version, write us at requestIL@ArmstrongInstitute.org. You can also take a *virtual* tour of the exhibit by visiting exhibit-tour.ArmstrongInstitute.org.

In 1993, Israeli archaeologist Avraham Biran discovered a large fragment of a basalt stele (inscription) at the Tel Dan excavation in northern Israel. Subsequent excavations the following year revealed two more fragments. When archaeologists put the pieces together, they revealed an extraordinary message. It stunned the world and sent an earthquake through the archaeological community.

The inscription was made by King Hazael of Syria in the mid-ninth century B.C.E. Hazael had recently led his Aramean forces into battle against the allied forces of Jehoram, king of Israel, and Ahaziah, king of Judah (2 Kings 9). Hazael's campaign was successful, and he boasted about his military victory on a basalt "victory stele" that he set up as a monument in the northern Israelite city of Dan.

On the ninth line of the stele, this is recorded: "[I killed Jeho]ram son of [Ahab] king of Israel, and I killed [Ahaz]yahu son of [Joram kin]g of the house of David. ..."

This expression, "house of David," is used 26 times in the Bible.

This discovery provided the first conclusive archaeological evidence pointing to King David's existence as a true historical figure. Beyond that, it also proved that he was the head of a royal dynasty—just as the Bible

describes. It also showed that his dynasty was so well known that a Syrian king—*living more than 150 years after David*—still referred to that line of kings as belonging to David's dynasty.

THIS IS, I BELIEVE, ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES EVER TO BE FOUND! It is uniquely special because of how powerfully it complements the biblical text and what it reveals about the legacy of King David.

The Tel Dan Stele belongs to the State of Israel and is one of its most important and celebrated artifacts. Under the care of Israel Museum, the stele is one of the museum's signature pieces. "The Louvre in Paris has the Mona Lisa, by Leonardo da Vinci—we have the Tel Dan Stele, by King Hazael," stated Pirchia Eyal, curator at Israel Museum.

Last December, as we were creating our exhibit, we asked the Israel Antiquities Authority and Israel Museum about potentially showcasing the Tel Dan Stele in our exhibit. We knew it was an audacious request, but we felt like it *belonged* in an exhibit built around King David that celebrated his legacy.

The stele has been to America only once, where it was briefly on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Bringing it to our exhibit would allow thousands of people to see it who otherwise would never have the opportunity.

At the time, bringing the stele to America wasn't possible, so Israel Museum kindly loaned us a beautiful replica.

Now, I am thrilled to announce that the Tel Dan Stele is coming to America to be a part of our "Kingdom of David and Solomon Discovered" exhibit!

Celebrating Ancient Persia!

The ancient Persians are recognized as one of the greatest peoples on Earth—and for good reason.

BY BRAD MACDONALD

THE OCTOBER 1971 PARTY THROWN BY the shah of Iran was breathtaking. It took 10 years to plan and lasted five days. The *Guinness Book of World Records* recorded it as the most “well-attended” international gathering in history.

For almost a week, more than 600 foreign dignitaries, including 65 heads of state, left behind their sprawling mansions and palaces to travel deep into the Iranian desert to sleep in tents pitched on dunes on the outskirts of Persepolis, capital of the ancient Persian Empire.

But this wasn't camping the way you and I do it. Guests stayed in spacious, custom-furnished, air-conditioned tents, constructed in traditional Persian style. Hairdressers and make-up artists were jetted in from Paris. Drapes and flowers were imported from Italy. They ate the finest

Cyrus Restores the Vessels of the Temple, by Gustave Doré

food, catered by Maxim's de Paris, which closed its Paris location for nearly two weeks to prepare for the banquet. Around 150 chefs, bakers and waiters were imported. The world's master hotelier, a Frenchman, was brought out of retirement to manage the waitstaff. Attendees dined on fine china and sipped expensive wine from goblets made of Baccarat crystal.

There were fireworks displays, performances from the world's finest musicians and spectacularly choreographed parades by Iranian soldiers, all dressed in traditional Persian garb. Two hundred fifty custom-built red Mercedes-Benz cars zipped across the desert carrying foreign diplomats. The price tag of the grand affair, according to the *Telegraph*, was \$100 million (almost \$800 million today).

Why host such an extravagant party?

The shah of Iran was celebrating the 2,500-year anniversary of Cyrus the Great and the founding of the Persian Empire.

Remembering Ancient Persia

Before the 1930s, Iran was widely known as *Persia*. Today the names *Iran* and *Persia* remain interchangeable—though each evokes radically different perceptions. The Persians are an Indo-European people whose biblical heritage traces back to Shem, the son of Noah. The Jewish historian Josephus recorded the Persians as being descendants of Shem's son Elam (Genesis 10:22).

Up until the mid-sixth century B.C.E., the Persians were a small, relatively powerless kingdom situated on the plains of Mesopotamia, north of the Tigris River and east of the Zagros Mountains. For centuries, the Persians, together with the Medes and other smaller kingdoms, lived in the shadow of much more powerful neighbors, primarily the Assyrians and Babylonians.

Persia's tranquil days spectating from the sidelines ended around 550 B.C.E., when Cyrus succeeded his father as king. King Cyrus, a brilliant soldier and administrator, unlocked Persia as a military and imperial power. In his first campaign, he conquered the more powerful Medes, who in defeat accepted an invitation to join forces. Within two decades, King Cyrus was ruling over a kingdom of *unprecedented* power and size, one that stretched from Thrace in the west to Egypt in the south to the Indus River in the east.

In 539 B.C.E., Cyrus sacked the greatest city on Earth and the capital of the mighty Babylonians. Babylon at the time was spectacular for its strength and majesty; it boasted one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Herodotus recorded that the city covered 507 square kilometers (196 square miles) and was protected by an outer wall that was 95 meters (311 feet) high and 27 meters (87 feet) thick. Access through the fortified

walls was controlled by more than 100 bronze gates. The mighty Euphrates River wended through the city, irrigating its famed hanging gardens.

But Babylon's impressive walls and "impenetrable" gates weren't enough to stop Persia's king. Employing a risky but simple strategy, the Medo-Persian army diverted the waters of the Euphrates, then used the riverbed to penetrate Babylon's gates. Once inside, Cyrus's army easily and quickly conquered the city, including its inebriated king (see *ArmstrongInstitute.org/1073*).

King Cyrus now ruled the largest, most powerful empire in the world. As administrators, Cyrus and his successors were unique. Persia's kings were unusually altruistic and enlightened. They respected and tolerated the customs and traditions of the people they ruled over. Starting with Cyrus himself, they had a penchant for *humanitarian* leadership. "Under the close supervision of his government, [Cyrus] permitted the conquered peoples to retain their own customs and religions and their own forms of government," explains Stanley Chodorow in *The Mainstream of Civilization*. Ancient Persia's humanitarianism is attested to both archaeologically and biblically. This will be explored in detail in this issue.

This is the history the shah of Iran was celebrating at his gigantic 1971 party. He was celebrating his nation's "pre-Islamic origins," a time when Iran was sophisticated and enlightened, a truly impressive superpower.

Persia and the Bible

The Hebrew Bible revolves mainly around Israel, the people who inhabited the southern Levant. But while the biblical text concentrates on Israel, it features several foreign peoples and kingdoms. Of all the kingdoms featured in connection with Israel, the Achaemenid Empire of King Cyrus and his successors is perhaps the *most* prominent.

The Medo-Persian Empire is referenced in Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. In fact, the Achaemenid dynasty played a significant role in several important biblical events.

The book of Ezra records the return of the Jewish exiles to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple under the decree of Cyrus the Great. Ezra opens by recording the benevolence of Persia's king. "Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, 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 ..." (Ezra 1:1). Ezra here is recording the fulfillment of a prophecy in Isaiah 44, where God said He would use Cyrus as a "shepherd" and that he would "fulfill my purpose." The biblical text not only attests to Persia's humanitarian tendencies, it explains them.



THE PERSIAN EMPIRE UNDER CYRUS THE GREAT C. 530 B.C.E.

Not long after the events recorded in Ezra, Nehemiah—a cupbearer in the royal court of King Artaxerxes—was granted permission to return to Jerusalem to rebuild its walls. Then there’s the book of Esther, also set in the Persian Empire during the reign of King Xerxes (biblical Ahasuerus), father of Artaxerxes.

The biblical text also includes prophetic references to Persia. In Isaiah, Cyrus is referred to as the Lord’s anointed (Isaiah 45:1), an unusual designation for a non-Israelite ruler, which signifies his role in God’s plan to restore Israel. Similarly, the book of Daniel, written during the Babylonian and Persian periods, includes visions and prophecies that mention the Persian Empire as part of the broader narrative of world history. In Daniel 6:2-3, King Darius of Persia promotes Daniel, a young Jewish man, to a position of great power within the mighty Persian Empire. During Daniel’s public promotion, the king of Persia issued a decree to “all the peoples, nations, and languages that dwell in all the earth,” demanding “that in all the dominion of my kingdom men tremble and fear *before the God of Daniel*” (verses 26-27).

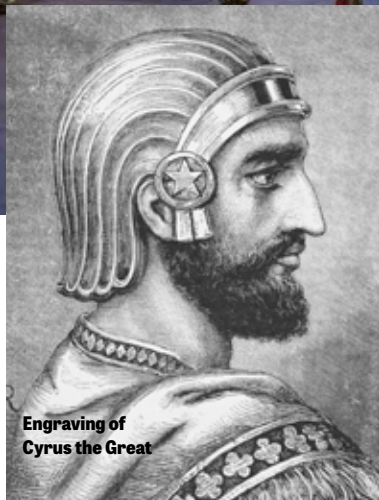
In Daniel 2, Babylon’s King Nebuchadnezzar has a dream in which he sees a powerful image in the shape of a king or warrior. Daniel explains the meaning of the image, which is made from four distinct materials. The head of gold represents the Babylonian Empire, while the chest and arms of silver represent the Medes and Persians.

In Daniel 7, Babylon’s King Belshazzar receives a vision of the same four kingdoms, each now uniquely represented by an animal. In this dream, the Medo-Persian kingdom is symbolized by a bear with three ribs in its mouth. The lumbering bear represents Persia’s territorial might, while the ribs represent Babylon, Lydia and Egypt—the three main regions conquered by Medo-Persia.

In Daniel 8, the young prophet describes a vision in which he sees a “ram standing on the bank of the [Euphrates] river. It had two horns; and both horns were high, but one was higher than the other, and the higher one came up last. I saw the ram charging westward and northward and southward; no beast could stand before him, and there was no one who could rescue from his power; he did as he pleased and magnified himself” (verses 3-4; King James Version).



Candelabra from the 1971 celebration in the lobby of Armstrong Auditorium



Engraving of Cyrus the Great



Firework display around the Chahyade Tower in 1971



Caspian Sea

Some biblical scholars recognize this as a depiction of the Medo-Persian Empire, with Persia being the more powerful (“higher”) horn.

The vision continues in verses 5 through 8, which depict a virile male goat *rapidly descending* (“touched not the ground”) from the west. This fast-moving military force smashes into the ram, breaking both its horns and trampling it to pieces. This goat also has a “notable horn,” a symbol of a powerful leader. According to some Bible scholars, this is a vision of Greece’s sudden and dramatic invasion of Persia under the leadership of Alexander the Great in 333 B.C.E.

Iran’s history is spectacular not only for its geographic enormity, military exploits and administrative and humanitarian enterprises; it’s spectacular and important for the way it converges with the Hebrew Bible, with *numerous* biblical characters and events.

An Armstrong Connection?

More than 60 years ago, when the shah of Iran was making preparations for his spectacular celebration, he commissioned the construction of 18 candelabra.

During the weeklong celebration, these 7-foot brightly lit giants, each weighing 650 pounds and decked with 802 pieces of Baccarat crystal, stood in the midst of the royal tent where all the world leaders gathered to dine. Together, these shimmering beauties—and *the history of King Cyrus and ancient Persia that they embodied*—dazzled the kings and queens, presidents and prime ministers at the shah’s royal banquet.

Today, two of those candelabra perform their duty in the grand lobby of Armstrong Auditorium in Edmond, Oklahoma. Much like the great king they were created to celebrate, these candelabra light our “Kingdom of David and Solomon Discovered” archaeological exhibit!

They are stunning. But as breathtaking as they are in appearance, it’s the story behind them we most cherish. Our candelabra were part of the celebration of the 2,500-year anniversary of Cyrus the Great and the Persian Empire. The shah intended that these candelabra awaken the Iranian people and the world to Iran’s majestic history—with the Jewish people and the Hebrew Bible! ■



Harmonizing Persian History and the Bible

One of the world's greatest empires has a rich history in the Bible and archaeology.

BY NICHOLAS IRWIN

WHEN IT COMES TO EXAMINING the history of the Persian Empire through the lens of the Bible, some of the books that come most readily to mind are Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. These books record events, personalities and details that occurred over a 100-year span—from Cyrus the Great's takeover of Babylon (539 B.C.E.) to Darius II's reign (424–404 B.C.E.).

Some of the Bible's most vivid and remarkable stories are recorded in these three books. In the book of Ezra, Cyrus the Great issues his monumental decree

to release the Jewish people from captivity so they can return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and restore proper worship. In the book of Esther, a young Jewish girl rises to the ranks of queen of the Persian Empire and is used to save the Jewish race from extinction. In Nehemiah, one man's leadership rallies the Jewish people to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem—with a sword in one hand and a spade in the other.

These stories are remarkable, inspiring and miraculous. But what about proving the accuracy of these stories? Can the scientific and archaeological evidence from the Persian Empire be reconciled with the biblical account?



The Fall of Babylon: Cyrus the Great Defeating the Babylonian Army, by John Martin

Over the past 200 years, archaeology has produced some wonderful finds that align with the history recorded in the Bible. It is important to note: Archaeological excavations related to the Persian Empire have produced a wealth of artifacts. Each Persian king mentioned in the Bible—Cyrus the Great, Darius the Great, Xerxes and Artaxerxes I—has been attested to archaeologically, and each has his own corpus of inscriptions and archaeological evidence that align with the dating you would expect from the biblical text.



Cylinder with King Nabonidus's prayer for his son Belshazzar

This article is merely intended to highlight artifacts and history of the Persian Empire as they pertain to the greatest historical record we have—the Bible.

The Nonexistent King

The Bible states that the final king to rule over the Babylonian Empire was Belshazzar. Daniel 5 vividly describes Belshazzar's final night: a raucous occasion of celebration and debauchery.

Although the Bible is clear on the events before Babylon's fall, prior to 150 years ago, it stood alone in describing a personality named Belshazzar. The accepted belief was that he didn't exist. Instead, Nabonidus was widely regarded as the final king of Babylon. Rather than being killed when Cyrus invaded, he was taken captive. It appeared that the Bible was at loggerheads with what the scholars accepted as "historical fact."

That all changed in 1854 when British Consul John Taylor discovered four 4-inch-long by 2-inch-wide cylinders in a ziggurat in the area of ancient Ur. Each cylinder bears the same inscription: a description of Nabonidus's restoration work at the temple and a prayer for his eldest son, *Belshazzar*.

