

# REWORKING THE MIDRASH IN LIGHT OF HISTORY: ACHASHVEROSH AND THE TEMPLE

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## CHRONOLOGY OF THE PERSIAN KINGS

This article deals with a discrepancy between the historical and rabbinic understandings of the order of kings in the Persian period, the repercussions of this discrepancy and a way to mitigate the effects of this conflict.

Cuneiform inscriptions from the ancient Persian palaces were deciphered in the 19th century, leading to a better understanding of the succession of Persian kings. These inscriptions confirmed the lists of Persian kings found in the writings of Greek historians, demonstrating that there were multiple kings named Artaxerxes, and that the Persian period lasted for more than two hundred years. This is at great variance with the views found in the Talmud and Seder Olam, the ancient work detailing the traditional rabbinic chronology of Biblical events. For example, according to Seder Olam, the Persian period lasted only 52 years,<sup>1</sup> and Artaxerxes is not a name for a particular king, but a general royal term, so that Cyrus and Darius are sometimes referred to as Artaxerxes.<sup>2</sup>

The major discrepancy between the rabbinic and historical accounts that concerns us here is when Achashverosh ruled. In Seder Olam, King Achashverosh is placed after Cyrus and before Darius.<sup>3</sup> However, historically, Achashverosh, identified with Xerxes,<sup>4</sup> ruled after Darius I and right before Artaxerxes I. Since the Second Temple was completed during the reign of Darius I (Ezra 6:15), this means that while historically Achashverosh/Xerxes ruled once the Temple was built, in the rabbinic chronology he ruled before the Temple was built.

This confusion seems to have resulted at least in part from the difficult narrative arrangement of Ezra 4, which jumps ahead to the reign of Achashverosh and Artaxerxes I before returning to the chronological narrative and the reign of Darius I in 4:24 and chapter 5.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the first six chapters of Ezra take place during the period of time from Cyrus to Darius I, with a flash for-

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ward in chapter 4 covering events in the time of Achashverosh/Xerxes and Artaxerxes I, and the rest of the Book of Ezra (chapter 7 to the end) and the Book of Nehemiah take place during the reign of Artaxerxes I.

However, in the rabbinic model, the first mention of each king in the text of Ezra represents the chronological order of the king, so that the order is Cyrus (Ezra 1:1), Achashverosh/Xerxes (Ezra 4:6), Artaxerxes (Ezra 4:7)<sup>6</sup> and Darius (Ezra 4:24). Artaxerxes, the king reigning from Ezra chapter 7 through the entire Book of Nehemiah is understood to simply be another royal title for Darius.<sup>7</sup> This of course leads to a radically different understanding of the background of events in the Book of Esther, either taking place before the Second Temple was completed in the rabbinic view, or years after the Second Temple was built in the historical approach.

#### MIDRASH REGARDING ACHASHVEROSH AND THE TEMPLE

There are a number of midrashic sources based on the assumption that Achashverosh ruled in a time before the Second Temple was built. The most famous is the statement in TB *Megillah* 11b that Achashverosh used utensils from the Temple at his feast because according to his (mis)calculations the time for the redemption had passed already. In TB *Megillah* 12a, R. Shimon bar Yochai tentatively suggested that because the Jews partook in this meal, they deserved to be punished by death. While the Talmud does not explicitly state what was the great sin of participating in the meal of Achashverosh, one way to understand it is that by enjoying the meal where the Temple vessels were being used, the Jews indicated that they had given up hope that the Temple would ever be rebuilt.<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, TB *Megillah* 15b reports that when Achashverosh told Esther 'And what is your request? Even to half the kingdom it shall be granted to you' (Est. 5:3) he meant that he draws the line at giving permission for the Temple construction to proceed. Similarly, according to *Leviticus Rabbah* 13:5, the Darius who ruled during the time of the construction of the Temple was Esther's son.