The last paragraph of the inscription reads: "As for me, Nabonidus, king of Babylon, save me from sinning against your great godhead and grant me as a present a life long of days, and *as for Belshazzar, the eldest son—my offspring—*instill reverence for your great godhead in his heart and may he not commit any cultic mistake, may he be sated with a life of plenitude."

In his official letter announcing the discovery, Sir Henry Rawlinson, "the father of

Assyriology,” wrote: “I hasten to communicate ... a discovery ... which is of the utmost importance for scriptural illustration. ... The most important fact, however, which [the Nabonidus Cylinders] disclose, is that the eldest son of Nabonidus was named Bel-shar-azar, and that he was admitted by his father to share in the government. This name is undoubtedly the Belshazzar of Daniel and thus furnishes us with a key to the explanation of THAT GREAT HISTORICAL PROBLEM WHICH HAS HITHERTO DEFIED SOLUTION” (emphasis added).

With the discovery of these four cylinders, it was clear that Belshazzar was made joint king over Babylon while his father was on campaigns in Arabia. Another Babylonian chronicle, the “Verse Account of Nabonidus,” also makes this clear, stating that before taking his long journey into Arabia, Nabonidus “entrusted the army to his oldest son He let everything go, entrusted the kingship to him.”

As second-in-command, it is also clear why Belshazzar made Daniel “the third ruler in the kingdom” (Daniel 5:29); it was the next highest office he could give.

The Nabonidus Cylinders are a key to aligning the scientific and biblical evidence of the Persian Empire—from the very foundation: the Persian army’s capture of Babylon.

A Miraculous Decree

After conquering Babylon in 539 B.C.E., Cyrus the Great cemented himself as emperor over an extensive empire. But it wasn’t just the expanse of his empire or his own military prowess that made Cyrus great; rather Cyrus is most well known for his humane and beneficent treatment of his subjects. He showed tolerance for the conquered peoples’ government, traditions and religion. This was in complete contrast to the preceding empires’ harsh and violent treatment of those they conquered.

Historian Will Durant writes in *Our Oriental Heritage*, “[H]e was the most amiable of conquerors and founded his empire upon generosity.” This is most profoundly evidenced by the Cyrus Cylinder—a clay cylinder (discovered in 1879) inscribed with Akkadian cuneiform script recording Cyrus’s conquest of Babylon and his initiative to

Front view of the barrel-shaped clay Cyrus Cylinder covered with lines of cuneiform text



allow captives to return home and resume their religious practices.

This artifact parallels the remarkable history recorded in 2 Chronicles 36:22-23 and Ezra 1:1-4. Notice Cyrus's decree after conquering Babylon: "Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth hath the Lord, the God of heaven, given me; and He hath charged me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whosoever there is among you of all His people the Lord his God be with him—LET HIM GO UP" (2 Chronicles 36:23).

While the Cyrus Cylinder is specifically about resettling *Babylonian* exiles, it proves that returning displaced peoples was a hallmark of Cyrus's reign. When combined with the biblical text, we know that Cyrus "made a proclamation ... and put it also in writing" that the Jewish captives were to be given independence to return to and rebuild Jerusalem and practice their religion—just as the archaeological evidence shows Cyrus did with other captive peoples.

The first-century Jewish historian Josephus recorded in *Antiquities of the Jews* that after telling "the most eminent Jews" in Babylon that their people could return, he wrote a letter to the governors in the area of Judea, stating: "I have given leave to as many of the Jews that dwell in my country as please, to return

to their own country, and to rebuild their city, and to build the temple of God at Jerusalem, on the same place where it was before" (11.1.3). According to the book of Ezra, 42,360 Jews departed from Babylon for Jerusalem (Ezra 2:64).

‘Across the River’

Around 15 years after Cyrus's decree, Darius I, known as Darius the Great, came to power. He was known for his brilliant administrative ability. Under his leadership, the Persian Empire spanned over 2 million square miles. To manage such a vast empire, Darius followed Cyrus's example and established 20 "satrapies," or provinces. Each province was led by a governor who directly answered to the emperor.

The Bible describes one such Persian official named "Tattenai, the governor beyond the River" (Ezra 5:3; 6:6, 13). He sent a letter to Darius, questioning whether the Jews should be permitted to continue rebuilding the temple.

Tattenai, with his unique title, has been corroborated in the archaeological record.

A cuneiform tablet written in 502 B.C.E., the 20th year of Darius's reign, records a financial transaction. In addition to the details of the fiscal agreement, the document lists an individual who was present to witness the transaction: a servant of "Tattenai, Governor of Across-the-River." "Across the river" refers specifically to a province west of the Euphrates River and matches the title given to Tattenai in the Bible: "governor beyond the River."

Even a seemingly obscure Persian individual is accurately recorded—to the very title—in the biblical text.

Palace Fit for a Queen

During his reign, Darius the Great made Shushan (modern-day Susa) his administrative capital. There he built a magnificent palace. Darius's son, Xerxes I (486–465 B.C.E.), continued to use this palace during his reign.

The events of the book of Esther revolve around this palace and provide a detailed description in the first chapter: "[T]he king made a feast unto all the people that were present in Shushan the castle, both great and small, seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's palace; there were hangings of white, fine cotton, and blue, bordered with cords of fine linen and purple, upon silver rods and pillars of marble; the couches were of gold and silver, upon a pavement of green, and white, and shell, and onyx marble" (Esther 1:5-6).

King Darius recorded his own description of the palace. On what is known as the "Foundation Charter," he wrote: "The palace which I built at Susa, from afar its ornamentation was brought. ... The cedar timber,



this was brought from a mountain named Lebanon. ... The gold was brought from Lydia and Bactria The precious stone lapis-lazuli and carnelian which was wrought here, this was brought from Sogdiana. The precious stone turquoise, this was brought from Chorasmia The silver and the ebony were brought from Egypt. The ornamentation with which the wall was adorned, that from Ionia was brought. The ivory ... was brought from Ethiopia and from Sind and from Arachosia. The stone columns which were wrought, a village by name Abiradu in Elam, from there were brought. ... Saith Darius the King: At Susa a very excellent work was ordered, a very excellent work was brought to completion.”

Beyond the parallels in the description of materials used for the palace, the book of Esther also describes specific rooms in the palace complex that can be corroborated with the archaeological site.

In *Ancient Persia and the Book of Esther*, Prof. Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones writes, “[E]xcavators of the Susa site have often enthused over the correlations to be found between the literary evidence of Esther and what the archaeology unearthed.” Those who most closely deal with the scientific evidence of Susa recognize the parallels between the archaeology and biblical account. Various researchers have noted that the Bible accurately describes the architectural layout of the palace. Take note of some of the specific palace rooms listed in the biblical account.

The first room the Bible describes is “the court of the garden,” where Xerxes hosted his feast (Esther 1:5). This court parallels the 11,000-square-meter (120,000-square-foot) banquet hall in Susa that boasted 36 pillars, each with an impressive 4-meter-tall (13 feet) capital. The walls of this banquet hall were lined with ornate lion and archer friezes. Perhaps the “blue” stone that Esther 1 refers to are these blue-hued friezes.

Chapter 5 describes Esther standing in “the inner court ... over against the king’s house” (verse 1). An inner courtyard has been discovered, sitting directly across from what would be Xerxes’s throne room and apartments. Historian Jona Lendering wrote that this



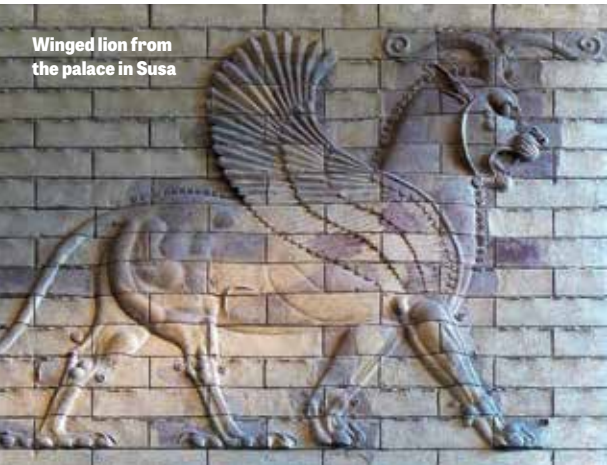
Archers frieze, Darius Palace Susa, Louvre

courtyard is “probably identical to the inner court mentioned in the biblical book of Esther. It gives access to King’s Hall, where the king received his guests ...” (“Susa, Palace of Darius the Great,” Livius.org).

A larger courtyard sits just inside the eastern entrance of the palace. This courtyard parallels the outer court described in Esther 6:4: “... Now Haman was come into the outer court of the king’s house, to speak unto the king”

One final location detailed throughout the biblical text is “the king’s gate.” The Bible makes 10 references to Mordecai, Esther’s close relative, sitting in or being near the king’s gate. Prior to 1970, however, there was no evidence of a palace gate at Susa. That all changed after French archaeologist Jean Perrot’s 1970–1978 excavations. Perrot’s team uncovered a truly monumental gatehouse structure on the eastern side of the palace.

In *The Palace of Susa*, Perrot wrote that early excavators’ identification of this palace as the one from the book of Esther “was always vague. The gate had not



Winged lion from the palace in Susa



Ruins of the Palace of Darius at Susa

been discovered, and the plan and the general scheme of the palace were not understood Today, we have better reasons for thinking that Darius's palace at Susa, begun in 520 B.C.E., completed by Xerxes ... is indeed the palace in the mind of the author of the book of Esther”

During his excavations, he said: “Today we reread with renewed interest the book of Esther, whose detailed description of the interior layout of the palace of Xerxes is now in good agreement with archaeological reality” (*Historique des Recherches; Let the Stones Speak* translation).

Defending the Defenses

Another Jewish individual the Bible describes as being in the palace at Shushan is Nehemiah.

Just under 100 years after the Jews were released from captivity, Jerusalem's walls hadn't been rebuilt. The city sat defenseless as enemies of the Jews' effort relentlessly worked to stifle progress.

Nehemiah, a cupbearer in the royal court of Artaxerxes I (son of Xerxes), was eager to help his people in Jerusalem. Around 444 B.C.E., Artaxerxes gave Nehemiah permission to go to Jerusalem as a governor and join the rebuilding efforts.

Upon arriving in Jerusalem, Nehemiah surveyed the situation, specifically taking note of the walls (Nehemiah 2:13). He then told the people: “[C]ome and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem ...” (verse 17). This monumental effort of rebuilding Jerusalem's walls has been attested to in archaeology.

During her 2007 excavations in the City of David, Dr. Eilat Mazar intended to repair a tower that she believed dated to the Hasmonean dynasty (142–37 B.C.E.). However, after six weeks of excavation, Dr. Mazar concluded that the tower wasn't Hasmonean but rather Persian; she dated its construction to around 450 B.C.E.

“Under the tower,” Dr. Mazar said in a Nov. 8, 2007, conference, “we found the bones of two large dogs—and under those bones a rich assemblage of pottery and finds from the Persian Period [sixth to fifth centuries B.C.E.]. *No later finds from that period were found under the tower.*” “Dog burials” are a known hallmark of the Persian Period, which along with the pottery, made clear to Dr. Mazar that this structure was built during Nehemiah's projects in Jerusalem.

Dr. Mazar also discovered a wall that was connected to the tower and likely dated to the same period. It was evident that this wall was constructed in a hasty manner. Hurried construction is exactly what you would expect from a wall that was built in just 52 days (Nehemiah 6:15).

“Finally, the absence of certain material helped Dr. Mazar date the tower and associated wall,” we wrote in “Discovered: Nehemiah's Wall.” “Yehud seal impressions are very common during Persian Period Judah. Yehud was what Judah was called during Persian rule. During Yigal Shiloh's excavations in the City of David in the 1980s, many Yehud bullae had been found, all of which dated to the second half of the fifth century B.C.E. or later. But here, in this almost 5-foot-thick Persian layer beneath the Northern Tower, Dr. Mazar didn't find a single one. That meant this material must have been in place before the middle of the fifth century B.C.E.”

Dr. Mazar's excavations proved that right at the time we'd expect Nehemiah to be building up Jerusalem's defenses, a hastily constructed wall and tower were erected—giving archaeological evidence of the book of Nehemiah.

A Priest and an Adversary

Another clue for the veracity of the book of Nehemiah comes from a papyrus letter dated to around 407 B.C.E. This Aramaic-language document, known as the Elephantine Temple Papyrus, lists two biblical figures



Fifth-century B.C.E. papyrus from Elephantine, Egypt, narrating the story of the wise chancellor Ahiqar in Aramaic script (Neues Museum, Berlin)

from the time of Nehemiah: Johanan the high priest and Sanballat, adversary of Nehemiah's work.

Elephantine is an island located in the Upper Egypt portion of the Nile River. Beginning around 650 B.C.E., a Jewish community developed in Elephantine. While the exact origins of this community are unclear, Prof. Bezalel Porten wrote in *Biblical Archaeology Review*: "The Jewish community at Elephantine was probably founded as a military installation in about 650 B.C.E. during Manasseh's reign. A fair implication from the historical documents, including the Bible, is that Manasseh sent a contingent of Jewish soldiers to assist Pharaoh Psammetichus I (664–610 B.C.E.) in his Nubian campaign and to join Psammetichus in throwing off the yoke of Assyria, then the world superpower. Egypt gained independence, but Manasseh's revolt [against Assyria] failed; the Jewish soldiers, however, remained in Egypt."

Excavations of Elephantine have produced 175 papyrus documents that date to the time Egypt was under the control of the Persian Empire, following Cambyses II's conquest of Egypt.

The Elephantine Temple Papyrus, or Papyrus No. 30, records a letter sent to a Persian official named Bagohi, the governor of Judah who most likely took over the position sometime after Nehemiah. The letter discusses the destruction of the Elephantine "temple of YHWH," or YHWH. It reads, "To Bagohi governor of Judah, [from] the priests who are in Elephantine the fortress. ... [W]e sent a letter [to] our lord, and to *Jehohanan the high priest* and his colleagues the priests who are in Jerusalem ..." Jehohanan, a longer version of the name Johanan, is mentioned in the biblical text as a "son of Eliashib the high priest," who served during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezra 10:6; Nehemiah 12:22-23).

The letter continues further down: "Moreover, all these things in a letter we sent in our name to Delaiah and Shelemiah, sons of *Sanballat, governor of Samaria*." Sanballat the Horonite is mentioned in various scriptures (see Nehemiah 2:10, 19; 3:33; 4:1; 6:1, 2). Sanballat was governor of Samaria when Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem. He led a campaign to stop Nehemiah's wall-building project. While his sons aren't specifically mentioned in the Bible, Delaiah

and Shelemiah are very common biblical names—both of which are mentioned in the book of Nehemiah (Nehemiah 3:30; 6:10; 7:62; 13:13).

There is a second possible mention of Sanballat in archaeology. A fragmented bulla from Wadi Daliyeh reads: "...iah, son of [...]ballat, governor of Samar[ia]." This bulla dates to the reign of Artaxerxes III, nearly 100 years after the Sanballat of Nehemiah's day, so it could refer to a different individual, perhaps a later relative. However, the legible suffix of the first listed name would align with either of Sanballat's sons: Delaiah or Shelemiah. Regardless of the exact identity of the Sanballat listed on the Wadi Daliyeh bulla, it is proof that the name Sanballat—a key antagonist of the Bible—was in use during this general time frame in Samaria.

The King of Qedar

Sanballat is not the only enemy of Nehemiah listed in the Bible. "[W]hen Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite, and *Geshem the Arabian*, heard it, they laughed us to scorn, and despised us ..." (Nehemiah 2:19). Geshem the Arabian worked alongside Sanballat in opposing the Jews. He was a prominent figure in this region, who likely had close connections to officials in Persia.

"Geshem was in fact the paramount Arab chief in control of the land-routes from Western Asia into Egypt," writes Kenneth A. Kitchen. "The Persian kings had always maintained good relations with the Arab rulers of this region ever since Cambyses had enlisted their aid for his invasion of Egypt in 525 B.C.E.—so Geshem's word could well have endangered Nehemiah at the Persian court" (*Ancient Orient and Old Testament*). What evidence do we have of this "paramount Arab chief"?

Evidence of Geshem has been discovered on an inscription from 410 B.C.E.

In 1947, archaeologists excavating Tell-Maskhuta in Upper Egypt discovered a collection of silver bowls used in the dedication to an Arabian goddess. Each bowl bears an inscription. The most notable



of which reads: "That which Qaynu, *son of Gashmu, king of Qedar*, brought in offering" "Gashmu" is another spelling of the name Geshem; both spellings are used in the book of Nehemiah (see Nehemiah 6:6; King James Version). Qedar was a kingdom in northwest Arabia, which fits well with Geshem's biblical title: "the Arabian."

William J. Dumbrell wrote for the *Bulletin of American Schools of Oriental Research* that when taken together, all the different pieces of information "confirm that Qaynu bar [son of] Gashmu was the son of the adversary of Nehemiah" (October 1971). Once again, the Bible proves its reputation as an authoritative and accurate historical source.

Harmonizing the History

A study of Persian history shows that when critics say a biblical king doesn't exist, in the end, the Bible is proved right and the critics are proved wrong. When the critics say a biblical book is fable or legend, the archaeology proves the Bible is filled with factual, historical details—down to the very architectural layout of a building.

Harmonizing the history of the Persian Empire with the biblical text is a fascinating and inspiring exercise that shows just how necessary biblical archaeology is. The Bible fills in the gaps of the archaeological record and gives us a more complete picture—even for a world power as well documented as the Persian Empire. ■

Inscribed silver phiale
(2.3 x 15.8 cm), circa 410 B.C.E.
Brooklyn Museum, Charles
Edwin Wilbour Fund

The Assyrian Military Camp at Lachish—

and Maybe at Jerusalem Too:

AN INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN C. COMPTON

THE INVASION OF JUDAH BY KING SENNACHERIB AND THE Assyrian army in the late seventh century B.C.E. is one of the most dramatic accounts in the Bible. It's a story of barbaric torture and widespread regional destruction, as well as sudden, providential deliverance.

By the time the Assyrian juggernaut encamped by Jerusalem, it had already sacked 46 fortified Judean cities. Remarkably, the capital city escaped unharmed, a reality documented in detail in the biblical text, as well as Sennacherib's own annals.

Archaeologically, Assyria's invasion of Judah is one of the most well-attested biblical events in Near East antiquity. Giant wall reliefs, discovered in Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh (on display in the British Museum in London), record Sennacherib's siege on Lachish. The Taylor Prism, discovered at Nineveh in 1830, records Sennacherib's boast that he had "shut him [King Hezekiah] up like a caged bird in his royal city of Jerusalem." In Jerusalem, Hezekiah's snaking water tunnel attests to the king's effort to defend Jerusalem; and two clay seal impressions attest to both King Hezekiah and Isaiah the prophet.

Researcher Stephen Compton published an article in the June 2024 issue of *Near Eastern Archaeology* outlining further evidence of Assyria's invasion. In his article, Compton explained his discovery of a "trail of Sennacherib's siege camps." Compton identifies locations at Lachish, Jerusalem and elsewhere— this is the first time an Assyrian camp has been identified in Israel.

Compton's article was front-page news at many international media outlets, including *Fox News*, the *Daily Mail*, the *New York Post* and *Newsweek*. In June, Brent Nagtegaal, host of *Let the Stones Speak* podcast, interviewed Mr. Compton about his research. The following interview has been edited for clarity.



STEPHEN C. COMPTON



The remains of the oval wall at Khirbet al Mudawwara

BRENT NAGTEGAAL (BN): Thank you for joining us. You have aroused some excitement in the media, even making global headlines. How did your interest in this history begin?

STEPHEN COMPTON (SC): I have long been fascinated by the Lachish site and the Lachish wall relief. On Sennacherib's palace wall, he had this relief depicting his conquest of this city. On one side, it shows his army approaching the city; [Sennacherib] is up on a hill, and then in the distance you can see his siege camp. On the relief the siege camp is depicted by a large oval shape. So I decided to take

Sennacherib's relief image and compare it with the landscape of the area that exists today.

I found a 1945 aerial photo of the area, which I lined up beside the relief—and found that it was a very good match. I made the city [of Lachish] the exact same size in the relief as in the photo, so the scale was the same. On the one side, you have level ground to the left of the city. Then you have this gentle slope up to the right and this little hill, which is where Sennacherib himself sat, and then further to the right, Sennacherib's oval camp. And at the same spot in the aerial landscape photo, there is an oval ruin.

I then decided to study the oval ruin and found that an archaeological survey had been conducted at the site. It showed some occupation in the Chalcolithic Period, but then it had been abandoned for 2,600 years before it was occupied by Lachish Level III strata, which is the strata where the pottery marks Sennacherib's invasion of Lachish. It was then abandoned again for centuries. The dating was a perfect match. So the shape, the size and its location were where they should be according to the relief. And in both cases, the long

access was aligned to the city, both in the image and in reality.

BN: This is remarkable—the fact that these two scenes are almost identical. Who knew that the Lachish wall reliefs were actually drawn to scale? Can you describe what an archaeological survey is as opposed to an excavation, and what do you mean by Lachish III?

SC: When a survey is conducted scientists do not excavate a site. Instead, they collect pottery sherds from the surface and use these to date the site's habitation. They also identified oval-shaped fortification walls around the outside of this hill. More recently, farming at the site has made this lower fortification wall no longer visible above the ground.

The style of the broken pieces of pottery discovered in the survey were consistent with Lachish Level III, which is the third-level strata of the city of Lachish. Those specific pottery sherds are found in the destruction layer of the site where there is evidence of a fire, wall destruction, iron arrowheads and a huge ramp coming up the site—all evidence of the Assyrian invasion of Lachish.

BN: So the discovery of both pottery as well as the fortification wall—and the clear dating of both to Sennacherib's siege of Lachish—strongly indicate that this was the Assyrian camp. Now how does this oval-shaped fortress relate to Jerusalem?

SC: Well, I also studied early aerial photographs of Jerusalem. And to the north of the city, I found another oval structure of similar size and position [to the one outside Lachish].

BN: What do you mean by similar size?

SC: It was about 140 meters in length. It was almost the exact same length as the Lachish camp.

There was also another interesting feature. On early topographical maps [produced by the British], the

Lachish camp site was labeled “*Mudawwara*,” an Arabic name. In the Middle Ages, this name was used to identify the “camp of an invading sultan,” so *mudawwara* could mean something like the “camp of the invading king.” So, it is a reference to some sort of royal camp. I noticed that the Jerusalem site also had the same name—*mudawwara*.

In 1881, the Palestine Exploration Fund went to the oval site in Jerusalem and identified it as a military siege camp, but they thought it was the camp of Titus from 70 C.E. However, we now know that the Roman camps were rectangles and this is clearly an oval shape, which is the characteristic shape of an Assyrian military camp.

We don’t have an archaeological survey as we do at Lachish, so the evidence isn’t as strong. But we have the same name, the same size, the same shape and the same position, which is on the north of Jerusalem. And the biblical text, in Isaiah 10, records that the Assyrians approached Jerusalem from the north.

BN: Tell us more about the passage in Isaiah 10, which records that Assyria was the “rod of [God’s] anger.” This seems to connect with your Assyrian camp near Jerusalem. Why is this significant?

SC: There has always been some controversy over Isaiah 10. Some researchers said that it could not be

talking about the Assyrians because, according to them, Sennacherib went from Lachish to Jerusalem, approaching Jerusalem from the south. Why would he approach from the north? But I followed the route of other *mudawwara* toponyms that were all located about a mile from cities we know Sennacherib conquered, and it indicates that from Lachish the Assyrians went north on the diagonal route well past the latitude of Jerusalem before turning east and then south and approaching Jerusalem from the north.

This is consistent with the approach recorded in Isaiah 10, where it says Sennacherib approaches a certain city, then another city, and then he finally ends up at Nob. This appears to be where he made his camp. Which is also an exciting coincidence because it says he halts at Nob. [“This very day shall he halt at Nob, Shaking his hand at the mount of the daughter of Zion, The hill of Jerusalem”—verse 32.]

Sennacherib makes his stand at Nob, which seems to be where his camp is, and if so, it gives us the location of Nob. Nob was the place where the tabernacle was at the time of Saul and David, and when David fled from Saul he fled to Nob and was given some assistance there. Saul becomes enraged and has genocide committed against Nob. Nob is not heard from again until this passage in Isaiah, 300 years later, when the Assyrians approach and make their stand there.

DRAWING: ALISTAIR HENRY; AERIAL PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY OF THE CENTER FOR COMPUTATIONAL GEOGRAPHY AT THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM

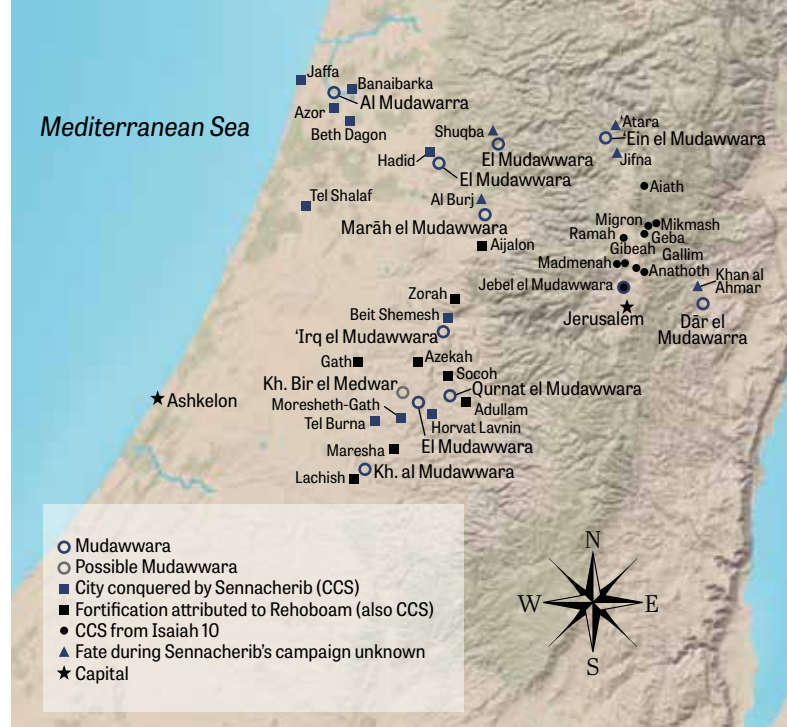


BN: In your article you note that there are several ideas about the exact location of Nob. And your suggestion that the Assyrian army camped in Nob puts the city right in the middle of where the other potential locations are.

SC: Yes, it is on the road from Gibeah, which is where King Saul's capital was located, to Jerusalem. It is right in the middle. And I think the passage dealing with Saul and David indicates it is close to Gibeah. But the account in Isaiah 10 indicates it is also close to Jerusalem. And this location is on the main northern road out of Jerusalem right in between both cities.

BN: You are obviously drawing a connection between the medieval Arabic name Mudawwara and the sites that King Sennacherib attacked. But there is a gap of more than 1,000 years between the toponym name and the event of the Assyrian invasion. How sure can we be of the connection between *mudawwara* and a camp of Sennacherib's army?

SC: My theory is that this was a major local event and there would have been the physical structures that remained, and there would have been local knowledge of it. For example, "That's the camp from when the Assyrians invaded—the camp of the invading king."



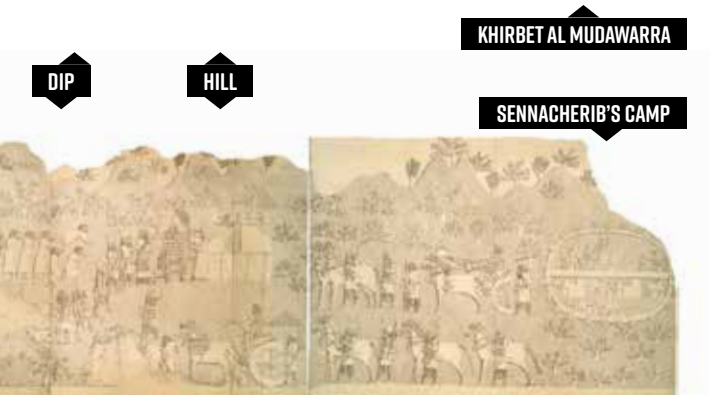
And so the name just kind of stuck with them over time and the traditional knowledge sort of survived in this toponym.

BN: And this isn't without parallel; we have other sites where Arabic names preserve the name of a site from biblical times. So you are really drawing on every bit of evidence you can for this. Did you receive any feedback from scholars about your theory?

SC: I received some pushback about Isaiah 10 because some scholars don't believe Isaiah 10 is referring to the Assyrians. I think if there hadn't been the certain assumption that Assyria approached Jerusalem from the south, nobody would have questioned that Isaiah 10 refers to the Assyrians. There was just the assumption that "We know best. We know the route they took. Therefore, we have to find another explanation." But the passage is very clear in mentioning the Assyrians. I think trying to put another invader in Isaiah 10 is misguided.

There has been a lot better response to the Lachish camp because there is so much evidence. I think when you see all the evidence it is hard to push back on. [Archaeologist David] Ussishkin disagrees. He has his own theory, and I respect that.

BN: Even before your research, Sennacherib's invasion of Judah during the time of Hezekiah was incredibly well attested by archaeology. And now, thanks to your efforts, we have even more evidence of this event. Now we have evidence of Assyrian camps—definitely at Lachish and quite possibly at Jerusalem—in precisely the locations identified by the Bible. Thank you so much for your research and sharing this with us!



Hezekiah Was Here

Two generations after King David, the kingdom of Israel split. To the north, 10 Israelite tribes seceded and formed their own kingdom. In the south, three tribes remained loyal to David's descendants. Fourteen generations from King David, at the end of the eighth century B.C.E., Hezekiah ascended to the Davidic throne in Jerusalem. The northern kingdom had just been conquered by the mighty Assyrian Empire. In the southern kingdom, young Hezekiah started his reign by purging Judah of pagan religious customs and reinstating the true worship of God. But before long, the mighty Assyrian King Sennacherib had Judah in his sights. The following archaeological discoveries testify to the startling accuracy of the biblical showdown between Sennacherib and Hezekiah.



LACHISH WALL RELIEF

DISCOVERED: 1845–47

LOCATION: Nineveh

DESCRIPTION: 24-meter-long, 2.5-meter-tall wall carving

The Bible says that in the 14th year of his reign, Hezekiah “rebelled against the king of Assyria, and served him not” (2 Kings 18:7). The Assyrian King Sennacherib came against Judah and conquered many of its cities, one of the greatest being Lachish (verse 17). Sennacherib believed the siege and subsequent taking of Lachish to be so important he emblazoned the scene on the four walls of a room in his palace in Nineveh. The relief is currently housed in the British Museum in London.

BRITISH MUSEUM

TAYLOR PRISM

DISCOVERED: 1830

LOCATION: Nineveh

DESCRIPTION: Hexagonal clay prism inscription

Returning to Assyria, Sennacherib recorded his “successful” venture on a clay prism, known today as the Taylor Prism, named after British Col. Robert Taylor who discovered it in 1830. Regarding Sennacherib’s invasion of Judah, the prism says, “As for Hezekiah the Judahite, who did not submit to my yoke: 46 of his strong, walled cities ... I besieged and took them. ... [Hezekiah] himself, like a caged bird I shut up in Jerusalem, his royal city.” However, there is no mention of Sennacherib actually taking Jerusalem—because, as the Bible reveals, he didn’t. There is no destruction layer laid down by Assyrian siege weapons in Jerusalem. There are no reliefs of a Jerusalem conquest along the palace walls in Nineveh, as there was for Lachish. This prism is housed in the British Museum, although two others that are almost identical can be seen in the Israel Museum and the Oriental Institute of Chicago.





38.1 cm

HEZEKIAH BULLA

DISCOVERED: 2009

LOCATION: Jerusalem

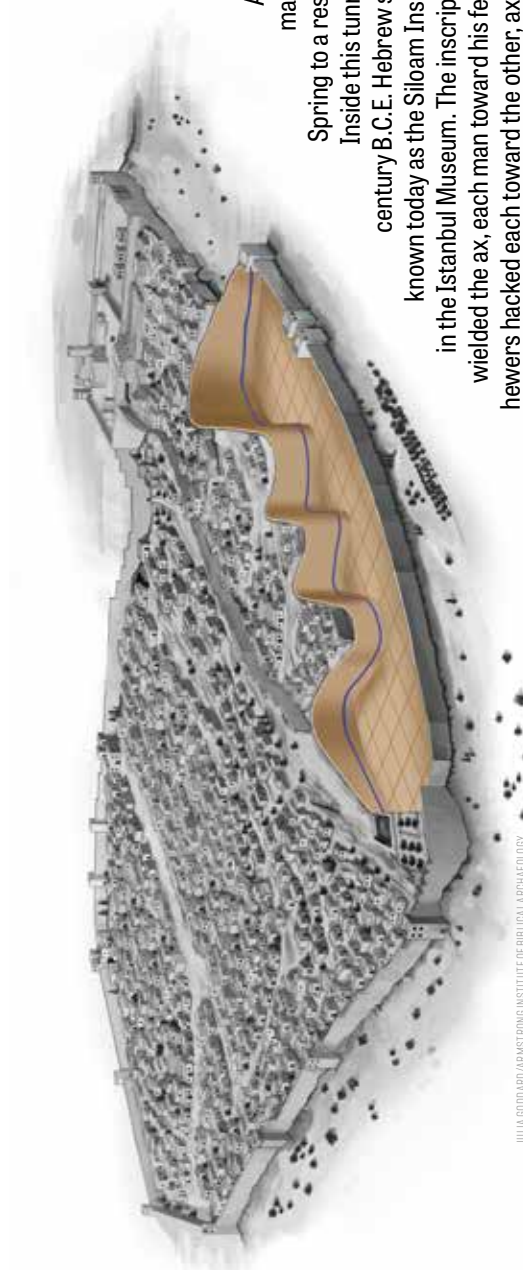
DESCRIPTION: Clay seal impression

King Hezekiah's own personal seal was excavated in 2009 by Dr. Eilat Mazar's team and announced in 2015. Found in the royal quarter of ancient Jerusalem, it carries the inscription, "Belonging to Hezekiah, [son of] Ahaz, king of Judah."



COURTESY OF DR. ELIAT MAZAR/PHOTO: OURA TADMOR

BRITISH MUSEUM



JULIA GOODARD/ARMSTRONG INSTITUTE OF BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

HEZEKIAH'S TUNNEL

DISCOVERED: 1838

LOCATION: Jerusalem

DESCRIPTION: 520-meter water tunnel carved through bedrock

Anticipating a siege against Jerusalem, King Hezekiah carved a massive tunnel underneath the city to bring water from the Gihon Spring to a reservoir inside the city walls (2 Kings 20:20; 2 Chronicles 32:2-4).

Inside this tunnel, an inscription was discovered in perfect eighth-to-seventh-century B.C.E. Hebrew script, which describes how the tunnel was made. This carving, known today as the Siloam Inscription, was removed from the tunnel and is currently housed in the Istanbul Museum. The inscription reads: "The tunneling was completed While the hewers wielded the ax, each man toward his fellow ... there was heard a man's voice calling to his fellow ... the hewers hacked each toward the other, ax against ax, and the water flowed from the spring to the pool, a distance of 1,200 cubits."

After 156 Years, Has the *Mmst* Mystery Finally Been Solved?

Hundreds of King Hezekiah's handle inscriptions bear the enigmatic term. Dr. Daniel Vainstub presents a fascinating new solution to the riddle.

BY CHRISTOPHER EAMES

IN 1868, THE FIRST INSCRIPTION BEARING THE paleo-Hebrew word *mmst* (ממשת) was documented. The inscription, stamped on a First Temple Period Judean vessel handle, was the first of many hundreds—probably now closer to 1,000—such *mmst* stamps that have since been discovered.

The stamps are of the famous *lmlk* (למלך), “to the King,” variety, dating to the reign of Judah’s King Hezekiah, during the late eighth century B.C.E. These vessel handle stamps typically bear the letters *lmlk* at the top, a central image of either a four-winged scarab or a two-winged sun, and a choice of one of four different words at the bottom: Hebron, Ziph, Socoh or our aforementioned *mmst*. Collectively, these various *lmlk* jar handle seal impressions number in the thousands and are generally seen as part of an administrative effort on the part of Hezekiah prior to the invasion of Assyrian King Sennacherib.

The first three seal types—those bearing the inscriptions “Hebron,” “Ziph” and “Socoh”—clearly refer to famous biblical cities. Yet there is no such Iron Age city, known either in the Bible or archaeology, by the name of *Mmst*, often vocalized as either “Mamshit” or “Memshet.” (There is a site of a similar name—ממשית—deep in the Negev; however, this is a much later Nabatean site founded in the first century B.C.E., and its Hebrew name is a later derivation of the Greek “Mampsis.”)

What could this word, then—found on numerous inscriptions throughout Judah—be referring to? For the past century and a half, the question has confounded researchers.

In a new paper published in the *Jerusalem Journal of Archaeology* in June, “The Enigmatic *Mmst* in the *Lmlk* Stamps,” epigrapher Dr. Daniel Vainstub proposed an ingenious solution to the meaning of this term. He combined a reanalysis of the Semitic structure of the word, a reexamination of many of the seal stamps in question,

and a reappraisal of 2 Chronicles 31 to propose that this word does *not* refer at all to an otherwise-unknown Judahite city but rather to a specific category of goods “from [the] *mas’et*”—Hezekiah’s collection of agricultural products in anticipation of the Assyrian invasion.

The ‘Impossible Root’

Vainstub began by highlighting the “impossible” Semitic root *mms* (ממש), if this is indeed a complete city name. He noted that, excepting Ethiopian languages, there are no known Semitic root words in which the first and second letters are the same (in our case, *mm*—ממ). No Canaanite, Hebrew, Arabic or other Semitic language branches bear such a pattern of repeat root letters in this manner—a “peculiarity in biblical Hebrew [that] was already observed by Rabbi Abraham ben Meir de Balmes (1440–1523)” and a “characteristic [that] is so deeply ingrained that it is still present today in the subconscious of native speakers of Hebrew and Arabic.” Thus, if a Judahite site existed bearing such a name, it would represent the only such confirmed *word*, let alone location, demonstrating such an unusual root structure.

Root aside, Dr. Vainstub also noted the reticence to develop personal or place names with the same first two letters prior to the Persian Period. Of the more than 800 toponyms in the Hebrew Bible, only five begin with the same first two letters, four of which refer to distant, foreign locations (Babylon, בבבל; Dedan, דדן; Shushan, ששן; and Sheshak, ששך). And of the 1,700 personal names in the Bible, just 17 begin with the same first two letters; of these, 12 are foreign or late (i.e. Persian Period) figures; the remaining five are of obscure etymology.

Added to this, ancient Egyptian sources from the third millennium to the start of the first millennium B.C.E. refer to more than 300 place-names and tribes in Canaan—*none* begin with the same first and second letters. And of the more than 500 Iron Age personal names



revealed by archaeology, only three bear the same first and second letters—all of which are foreign names.

Small wonder, then, that a city-site bearing such a name has not yet been found archaeologically or biblically. Something else must be intimated by this text.

The First Letter a Preposition—‘From’

In the Hebrew language, there are two equal forms of articulating “from”—either as a single word, *min* (מן), or in contracted form, as a prefix, *m-* (מ-). This would render our inscription: “from *mst*”—the latter part, *mst* (משת), now being the independent word in question.

But is “from” the correct interpretation of this initial letter? Remarkably, Dr. Vainstub highlighted a number of rare variant *mmst* seals that bear the inscription *mn mst* (מן משת)—containing an additional “n” between the “m”s. In his paper, he drew particular attention to four examples—one from Tell en-Nasbeh, two from Jerusalem, and one unprovenanced from a private collection.

Dr. Vainstub was almost beside himself in describing to me the first such seal discovered at Tell en-Nasbeh, which was initially published in 1947. “This was the proof!” he exclaimed. The seal had, at the time, been fully drawn and documented as *mmst*—the additional “n” being a peculiarity that seems to have flown under the radar. This was the proof Vainstub needed: This longer, clear variant of the word “from,” *min*, proved that the shorter initial letter *m-* signified the same, the preposition “from” something.

But what was that something?

‘From’ What?

Dr. Vainstub argues that the remaining word *mst* (משת) represents a contraction of the Hebrew word *mas’et* (משאת).

Though the omission of the middle aleph (א, an unpronounced, glottal-stop consonant) may at first seem unusual, there is biblical and archaeological precedent for it. Vainstub provided a number of examples, such as the Siloam Inscription, which renders the word לקראת as לקרת (importantly, also an inscription from the time period of King Hezekiah).

Additionally, Dr. Vainstub highlights several examples of *mmst* impressions in which the letter aleph appears to be *added* to complete the word in full. As with the preposition “from,” this would bolster the interpretation that משאת is the correct word being rendered on these seal impressions, and that משת is merely a contraction of the term.

Considering all variants of this particular Hezekiah-period administrative seal, we, therefore, have ממשת/מן משת/ממשת—all signifying the same thing, “from [the] *mas’et*.”

We are therefore left with the final, most important question of all: *What was this mas’et?*

Agricultural Preparations for War

“The term *mas’et* ... is used in biblical Hebrew with several different meanings,” wrote Vainstub. “One of them expresses an *ad hoc* tax, contribution or offering, in contrast to the mandatory regular taxes and offerings to the kingdom and the temple. Thus, in Ezekiel 20:40, Zephaniah 3:18 and Psalm 141:2, it expresses a voluntary extra offering to the temple.”

He continued:

“[T]he Prophet Amos (5:11) denounces a merciless *mas’et* imposed on poor peasants, who were forced to deliver part of their crops to the government. Amos seems to refer to a *mas’et* imposed by King Jeroboam II in the Northern Kingdom, in whose time the prophet was active. This *mas’et* closely resembles the one imposed by Hezekiah Jeroboam’s *mas’et* is called משאת-בר, *mas’et* of grain [a ‘grain tax’].”

Armed with these parallels, Vainstub pointed to 2 Chronicles 31:4-20 as offering “an accurate account of the historical events related to the collection of the *mas’et* of Hezekiah.” This passage describes an enormous collection of various agricultural products. “From verse 12 onward, the text describes a comprehensive administrative organization established for distributing the food ‘in all Judah,’” wrote Vainstub. “It is tempting to connect this account with the ‘private impressions’ that occurred alongside the various *lmlk* stamps, manifesting a composite administrative network unparalleled in the history of Judah.”

“As these actions fit the implementation of the *mas’et* imposed by Hezekiah in view of the expected arrival of the Assyrian army,” Vainstub concluded, “in my opinion, the origin of the core story preserved in the book of Chronicles is, indeed, the collection of Hezekiah’s *mas’et* and its distribution in *lmlk* jars.” Thus, the Judahite storage jars stamped with this particular impression represented contents from this particular collection, administered by King Hezekiah during the first part of his reign.

It’s an intriguing solution to a 156-year-old puzzle. Indeed, the explanation is built on a number of relatively complex layers of explanation. It’s certainly not a simple case of, *here’s an inscription with a biblical figure on it*. But justifiably, there is a reason why this *mmst* mystery has proved difficult to crack for so long. It’s why, a century and a half after Sir Charles Warren excavated such *mmst* inscriptions from Jerusalem’s Ophel, we continue to unearth them in our own Ophel excavations (one of which I found personally, in 2018) and still wonder about what this word really means.

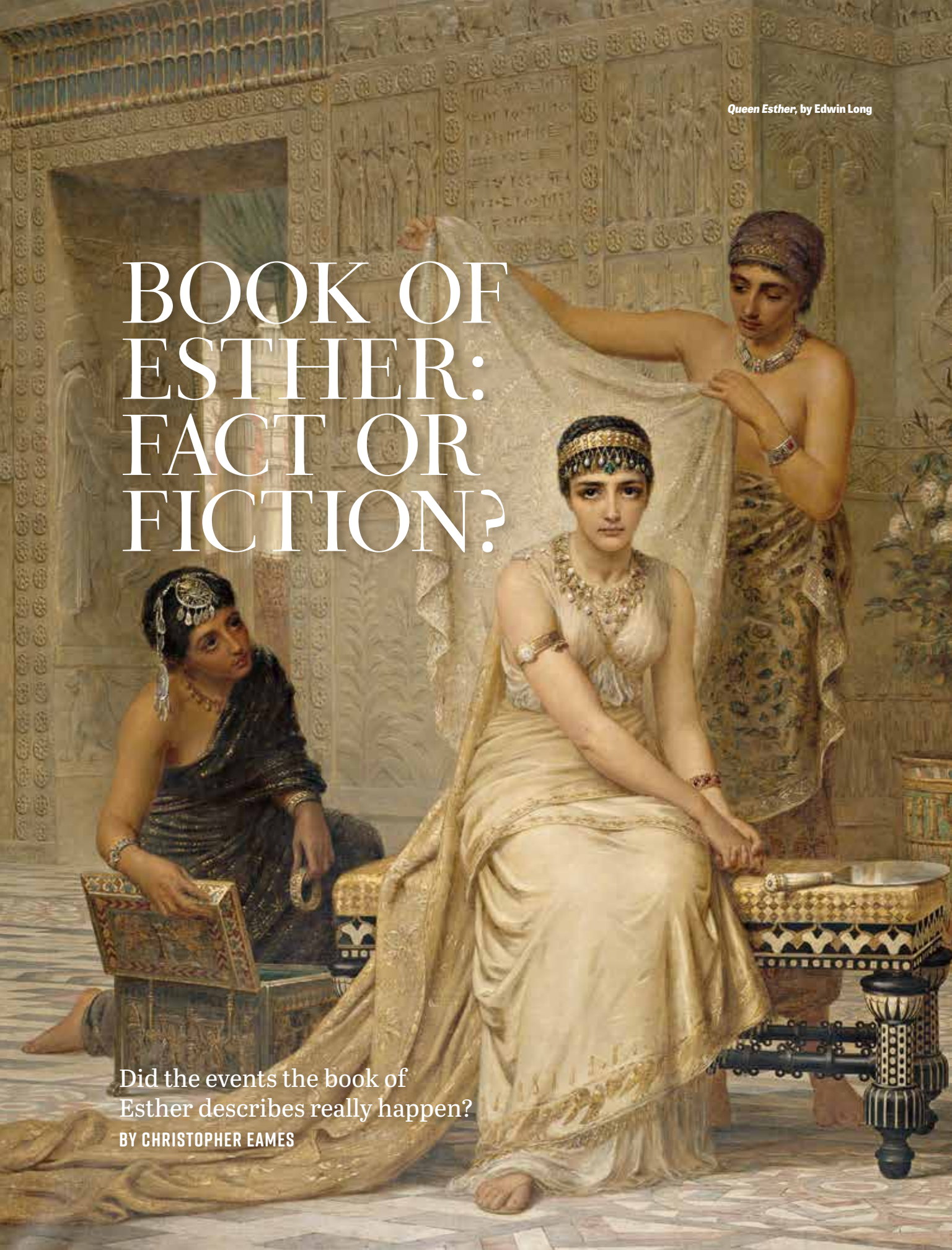
It seems the wondering is over. ■

Queen Esther, by Edwin Long

BOOK OF ESTHER: FACT OR FICTION?

Did the events the book of
Esther describes really happen?

BY CHRISTOPHER EAMES



“THE BOOK OF ESTHER ... IS A FREE COMPOSITION, not a historical document. Its fictional character can be illustrated by many examples [A]rtificialities are clear There are many exaggerations ... sarcastic implausibilities ... and huge ironies.”

These are not the words of a secular scholar in a source-critical journal article. This is the introduction to the book of Esther in the New American Bible (NAB) and New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE)—the popular translation of the Scriptures for liturgical and personal use by Catholics in the United States. The Jerusalem Bible (another popular translation) opens with a similar introduction: Although Esther bears “the literary form of historical stories, the events ... are not attested from other sources and ... treat the facts of history and geography with a good deal of freedom.”

The assessment is even more grim on the other side of the Christian spectrum. In the opinion of Protestantism’s founding father, Martin Luther: “I am so great an enemy to the second book of the Maccabees, AND TO ESTHER, that I wish they had not come to us at all” (*Table Talk*, published 1566; emphasis added throughout).

From a Jewish perspective, the book of Esther could hardly be afforded more importance. One of Judaism’s highest-esteemed rabbis and philosophers, the 12th-century Maimonides, esteemed the book of Esther as second to the Torah itself. This book, in the words of first-century Jewish historian Josephus, numbers among those “which contain the records of all the past times, which are justly believed to be divine” (*Against Apion* 1.8).

Even still, some religious Jewish leaders have taken issue with the book. Rabbi Samuel Sandmel described Esther as a “fictional piece” that contains “farcical” details; and Sandmel, like Luther, would “not be grieved if the book of Esther were somehow dropped out of Scripture” (*The Enjoyment of Scripture*).

Many simply don’t trust the historicity of Esther. Some believe the story is artificially modeled after the Moses-Exodus account against the backdrop of the Persian court. Others believe it is a creative retelling of the Mesopotamian gods Marduk (Mordecai) and Ishtar (Esther) exerting their supremacy in Persia over the Elamite god Humban (Haman). More generally, the book is considered by scholars as a “novella” in the “wisdom literature” genre—often compared to the likes of *One Thousand and One Nights*—a biblical text in which “there may be a core of historicity,” a “kernel of truth,” but one thoroughly embellished by “layer upon layer” of coloring (Carey Moore, “Eight Questions Most Frequently Asked About the Book of Esther”). Many scholars consider Esther a complex aetiology

(mythologized backstory) for explaining the otherwise-obscure origins of the Purim holiday.

Esther creates an unusual predicament. Often, when it comes to biblical studies, the further back into the past the account is set, the more it is treated with skepticism. Ironically, the book of Esther—one of the *latest* chronological accounts in the Bible—is one of the most historically disputed books in the canon.

Is the book of Esther fact or fiction? Can we even know?

Setting the Scene: A Brief Overview

The biblical story of Esther is likely well known to the reader. Set in Persia, the book opens with King Ahasuerus hosting an immense festival at his Shushan palace. The king demands his wife, Queen Vashti, attend the party so he can parade her beauty. But the queen refuses, humiliating the king and resulting in her banishment.

King Ahasuerus needs a new wife, and Persia needs a queen. After careful vetting, a candidate is found in the Jewess Hadassah, also named Esther, who was raised by her older cousin Mordecai, an official in the Persian courts (see sidebar, page 26).

Ahasuerus later promotes the wicked Haman “above all the princes” in Persia (Esther 3:1). This is when the trouble begins. When Mordecai refuses to prostrate before him, Haman—recognizing Mordecai’s Jewish heritage—“sought to destroy all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom” (verse 6). He manipulates the king into issuing a decree against a “certain people” who do not “keep ... the king’s laws” (verse 8)—and being granted the king’s seal, Haman declares the extermination of all Jews on the 13th of Adar. Mordecai discovers the plot and beseeches Queen Esther—her Jewish identity still disguised—to intercede on behalf of her people.

Esther is granted an audience with the king and organizes a great banquet in honor of the king and Haman. Following this banquet, Esther requests another. Haman leaves filled with pride but also seething with hatred for Mordecai; he constructs large gallows, anticipating Mordecai’s destruction.

At the second banquet, Esther abruptly informs the king about Haman’s plot to kill her people. The next day, Haman is hung on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. But a Gordian challenge remains: Persian law means King Ahasuerus cannot rescind the earlier decree demanding the destruction of the Jews. He does, however, issue another decree, one that demands that all Jews defend themselves against any individuals implementing the first decree. This solution is not without bloodshed, but genocide of the Jews is prevented.

The book ends with Esther and Mordecai instituting the 14th of Adar as a day of salvation, celebration and feasting. “Wherefore they called these days Purim And the commandment of Esther confirmed these matters of Purim; and it was written in the book” (Esther 9:26, 32).

It’s a riveting story. But is it true?

Ahasuerus and His Empire

Intriguingly, modern scholars broadly agree on one core detail in Esther: the identity of the Persian king. The biblical Ahasuerus is widely recognized as Xerxes I (also known as Xerxes the Great), who ruled the Persian (Achaemenid) Empire from 486 to 465 B.C.E.

At face value, the names could hardly be more different—*Ahasuerus* and *Xerxes*. But we are dealing with extremes on both ends of the linguistic spectrum. On the one hand, *Ahasuerus* is a somewhat fraught English transliteration of the Hebrew pronunciation *Achashverosh* (the guttural “ch” pronounced as in *loch*); on the other, the popular names used for Persian kings (i.e. Xerxes) are actually Greek. The Hebrew pronunciation of this king’s name is actually close to the original Persian pronunciation of Xerxes’s name, rendered phonetically as *Khshayarsha*. Furthermore, over the last century, ancient Aramaic documents discovered in Elephantine, Egypt, reveal the Aramaic spelling of Xerxes’s name to be אַחַשְׁוֵרֶשׁ—virtually identical to the Hebrew spelling of Ahasuerus, אַחַשְׁוֵרֶשׁ.

Historically, there has been some debate about the correct Persian king of Esther. Other popular candidates, based in part on perceived name-similarities, have been either Artaxerxes I (465–424 B.C.E.) or Artaxerxes II (404–358 B.C.E.). These rulers’ original Persian names, however, are significantly different from the name of the king found in Esther; also, Artaxerxes’s entirely different name (Hebrew *Artachshasta*) is used 15 times throughout the books of Ezra and Nehemiah (referring to Artaxerxes I), alongside and in distinction to the name Ahasuerus (Ezra 4:6). Of additional note is the fact that the territory of Egypt was *lost* during the reign of Artaxerxes II, and his reign is much too short, thus disqualifying him as the ruler in the book of Esther (based on Esther 1:1, 3:7 and 8:9). Further disqualifying these later kings is the fact that throughout their reigns the Jews had significant favor (as the books of Ezra and Nehemiah attest) and would therefore not have found themselves facing the same existential threat described in Esther.

The book of Esther, then, set during the early part of the reign of Xerxes I, fits with that of the identically named, powerful emperor Xerxes, who presided over a domain spanning from India to Cush (Esther 1:1), ruling

from his royal palace at Susa (verse 2; Elamite *Shushan*, identical to the biblical Hebrew “Shushan”).

Unfortunately, this is where the historical parallels are often seen to stop—again, in the muted words of the NAB and NABRE, the account being only “loosely based on Xerxes.”

127 Satrapies?

One of the first issues of contention relates to the large number of geographic divisions assigned to the Persian Empire in Esther 1:1. The biblical text identifies 127 distinct divisions of the empire—often assumed to refer to the Persian division of “satrapies.” This is six times more than the number of satrapies recorded by Herodotus, the fifth-century B.C.E. Greek historian, who counts just 20 satrapies during the reign of Xerxes’s father, Darius the Great.

Yet on its face, 127 is an oddly specific number. Furthermore, we can determine from internal evidence within the book of Esther itself that this figure is *not* referring to “satrapies”—rather, the number is referencing smaller *provincial* divisions.

“[T]he Hebrew word for provinces used here, *medinot*, in the Hebrew Bible mainly refers to small districts,” wrote Iranian history expert Morteza Arabzadeh Sarbanani in his 2023 article “The Book of Esther as a Source for Achaemenian History.” “[I]n Esther 3:12, the author makes a clear distinction between ‘the king’s *satraps*’ and ‘the governors over all *provinces*’—the latter word matching that used in the introduction to Esther. “This suggests the ‘provinces’ in Esther 1:1 are *not* equivalent to the satrapies *but the smaller divisions that comprised the satrapies*.”

French historian Gérard Gertoux concurs, noting that during the time of Xerxes, the number of satrapies would have likely been around 30, and based on an average subdivision, “there were more likely to be around 120 provinces (30 satrapies multiplied by four provinces in each satrapy)” —a tidy fit with the 127 provinces mentioned in Esther 1:1 (“Queen Esther, Wife of Xerxes: Fairy Tale or Real History?”).

Arbitrary Dates?

Another interesting, immediately apparent peculiarity in the book of Esther are the very specific timestamps recorded. The snubbing of Ahasuerus’s initial wife, Vashti, takes place during a long festival at Susa “in the third year” of the king’s reign (Esther 1:3). The story then picks up several years later, “in the tenth month, which is the month Tebeth, in the *seventh* year of his reign” (Esther 2:16), when the young Esther is brought before the king.

It is striking how specific this time frame is. Furthermore, no literary reason is given for this



Queen Esther Approaching the Palace and Ahasuerus, by Claude Lorrain

three-to-four-year gap in the first two chapters of the book. What could be the reason?

There *are* some rather remarkable synchronisms with the reign of Xerxes I (again, whose reign began in 486 B.C.E.). Regarding the first timestamp—the festival of the third year—Sarbanani notes a “loan document from Susa ... dated to the third year of Xerxes’s reign confirm[ing] that he was in Susa at that time. We also know that Xerxes had subdued the Egyptian rebels by January 484 B.C.E., therefore, the feast mentioned in the book of Esther may have been a celebration of Xerxes’s victory over Egypt.” This notion that this was a celebration of a military victory is supported by the fact that the first-mentioned guests among the palace nobles are *military leaders* (Esther 1:3).

What about the narrative gap between this event and the king reemerging in his seventh year (479 B.C.E.)? The significance of this time period can easily be overlooked. Yet *this is when Persia’s king was away on his campaigns against Greece!*

Xerxes began preparing his army, which included the combined forces of 46 different nations, for a major

invasion of Europe in 481 B.C.E. The campaign that followed (480–479 B.C.E.) is known as the “Second Persian Invasion of Greece” and included such famous battles as that of Thermopylae (of Spartan fame), Salamis, Plataea and Mycale. Ultimately, this campaign proved devastating for Xerxes, who personally led his troops—meaning that he was away from the Persian court *until his seventh year as king*.

Dr. William H. Shea summarized: “Xerxes left [from his campaign] for Susa ... approximately the 1st of September, 479, or about the beginning of the seventh Babylonian and Persian month *in his seventh regnal year*” (“Esther and History”). This long absence precisely parallels the gap evident in the book of Esther. But there is more: Recall that the events with the king and Esther pick up in “month Tebeth.” This coincides with *December-January* of 479–478 B.C.E.—fitting even more tidily with the account in Esther. “Xerxes returned to Persia from his Greek debacle in the fall,” continued Shea. “[T]hus it is natural that he went to his winter residence in Susa, as Herodotus indicates,” where he would have encountered Esther shortly after his return.

Is this incredibly precise fit for the resumption of the story merely coincidence? Or does the time line fit because it reflects historical reality?

Xerxes's Monogamy

It was at this time that Esther “obtained grace and favour in his sight more than all the virgins; so that he set the royal crown upon her head, and made her queen instead of Vashti” (Esther 2:17). Esther became not one of a number of queens, but the sole specific replacement for a single queen who had been defrocked years earlier. To this end is another remarkable synchronism: King Xerxes’s *monogamy!*

“Regarding Xerxes’s marriage, the first point of agreement between the book of Esther and Greek historians is that this king was always monogamous,” continued Gertoux. Herodotus “only mentions one queen ... who was the sole wife of Xerxes.” His father Darius, by contrast, had *six* wives; Xerxes’s son Artaxerxes also had many wives. “Unlike his polygamous father, Xerxes spent his life married to a single woman Xerxes scores quite highly in terms of love and fidelity,” summarizes Dr. Richard Stoneman in *Xerxes: A Persian Life*.

Against the polygamous backdrop of ancient Persia (and ancient history generally), Xerxes’s marriage to one wife stands out. And it is another uncanny match for the marital monogamy of the biblical Ahasuerus.

The issue is, *we know the name of Xerxes’s sole queen: Amestris.*

What, Then, of Esther?

Again, from the NABRE’s introduction to Esther: “[F]urther investigation shows this is not meant to be a historical account. *There is no record of Xerxes having any other queen than Amestris*”

Some, attempting to harmonize Xerxes’s life with the Esther account, have sought various means of reconciliation. Perhaps Amestris was queen between Vashti and Esther; perhaps after Esther. Dr. Shea, in his aforementioned article, posited that Amestris may have been one and the same as Vashti. At face value, this may seem to satisfactorily gel with the ancient Greek accounts about her, which make her out to be an evil character—a veritable wicked witch who Herodotus reports was responsible for sacrificing 14 noble children (*Histories* 7.114).

But attempts to identify Amestris with Vashti, or on either end of Ahasuerus’s marriage to Esther, have largely fallen short. As Casey Moore points out in his 1971 *Anchor Bible* commentary *Esther*: “[A]ccording to [Esther] 2:16 and 3:7, Esther was queen between the seventh and 12th years of Xerxes’s reign, but *according to Herodotus, Amestris was queen then*” The various Greek

accounts imply that Amestris was queen throughout this period, wielding significant power through to the end of Xerxes’s reign and on into that of her son and successor, Artaxerxes I (compare with the article on page 35).

There is no room, then, for Esther—*not unless Esther is one and the same as Amestris herself*. This is the conclusion reached by a handful of researchers, including Gertoux, Dr. Robert Gordis, Prof. Robert Hubbard Jr. and Dr. Mitchell First.

Immediately striking are the core similarities in name—*Amestris* bearing the same phonetic *estr* element. As First wrote in his Torah.com article “If Achashverosh Is Xerxes, Is Esther His Wife Amestris?”, a “stronger connection exists between the Greek Amestris and the Hebrew Esther. The ‘is’ at the end [of Amestris] is just a Greek suffix added to turn the foreign name into proper Greek grammatical form The name Amestris is based around the consonants M, S, T and R, and the name as recorded in the *Megillah* [the book of Esther] is based around the consonants S, T and R.

“Very likely, this is not coincidence. Perhaps her Persian name was composed of the consonants M, S, T and R, and the M was not preserved in the Hebrew.”

Gordis agrees, positing that “‘Esther’ represented an apocopated form of the name ‘Amestris.’ The tendency to shorten foreign names, particularly when their etymology is not known, is widespread” (“Religion, Wisdom and History in the Book of Esther: A New Solution to an Ancient Crux”). He gave the example of the Greek

IS THIS

MORDECAI IS A FASCINATING figure in the Esther account, for whom there are a number of peculiarities and points of debate.

One is the nature of his genealogy in Esther 2: “There was a certain Jew in Shushan the castle, whose name was Mordecai the son of Jair the son of Shimei the son of Kish, a Benjamite, who had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captives ...” (verses 5-6). Some have argued that for Mordecai to have survived the captivity, he would have been over 100 years

name “Alexander,” widely adopted in foreign sources as “Sander”; there is also the example of the apocopated Greek name of Xerxes himself.

Gertoux, for his part, noted that “[t]he name Esther (*Stara* in Old Persian) means ‘star’” and linked it to the name “the star woman (*ama-stara*).”

There are certain difficulties raised with the identification of Amestris as Esther. One objection is that Herodotus appears to name Amestris’s father as the military commander Otanes, whereas the biblical Esther’s father is named as Abihail. Still, while “[t]hese names cannot be connected phonologically, it is striking that the name Avichayil [Hebrew pronunciation of Abihail] contains the element ‘ח-י-ל,’ which has a military connotation and means ‘strength’ or ‘soldier;” wrote First. Alternatively, Prof. Robert Hubbard Jr. argues that Herodotus’s reference to Otanes as father of Amestris in *Histories* 7.61 has been misinterpreted entirely, and that based upon the grammar of the sentence in question, it does not refer to the father of Queen Amestris at all (“Vashti, Amestris and Esther 1,9”).

Another point of contention is the notion that Amestris was already married to, and together with, Xerxes in Sardis in 480 B.C.E.—chronologically before the marriage to Esther. This has, therefore, led some to try to associate her with Vashti, in some kind of continuing marital relationship with Xerxes at this time. Professor Hubbard tackled this question in his abovementioned article, demonstrating that the limited

information about Amestris in Herodotus’s *Histories* “provides no evidence that Amestris accompanied Xerxes at Sardis during his Greek campaign”—if anything, just the opposite. He concludes that a thorough reassessment of the sources, while “undermin[ing] the theses of Wright and Shea (i.e. that Amestris is Vashti) ... leave[s] open the *chronological* possibility that Amestris and Esther might be the same person since they would be at least chronologically contemporary” (emphasis his).

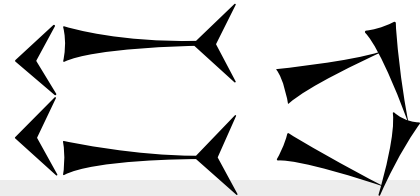
But what of Amestris’s cruel reputation? Could there be a more mismatched character to that of Esther?

Medusa? Or Misunderstood?

It bears emphasizing here that part of the reason for the difficulty in understanding Persian history during this period is because it comes to us primarily through the Greeks—sworn enemies of the Persians. (For an exaggerated case in point of the caricaturing of Persia and Xerxes I himself, look no further than Zack Snyder’s 300.) Scholars naturally view the Greek accounts of Persia with some suspicion, due to this inherent, and sometimes obviously flamboyant, bias. “Clearly, Herodotus and Ctesias depict Amestris as cruel. It should be noted, however, that many scholars today doubt the stories told by the Greek historians about their enemies the Persians; THOSE CONCERNING ROYAL PERSIAN WOMEN ARE PARTICULARLY SUSPECT,” First wrote.

Still, even among the negative Greek accounts, there are certain buried nods to the wisdom and discernment

MORDECAI?



old during the reign of Xerxes. To this end, some have argued based on these verses that the mid-sixth century *Cyrus* should be identified as the Ahasuerus of Esther. The answer is simple, however, if we do not take Mordecai to be the individual carried away captive (which is the sense given in certain translations, such as the King James Version), but rather his great-grandfather Kish.

Another point of confusion is Mordecai’s relationship with Esther, popularly named as her “uncle.” Actually, the “biblical text

is straightforward,” wrote Prof. B. Barry Levy. Esther 2:7 reveals that “Esther is the daughter of *Mordechai’s* uncle, and thus, Esther and Mordechai are first cousins. ... No traditional rabbinic text claims that Mordechai was Esther’s uncle, but the idea has both popular currency and support in early texts” (“What Was Esther’s Relationship to Mordechai?”). Levy primarily credits the popular spread of this assumption to Jerome’s Latin Vulgate, “which says that Esther was the daughter of Mordechai’s brother.”

But is there any evidence for the man himself, in the courts of Persia? Prof. David Howard Jr. summarizes the evidence in *An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books*: “[A] tablet discovered in 1904 contained the name ‘Marduka’ as a high Persian official during the early years of Xerxes’s reign, which corresponds to the time of Mordecai. In more recent years, more than 30 texts have been uncovered with the name Marduka (or Marduku), referring to up to four different individuals, one of whom could easily have been the biblical Mordecai.” ■

of Amestris. Ctesias observed her “great fondness for the society of men” (*Persica*). Plato, in the fourth century, described large tracts of Persian land named by its inhabitants after her, such as “The Queen’s Girdle” and “The Queen’s Veil” (*First Alcibiades*). Gertoux highlighted some of these references to “queen Amestris as an influential and wise woman,” in contrast to certain Greek absurdities “concerning Amestris that are obviously false.” Still, he noted that Herodotus’s account “obviously comes from an Achaemenid informant We can conclude that the Achaemenid informant did not like Amestris and consequently had portrayed her in a very negative way.”

Is it likely that an Achaemenid would have reason to view Esther negatively? The answer from the biblical text can only be a resounding *yes*.

Take Herodotus’s claim in *Histories* 7.114: “It is a Persian custom to bury people alive; for I have heard that Amestris, wife of Xerxes ... caused 14 children of the best families in Persia to be buried alive, to show her gratitude to [a certain foreign] god.” The slander of this passage is palpable—and this notion of human sacrifice occurring in Persia is roundly rejected by scholars. But what of the deaths of children of nobility?

Recall the biblical account of the death of Haman and the king’s decree that the Jews in the land be allowed to defend themselves. The Jews in Shushan killed “ten sons of Haman the son of Hammedatha, the Jews’ enemy” (Esther 9:10), hanging them on Haman’s gallows before burying them. Could the memory of such an event have been preserved in some manner through this account of Herodotus? And could such a vengeful Achaemenid informant have been responsible for shaping this almost comically obtuse, evil caricature of Esther/Amestris among the Greeks?

As for the actual account of the near genocide of the Jews, perhaps unsurprisingly, we have no Persian record of it. In fact, we have comparatively little detail of events in general during the latter part of Xerxes’s reign. Despite this, Gordis noted that “the incident is not as improbable as has been thought. In 88 B.C.E. ... Mithradates VI of Pontus ordered a general slaughter of ‘all who were of Italic race,’ men, women and children of every age [T]he massacre was to be carried out at the same time everywhere, namely on the 30th day after the date of the royal order. It is reported that 80,000 were killed on that day. That Persian influence predominated in Pontus is well known. Is it possible that Mithradates was maintaining an older Iranian ‘tradition’ for disposing of one’s enemies?”

Gertoux added that the “best proof of the existence of this ancient event” relayed in Esther “is the total absence of Jewish names in Persian documents before



the reign of Xerxes, then the emergence of hundreds of Jewish names just after his reign ... proving their full reinstatement in the Persian society.”

All in the Details

The bulk of the content in Esther is dialogue, day-to-day interactions, courtly intrigue and the *prevention* of an event of historical magnitude. Lacking any archaeological or added textual evidence, these are almost impossible to account for historically. But often, some of the best giveaways for intrinsic historicity are in the smallest of details—the throwaway lines, the details taken for granted. And the book of Esther is replete with them. Here are a few examples:

- The description of the empire at the time of Xerxes I, spanning from “India” to “Ethiopia”; this geographical reference is paralleled on Xerxes I’s Daiva Inscription.
- Decrees sent out “to every people after their language” (Esther 1:22). The issuing of multilingual decrees, deferring to the personal language of subjects, is a well-documented feature of Persian rule.
- The book of Esther identifies a cabinet of seven counselors to the Persian king (verses 13-14). Xerxes’s father, Darius the Great, had six such men in his

cabinet (per the Behistun Inscription)—pointing to an inner circle of roughly the same size.

- Esther 5:1 contains what can only be described as eyewitness detail about the architecture of Xerxes's palace, with an "inner court of the king's house, over against the king's house," and "royal throne in the royal house, over against the entrance of the house." This layout has been corroborated thanks to archaeological excavations of the Susa palace (see pages 9-11).
- The prominent role of the Persian king's royal scepter (Esther 5:2): While the exact function of the scepter is still unknown, several Persian palace reliefs depict Persian king brandishing a scepter.
- The desire of the Persian king to recompense servants for good deeds (Esther 6:1-3)—a practice echoed in Darius's Behistun Inscription. Notable in relation to this are the Persian "lists" made of such benefactors (Esther 2:23), a practice noted by Herodotus (*Histories* 3.140).
- The kingdom is jointly referred to in numerous verses as that of "Persia and Media" (Esther 1:3, 14, 18; 10:2). This parallels references in inscriptions, such as Darius the Great's reference to himself as king of "Persia, Media and other countries" (DPg Terrace Inscription).
- There is also the well-known, infamous unchangeability of Persian law, even in cases of judicial error (Esther 8:8).

Then there is the raw language of Esther. Skeptics commonly identify Esther as Classical Greek storytelling. Yet as Sarbanani notes, "Although some of this information [in Esther] has resemblance to that provided in Classical [Greek] sources, most of it is in line with evidence directly connected to the Persian Empire. Considering this fact along with the absence of *any* Greek word in the text on the one hand and the presence of many Old Persian and Aramaic words on the other hand, *it seems that the author of the book of Esther had access to sources directly related to the Persian Empire.*"

Similarly, Craig Davis, in *Dating the Old Testament*, assesses the language of Esther—its "Classical Biblical Hebrew rather than Late Biblical Hebrew" linguistic features and its total lack of Greek words, and its "thoroughly Persian" nature and use of language—concluding that the "most likely date for Esther is around 430 B.C.E., during the governorship of Nehemiah. ... This would also be consistent with the statement of Josephus that no Old Testament books were written after Artaxerxes" (whose reign ended in 424 B.C.E.). Thus, even in the language of the book itself there is consistency, "support[ing] a date deep within the Persian Period" (ibid).

In Sum

It's true that there is a lot we do not and cannot know about the historicity of Esther. But it is surely an oversimplification to reject the work as "fictional."


Does the book contain what could be described as implausibilities? Sure. Consider the king's dream and decision to elevate Mordecai, at the same time as Haman's plotting his death. But these are not *impossibilities* and are not demanded by the *facts* to relegate the book to the status of "fiction." By the same token, the facts that *are* present throughout the book—the "throwaway" lines and language slotting tidily into the history of early fifth-century B.C.E. Persia—*do* clearly attest to its historical nature. Not to mention the book's conclusion, appealing to readers to cross-reference the information "in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia" (Esther 10:2).

Unfortunately, no such Persian chronicles have survived—again, unfortunately, a bulk of what we know about ancient Persia comes from sorely biased Greek sources. Yet ironically, for those who would cast aside Esther as an ahistorical "novella" in favor of the Greek accounts, the very same accusations have been leveled at certain of *Herodotus's* descriptions of Xerxes's Persia, as having "all the literary earmarks of a novella based on oral tradition rather than an eyewitness account" (Hubbard Jr., *ibid*). It's a criticism that goes back nearly 2,000 years to the Jewish historian Josephus, who in no uncertain terms condemned Greek historians who, "without having been in the places concerned, or having been near them when the actions were done ... put a few things together by hearsay, and insolently abuse the world, and call these writings by the name of *Histories*" (*Against Apion* 1.8).

As for the comparative importance of the book in the canon? It is not for this author to decide. Personally, I would not be so bold as to rank it beside the Torah in importance. Similarly, I would not be so bold as to regard myself an "enemy" of it, to reject the work as "fiction," or to claim it as "offensive."

For if anything is evidence of the historicity of Esther and its account of the near-extirmination of the Jewish people, it is the regularity with which the same anti-Semitic theme has played throughout history. By far the *worst* example being *still in living memory*, with 6 million Jews murdered in the Holocaust alone (not to mention numerous other pogroms and atrocities of the past century). Yet paradoxically, out of those ashes, within mere decades the Jewish nation arose through repeated defensive wars to become more powerful in might than ever before.

One wonders if 2,500 years from now future historians will regard the dramatic events of Jewish history during this past century as "farcical," "hugely ironic," preposterously "exaggerated"—as "fictional." ■



ESTHER IN THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS?

Only one biblical book is missing from the massive corpus of scriptural manuscripts. Or is it?

BY CHRISTOPHER EAMES

THE BOOK OF ESTHER IS NOTABLE AMONG THE biblical canon for being one of the last books to be written and the last to be canonized. There are numerous peculiarities about this book of the Bible. It is common knowledge that among the famous Dead Sea Scrolls (a trove of fragmentary manuscripts dating variously from the third century B.C.E. to the first century C.E.), this is the only biblical book missing entirely.

The fact that Esther is missing from the Dead Sea Scrolls has, in part, led to various speculations about the authenticity of the Esther account. Some even

question whether the book was originally included in the biblical canon. One of the main arguments *against* Esther being part of the Bible revolves around the Dead Sea Scrolls. This enormous trove of preserved and partially preserved works contain a total of around 800 scrolls, roughly 30 percent of which are associated with biblical texts. Text from every book of the Bible *except* Esther has been found on the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Is Esther's apparent exclusion from the Dead Sea Scrolls proof against its canonicity?

In his article "Should She Stay or Should She Go? The Canonicity of Esther," Stephen Curto wrote: "[This]

objection, that Esther is absent from the Dead Sea Scrolls, is a more worthwhile argument for those who oppose canonicity. The Dead Sea Scrolls are easily the most significant archaeological discovery of the past century and possibly millennium. It is the most comprehensive collection of Old Testament manuscripts discovered to date. ... There were fragments from every single Old Testament book found at Qumran, the location of the discovery, except Esther.”

Thus, theories have prevailed that Esther had not yet, at this late turn-of-the-millennium period (centuries after the events it describes), officially entered the biblical canon—due in large part to a lack of trust in its authenticity.

One recourse of explanation in defense of Esther, however, is that numerous Dead Sea Scroll fragments—charred, disintegrated and faded—are entirely unreadable, and thus may have contained Esther material. There is also the inferiority of the argument of silence, as Curto noted: Just because something hasn’t been discovered, doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist.

Another explanation is that the book of Esther is itself a small work, which would leave less of a “footprint” among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The same could be said of the book of Nehemiah, a work of similar length *also not found among the Dead Sea Scrolls*. (The reason this book isn’t met with the same controversy is because Ezra and Nehemiah originally were a single text, and fragments of text within the Ezra portion *have* been found.) Another explanation is that since the book of Esther does not contain the name of God, it did not need to be ritually preserved or buried (a traditional Jewish practice derived from Deuteronomy 12:3-4, to prevent damage to the “name of God”).

Finally, there is an elephant in the room—the Qumran community were themselves seen by the Jewish community at the time as a group of “religious wackos,” monastic desert pariahs from the central Jewish communities and sects, with numerous fringe beliefs (including an entirely different solar calendar); thus, they should not be seen as representative, consequential preservers of scripture or doctrine.

These are all valid points. But *what if none of them are necessary?* Despite the lack of direct evidence of an Esther scroll itself, certain other manuscript discoveries from Qumran *do* indicate that the community was not only aware of but entirely conversant with the book of Esther.



1QapGen

The rather mundanely-named Dead Sea Scroll fragments 1QapGen and 4QprEsth ar constitute apocryphal, late Aramaic fragments among the Dead Sea Scrolls. 1QapGen (the “Genesis Apocryphon”) expounds on an incident at pharaoh’s court involving Abraham and Sarah, using

remarkably similar language to the account of Esther and Mordecai in the court of Ahasuerus. And 4QprEsth ar constitutes six fragment clusters relating to some relatively obscure apocryphal story set in the Persian period, with linguistic similarities to the book of Esther.

1QapGen was proposed by its researcher, J. Finkel, to be evidence of the preexistence of, and the author’s dependence on, the book of Esther (as published in his article “The Author of the Genesis Apocryphon Knew the Book of Esther (in Hebrew)”). For example, 1QapGen 20:6-7 describe Sarah’s beauty, as follows: “[A]nd all maidens and all brides that enter under the wedding canopy are not fairer than she. And above all women is she lovely and higher in her beauty than that of them all.” This is a parallel to Esther 2: “[T]hus came every maiden unto the king And the king loved Esther above all the women, and she obtained grace and favour in his sight more than all the virgins ...” (verses 13, 17; King James Version).

1QapGen 20:30 states: “[A]nd the king swore to me with an oath that cannot be changed.” This parallels Esther 8:8: “[F]or the writing which is written in the king’s name, and sealed with the king’s ring, may no man reverse.”

The similarities compound. In the Aramaic 1QapGen, “בוץ וארגנואן” is mentioned; properly, this is a very specific term referring to a fine linen of purple (as explained in Shemarayahu Talmon’s 1995 article “Was the Book of Esther Known at Qumran?”). The Aramaic account records this material was given by the ruler to Abraham when he was sent forth from the court. This word combination is *only* found, among the books of the Bible, *in the book of Esther*, and in two places—Esther 1:6 and 8:15—describing royal apparel specifically bequeathed *by the king to Mordecai when he was sent forth from the court* (with the exact Hebrew equivalent “בוץ וארגמן”). Furthermore, in the veritable ocean of rabbinic literature, this word combination is again *only* found in commentaries relating to Esther.

Individually, each of these parallels make for interesting speculation. Collectively, they speak to Finkel’s only logical conclusion, that the author of the

apocryphal Dead Sea Scroll Qumran 1QapGen must have had a knowledge of, and drew from, the existing book of Esther.

4QprEsth ar

Research of the small Aramaic 4QprEsth ar fragments was conducted by J. T. Milik and published in 1992. He noted similarities between the biblical text of Esther and this enigmatic work, indicating a connection or understanding between the two.

4QprEsth ar^d II 6 reads: “[H]is wickedness will return on his own [head ...].” This parallels Esther 9:25: “[H]is wicked device, which he had devised against the Jews, should return upon his own head”

4QprEsth ar^d II 3 describes honor being given to a queen, in the form of a “[royal ...] crown of go[ld upon] her [he]ad.” This parallels Esther 2:17: “[H]e set the royal crown upon her head”

4QprEsth ar^a 3-5 read, in part: “At that same hour the temper of the king was stretched [... the bo]oks of his father should be read to him and among the books was found a scroll ... it was found written within” This parallels Esther 6:1-2: “On that night could not the king sleep; and he commanded to bring the book of records of the chronicles, and they were read before the king. And it was found written”

4QprEsth ar^d I IV 2-3 describe a “man of Judah, one of the nobles of Benjam[in ...] an exile” This parallels Esther 2:5-6: A “certain Jew ... a Benjamite, who had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captives.” And in a line of text near this reference, Milik proposes the following reconstruction: “[... as for] me, Es[ther].”

But Wait—There’s More

Besides the parallels in 1QapGen and 4QprEsth ar, Shemarayahu Talmon offered numerous additional examples of general text found at Qumran to show the community’s familiarity with the book of Esther. He wrote that “*hapax legomena* [terms that are only found once] in the Hebrew Bible, which are extant *exclusively* in the book of Esther and are *quoted verbatim* in Qumran texts, which were unquestionably authored by members of the יחד [Qumran community], evince the dependence of the latter on the former” (emphasis added throughout). These include:

- Specific vocalization of words in “conjunctive structure with the definite article,” a “distinctive linguistic characteristic of the book of Esther.” For example, Esther 1:8—“אִישׁ וְאִישׁ” and 8:9 “עַם וְעַם”—among numerous other conjunctive examples—the use of which Talmon believes influenced the Qumran community’s adoption of this linguistic element seen throughout their other writings. (One extreme example of repetitive

conjunctive structure is from 4Q416 1 6-7: “לְאִישׁ וְאִישׁ לְמַמְלָכָה וּמַמְלָכָה לְמַדִּינָה וּמַדִּינָה”—“for all kingdoms and for all provinces and for all men.”)

- The use of the word “תר” in order of succession, in “waiting one’s turn,” is found *only* in such manner in Esther 2:12 and 15 and is used repeatedly in the same manner by the Qumran community.
- The pairing of the Hebrew words “light and happiness” (אורה ושמחה) occurs *only* in Esther; this pairing, while not absolutely certain, can be found on two Qumran texts.
- The expression of “my wish ... and my request,” found nowhere else in the Bible, is present six times in the book of Esther. The same form is found in another apocryphal Qumran text.
- The stringing together of the words הפך, שמח, יגון, אבכל is found in Esther 9:22—and a similar line of text is found in 4QpHos. “While in Esther the phrase is used in a positive sense, in 4QpHos it is given a negative turn,” Talmon explained. “The literary transformation supports the supposition that the author *deliberately quoted the expression in Esther* with a pointed inversion of content.”

These examples are just a selection of Talmon’s evidence. “[The] employment of these phrases, which had no general currency in post-biblical (rabbinic) Hebrew, evinces the *Yahad* [Qumran community] author’s familiarity with them, buttressing the supposition that he knew the book of Esther,” he summarized. “The linguistic-contentual parallels with Esther [in the Qumran community] indeed support the claim that the authors of those texts were conversant with the tale of Esther and Mordecai.”

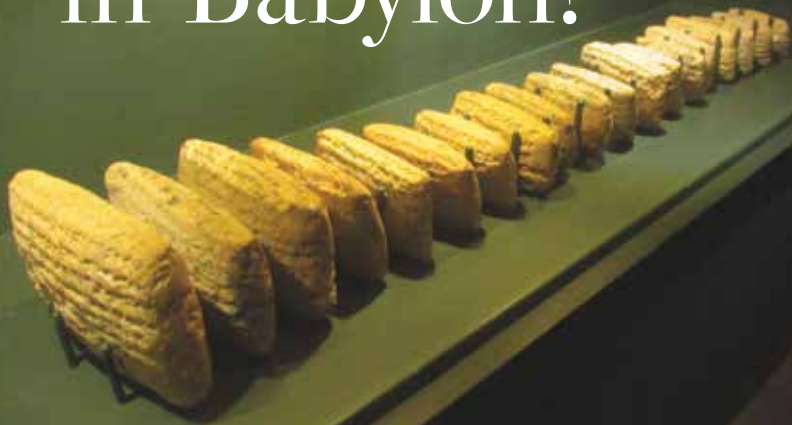
Textual Salvation

Considering this, is it accurate to say the book of Esther is not found among the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Qumran community? For now, the answer remains technically affirmative (for any of the manifold reasons described in the first part of this article). Yet that affirmation can also be misleading because, as the remarkable parallels from the late Qumran apocryphal texts show, there *was* a level of awareness and knowledge of this remarkable biblical work—and an apparently significant degree of familiarity with it.

As for the overall historicity of the book—despite widespread dismissal from skeptics—there *is* likewise a remarkable body of evidence for it (see article, page 22).

As such, just as the book of Esther is a story about Jewish deliverance from the hands of Haman, it appears that the very scriptural text itself may be “rescued,” in its own right, from the clutches of desert destruction and obscurity at Qumran. ■

Evidence of Jews in Babylon?



Archaeological evidence confirms the biblical text and the message of Jeremiah.

BY BRENT NAGTEGAAL

KING NEBUCHADNEZZAR'S INVASION OF JUDAH IN the late seventh century B.C.E. was the death knell for the nation. Between 605 and 586 B.C.E., successive incursions by the Babylonian army resulted in the destruction of Judah, the devastation of Jerusalem, and the exile of tens of thousands of Jews from their homeland.

The Prophet Jeremiah lived in Jerusalem during this turbulent time and delivered to the Jewish people God's message of impending doom—but also hope. Jeremiah told the Jews that they would be in exile in Babylon for 70 years, but then would be given the opportunity to return to their homeland and their beloved capital, Jerusalem.

Jeremiah 29, likely written shortly after 598 B.C.E., records a letter to the newly exiled Jews in Babylon: "Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, unto all the captivity, whom I have caused to be carried away captive from Jerusalem unto Babylon: Build ye houses, and dwell in them, and plant gardens, and eat the fruit of them; take ye wives, and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply ye there, and be not diminished" (verses 4-6). It's a remarkable letter: Even in exile, the Jewish people would thrive.

How did the exiled Jews fair in Babylon?

Clay tablets from the land of Babylon give us the answer.

Tablets From Judah-town

In 2014, Laurie E. Pearce and Cornelia Wunsch published the study of more than 100 clay tablets discovered in modern-day Iraq. The ancient documents, which are written in neo- and late-Babylonian cuneiform, come from the private collection of David Sofer. Although they are unprovenanced, scholars consider the tablets to be authentic. These artifacts provide insight into the lifestyle of Babylon's Jewish exiles.

The earliest documents date to 572 B.C.E., just 26 years after Jeremiah wrote his letter to the exiles. The last text in the collection is dated to 477 B.C.E., when Esther became queen in Persia. Over half of the tablets (54 in total) are part of the private archive of a man named Ahiqam, who happens to be from a conspicuously named town called Al-Yahudu in Akkadian

or, in English, Judah-town.

Although the precise location of Judah-town is unknown, it is generally considered to be in the area of Nippur, around 100 kilometers (62 miles) southeast of Babylon. Thus, it is significant that less than two decades after the destruction of the temple there is textual evidence outside the Bible of a well-established Jewish community on the outskirts of Babylon.

The inscriptions record events you might expect in a rural community, such as land leases, receipts for payments (be it in dates or barley), sales of cattle, collections of taxes, division of estate inheritance after the death of a patriarch, and even loans. For these ancient Jews, they're routine, boring details. For modern scholars, the tablets provide a rare glimpse into the lifestyle of an ancient Jewish community.

Dr. Kathleen Abraham, a specialist in ancient Babylonian history at Bar-Ilan University, described the tablets as showcasing the "day-to-day activities performed by the Judean exiles and their descendants, such as farming the land they had received from the Babylonian king in return for military service as archers, paying taxes, or settling matters of inheritance with the family."

Although they were clearly from the lower echelon of society, the Jews of Judah-town lived a surprisingly unrestricted life. As long as they paid their rent and fulfilled military conscription, the king of Babylon left

them alone. This underscores one of the differences between the Babylonian and Assyrian empires in regards to conquered peoples: While the Assyrians deported and scattered those they subjugated, the Babylonians often planted victims together in an underdeveloped part of the empire. Here, they could develop their new land and, in the case of Jews of Judah-town, even retain their native identity.

A Typical Example

One illuminating example of the Judah-town tablets is text number 10. The inscription was recorded in 549 B.C.E., about a decade before a contingent of Jews returned to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel. It details a simple promissory note written in cuneiform declaring that Shelemiah son of Nedaviah (both obviously Jewish names) owes barley to another man.

The translation by Pearce and Wunsch reads: “kor of barley are owed to Gummulu son of Bi-hamê by Šalam-Yāma son of Nadab-Yāma. In Simānu, he will deliver the barley in its principal amount in the town of Adabilu. Dalā-Yāma son of Ili-šū guarantees delivery of the barley. Witnesses: Šikin-Yāma son of Ili-šū; Balātu son of Nabû-nāsir; and the scribe, Nabû-nāsir son of Nabû-zēr-iqīša. Written in Judah-town, the 23rd day of Tebētu, the sixth year of Nabonidus, king of Babylon.”

The text, a typical example of the Al-Yahudu archive, is somewhat mundane. There is a debt owed, a guarantor is mentioned, and there are witnesses to the contract. Then the location and the date are given.

But there is also something utterly unique on this tablet. On the left side of the tablet, five paleo Hebrew letters are clearly visible. This is the language and script of the land of Israel, not Babylon. According to historian Jean-Philippe Delorme, it is the “only evidence for the use of this script outside the land of Israel.”

The Hebrew script spells the name Shelemiah (“*slmyh*”), the individual who owed the barley. The use of the Hebrew script shows that even though Aramaic was dominant, there were still people in Judah-town familiar with Hebrew and teaching Hebrew to their children. Even after almost 50 years in exile, the Hebrew language remained.

What’s in a Name?

The names of the inhabitants of Judah-town are also noteworthy because of what they tell us about the ethnic identity of the people and the degree of assimilation into Babylonian culture. There is a high concentration of names including “Ya,” “Yahu” and “Yama”—all theophoric elements linked to the God of the Israelites: YHWH. Examples of these Yahwistic names from the texts include Nadab-Yama (Nedavyah), Salam-Yama (Shelamyah) and Nahim-Yama (Nehemyah). There are



Yahudu Text No. 10

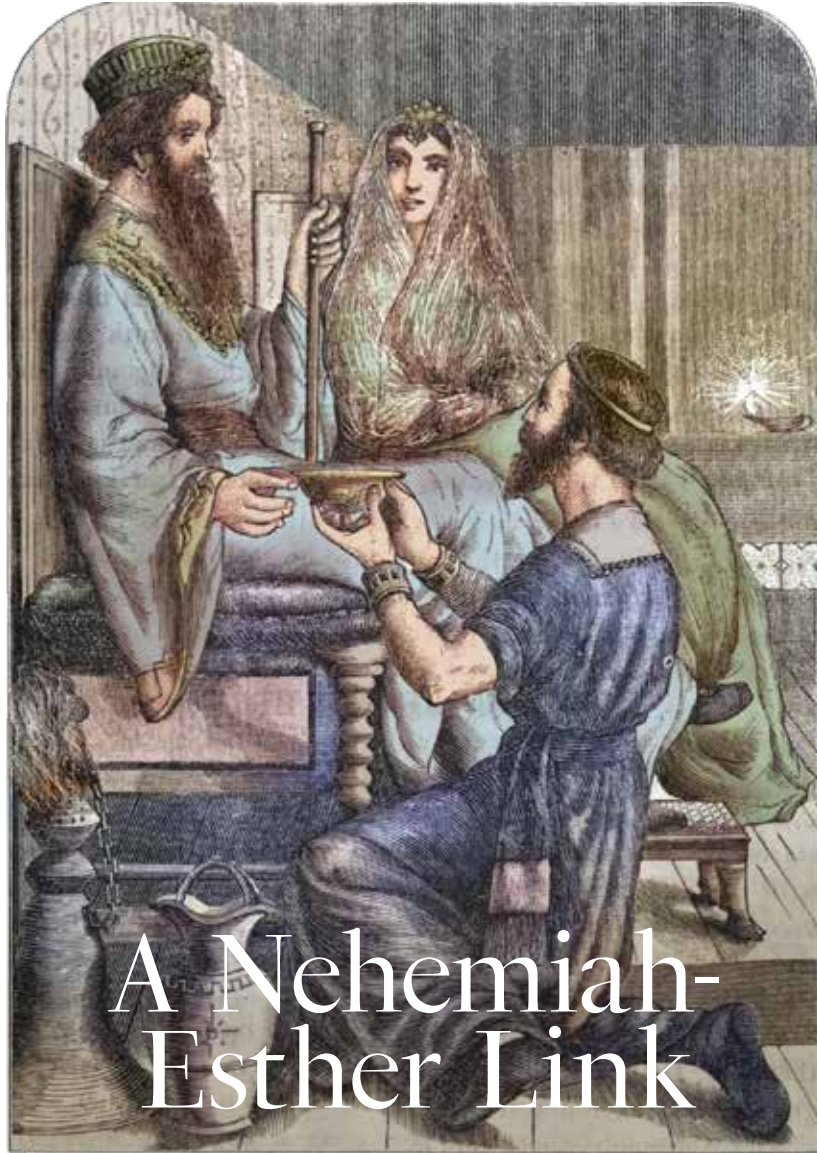
also other Jewish names, such as Haggai (linked to “festival”) or Sabbatay (“the one of the Sabbath”).

Of the 313 individuals mentioned on the Judah-town tablets, 38 PERCENT bear Yahwistic names (while 43 percent have Babylonian names). As noted by Delorme, this is an anomaly. Such a large percentage of names from a single foreign ethnic group “has never been observed for any other ethnic community living in Babylonia” (“The Al-Yahudu Texts (ca. 572–477 B.C.E.): A New Window Into the Life of the Judean Exilic Community of Babylonia”).

Interestingly, there is an even greater surge of Yahwistic names found on the Al-Yahudu tablets, which are dated to 552–532 B.C.E., just before the conclusion of the 70 years of exile prophesied by Jeremiah. “The peak in popularity of Yahwistic names for the population of Al-Yahudu is contemporaneous with the emergent movement of a national revival that promoted the return to the land of Israel during the late neo-Babylonian and early Achaemenid periods,” Delorme wrote.

From what we can tell from the onomastic evidence, many of the Jews in Judah-town were likely aware of Jeremiah’s message delivered more than 50 years earlier. The biblical text shows that Daniel, who was alive at the time and living in Babylon, was aware of Jeremiah’s prophecy (Daniel 9:2). Daniel also told his people that while in exile in Babylon, they should build houses, marry, work the land, and thrive, which is exactly what the Al-Yahudu tablets reveal happened.

Jeremiah’s letter did more than merely describe Jewish exile; it also described their return to Judah. “... After seventy years are accomplished for Babylon, I will remember you, and perform My good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place [Jerusalem]. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:10-11). The book of Ezra records that over 40,000 Jews took the opportunity to turn that hope into reality and return back to their native homeland, and perhaps some of those were from the rural Babylonian village of Judah-town. ■



A Nehemiah- Esther Link

Who was the Persian ‘queen’ referenced in Nehemiah 2:6?

BY RYAN MALONE

ONE OF THE MOST REMARKABLE FIGURES IN JEWISH history is Hadassah, or Esther—who went from being one of many ordinary displaced Jewish girls to the genocide-preventing queen of Persia.

When it comes to Jerusalem’s history specifically, one of the most remarkable figures is Nehemiah—known for his unwavering grit, shrewdness and efficiency during one of the city’s most vulnerable periods. His swift wall-building was emblematic of other forms of security he brought to the Jewish capital at the time. His chronicle of events provides some of the most specific historical details about the city ever recorded.

Using the biblical record as a *chronological* guide, Esther’s and Nehemiah’s lives in Persia would have overlapped. Nehemiah’s account begins about 20 years after the death of Xerxes, Esther’s husband (see article, page 22).

But is there even more in the biblical account that connects these two heroic personalities? The exchange between Nehemiah and Artaxerxes may divulge an answer.

‘The Queen Also Sitting by Him’

Nehemiah 2 contains an incredible exchange between Artaxerxes—son and successor of Xerxes I—and his cupbearer Nehemiah. The king noticed an overt air of

sadness about his servant, which made Nehemiah “sore afraid” (verse 2). Other biblical accounts indicate that someone in deep mourning would have stayed away from the Persian royal court (see Esther 4:1-2), so he may have felt in danger of a grievous violation here.

Nehemiah defended his disposition by describing the plight of Jerusalem, mentioning the charred gates and twice the importance of its tombs (Nehemiah 2:3-5).

The king responds in verse 6 with a couple of follow-up questions, and then the account implies Artaxerxes was *happy* to send Nehemiah away for a set time.

Another intriguing detail is nestled in verse 6: “And the king said unto me, the queen also sitting by him: ‘For how long shall thy journey be? and when wilt thou return?’ So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time.”

Notice that Nehemiah’s account is written in the first person. As with any autobiographical account, the details he chooses to include or exclude speak volumes of what is significant TO HIM.

Why does Nehemiah mention the presence of this queen right before the king’s response and subsequent permission to return to Judah?

The Bible’s Queens

As the wife of Xerxes, Esther would be the “queen mother” at this time. Artaxerxes’s wife, or queen “consort,” was a woman named Damaschia (he had other wives and concubines, but she was the mother of his heir).

The handful of Hebrew words for “queen” don’t really make a distinction in these roles—whether a ruling female monarch (e.g. queen of Sheba), a wife of a monarch (a consort) or the mother of a ruling king.

It’s worth briefly exploring how the Bible uses these terms to shed more light on what is being said (or not said) in Nehemiah 2:6.

The Hebrew Bible describes about a dozen queens, if you don’t count the 60 anonymous ones in Song of

Songs 6:8-9. *Malkhah* is most common word for queen; simply and logically, it is the feminine form of the word for “king” (*melekh*). This Hebrew word (and the nearly identical Aramaic equivalent) describes the queen of Sheba, Persia’s Vashti, the queen in Belshazzar’s reign, and *half of these references are to Esther herself*. (A similar word describes the object of pagan worship, the “queen of heaven”—a feminine noun from the root meaning to reign, and perhaps simply a feminine form of the pagan *Molech*.)

Another word describes a woman of kingly relation: *g’virah*. This is the feminine form of the word *gavar* (ruler or lord—close to the modern Hebrew for “man”). This shows the versatility of *any* word for “queen.” For instance, it can refer to a wife of a pharaoh (1 Kings 11:19). In contrast, Jeconiah’s “queen-mother” is listed as being part of a wave of Babylonian captives (Jeremiah 29:2); other accounts mention his “mother” (singular) and his “wives” (plural)—not plural queens (see 2 Kings 24:12, 15). Even King Asa’s grandmother is explicitly referred to as “queen” (1 Kings 15:13; 2 Chronicles 15:16), who at one time would have been “consort.”

The same versatility is built into the English language: Elizabeth II, her mother and her paternal grandmother were all referred to as “queen” when all three were alive.

Who Is This Seated ‘Queen’?

The remarkable thing about Nehemiah 2:6 is the word for queen is completely unique, with the exception of one anonymous reference in Psalm 45:10. The word *shaygal* appears to come from a root implying sexual intimacy—which would *not* be the case between Artaxerxes and Esther, but definitely between Artaxerxes’s father and Esther, since they are his parents.

Psalm 45:10 (verse 9 in other translations) describes an unnamed king with a queen (*shaygal*) standing next to him.

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To learn more about the exhibit and the Tel Dan Stele, and to plan your visit to Edmond, be sure to visit ArmstrongInstitute.org. If you can, I encourage you to visit Armstrong Auditorium where the “house of David” will soon be on display! ■

STELE
FROM PAGE 1

As I prepare this article, we are still finalizing the details. But we expect the stele to go on display in mid-to-late September and to remain on display through November 22.

After its stint in Edmond, Oklahoma, the stele will travel to New York City, where it will be on display for six weeks at the Jewish Museum.

We are incredibly grateful to Israel Museum, to the Israel Antiquities Authority and to the people of Israel for sharing this extraordinary artifact with us. This is a tremendous honor and responsibility for the Armstrong Institute of Biblical Archaeology and a highlight for us after almost 60 years of working in Jerusalem in

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FEEDBACK

I love your magazine. The issue about David and Solomon is a masterpiece, clearly delineating the proofs and examples of archaeological evidence for it. It's an issue that needs to be studied, not just read. ...

I don't have enough words to tell you how important this magazine is. It is such a breath of fresh air to receive archaeological and historical information from people who accept the Bible as an authoritative source. Thank you so much. I eagerly await your response and to see the next issue.

JERUSALEM, ISRAEL

Thank you for the excellent research and writing skill. I absolutely love this magazine.

NESS ZIONA, ISRAEL

I have just now successfully renewed my subscription to *Let the Stones Speak*, but I cannot let this moment pass without expressing my heartfelt appreciation for your sharing your material with me. The "David and Solomon's Monumental Kingdom" issue, in particular, is a study unlike any other that I have come upon. I can only repeat what you surely have heard from many others—that your collective efforts are precious.

YEHUD, ISRAEL

I wanted to take a moment to thank you for sending me your fascinating magazine, *Let the Stones Speak*, about David and Solomon's united monarchical kingdom. The pictures were stunning, and the information was incredibly engaging. I truly appreciate the effort that went into making this material and distributing it. I'm already looking forward to the next one—keep up the fantastic work!

UNITED STATES

In Nehemiah 2:6, we see a woman sitting beside Artaxerxes, but she is not functioning as "queen" in the sense that would require the feminine form of "king" or the feminine form of "ruler." There is a family connection here. And for it to be Esther—who claims half the biblical references to a queen, though a different word when her husband is the actual king—is quite likely.

The use of *shaygal* causes some commentators, like Adam Clarke, to believe this woman to be some sort of concubine. But that makes Nehemiah mentioning her in his autobiographical prose all the stranger.

The Jamieson, Fausset and Brown Commentary notes: "As the Persian monarchs did not admit their wives to be present at their state festivals, this must have been a private occasion." We could add that concubines would also be excluded from this kind of affair.

It continues: "The queen referred to was probably Esther, whose presence would tend greatly to embolden Nehemiah in stating his request; and through her influence, powerfully exerted it may be supposed, also by her sympathy with the patriotic design, his petition was granted, to go as deputy governor of Judea, accompanied by a military guard, and invested with full powers to obtain materials for the building in Jerusalem, as well as to get all requisite aid in promoting his enterprise."

Let the Stones Speak editor in chief Gerald Flurry commented on Nehemiah 2:6 in his booklet on Ezra and Nehemiah: "The king (and queen) granted all of Nehemiah's requests. Why did they do so? Nehemiah recognized that it was God who had given him great favor. Even though the king and queen physically supported him, their support was directly inspired by God."

This divine support resonates more poignantly if it is Esther herself seated next to Persia's king.

A Queen for Jerusalem

Consider the details covered: Based on the Hebrew word chosen, she is not in the same position of authority as Esther is when Xerxes is ruling. But Esther is presumably still alive at this moment, still functioning as the Jewish queen mother of Persia. And, perhaps most convincingly of all, she is significant to Nehemiah. It appears her presence was positive and impactful to the outcome of the story. Perhaps the presence of this Jewish heroine made him more candid with Artaxerxes, knowing that the king's mother would be sympathetic to his cause.

If so, Esther stands not only as the powerful queen who stood in the way of the Jewish people being blotted out, she also played a part in the renaissance of strength that *Jerusalem itself* achieved under Nehemiah. ■



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