The messages of these aggadic comments are that the Jews deserved to be punished for not caring about the Temple during the time of Achashverosh, and that while Achashverosh had a positive relationship with Esther, he still would not go so far as to allow the Temple to be rebuilt. Although these ag-

gadic interpretations are chronologically inaccurate, their messages are valid, as we shall see.

#### THE STRUGGLE OVER JERUSALEM

In Ezra 4:6 we read that *in the reign of Achashverosh, at the start of his reign, they (the Samaritans) drew up an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.* It is not clear what this accusation was.<sup>9</sup> However, the verse mentions Jerusalem, and comes right before a long narrative detailing how later in the reign of Artaxerxes I the king was convinced by enemies of the Jews to suspend the rebuilding of Jerusalem, *that rebellious and wicked city* (Ezra 4:12). It stands to reason that the accusation in the time of Achashverosh was similar to that from the time of Artaxerxes I, that *if this city is rebuilt and the walls are completed, they will not pay tribute, poll-tax, or land-tax, and in the end it will harm the kingdom* (Ez. 4:13). The Temple, a religious structure, was already built by the time of Achashverosh and Artaxerxes I, but the building of Jerusalem, the political capital of Judea, was still a controversial issue.

While the precise identification the Talmud makes regarding the time of the building of the Second Temple is difficult to maintain, the message of TB *Megillah* 15b can be preserved if we apply the statement of ‘*Even to half the kingdom it shall be granted to you*’ (Est. 5:3) as referring not to the construction of the Temple, but to the construction of Jerusalem. The Talmud states that the aggadic interpretation that Achashverosh would not allow the Temple to be built is based on interpreting the phrase *half the kingdom* as “a matter that divides the kingdom”, an issue that is very divisive and which can bring trouble to the Persian Empire, dividing it in half.<sup>10</sup> Jerusalem fits this description, as we see that the Samaritans vigorously opposed Nehemiah when he began rebuilding Jerusalem later on (Nehemiah 2:19, and chapters 4 and 6). An echo of this interpretation is even found in Targum Sheni.<sup>11</sup> In its interpretation of Esther 5:2 it states that Achashverosh made an oath to Sanballat and Toviah, the leaders of the opposition to Nehemiah’s building of the walls of Jerusalem, because he feared a rebellion in Israel.

This historical understanding can give us an insight into the rabbinic rule that any city which was walled at the time of Joshua celebrates Purim on the fifteenth of Adar. The reason given for this particular cutoff time is explained

in TJ *Megillah* 1b as chosen “in order to give honor to the Land of Israel, which was in a state of destruction in those days.” In their commentaries to TB *Megillah* 2a, both Ramban and Ran explain that if the cutoff date for walled cities would have been during the reign of Achashverosh when the Purim miracle took place, there would not be many cities in Israel that would celebrate on the 15<sup>th</sup> of Adar, including Jerusalem, since its walls were still destroyed then.

We can now see that the city that was shamefully un-walled at the time in Israel was Jerusalem, which in the time of Xerxes, before the arrival of Nehemiah, still had its walls destroyed. If the halacha would have determined that cities un-walled at the time of the Purim miracle would not celebrate on the 15<sup>th</sup> of Adar, it would be an everlasting mark of shame for the Jewish people, because it would emphasize that Jerusalem was neglected in the time of Achashverosh. R. Yehoshua Bachrach further suggests that the lone mention of Jerusalem in the Book of Esther, when Mordechai is introduced as *exiled from Jerusalem* (Esther 2:6), is meant to place the destruction of Jerusalem as a “cloud spread over the entire Megillah.”<sup>12</sup>

#### INDIFFERENCE TO THE SECOND TEMPLE

Ezra chapters 1 and 7 number the relatively small number of Jews who returned to Israel, both under Zerubbabel in the time of Cyrus, before the Temple was built (Ezra 1), and under Ezra in the time of Artaxerxes I,<sup>13</sup> after the Temple was built (Ezra 7). These small numbers show that most Jews were content to stay in the Diaspora. When TB *Megillah* 12a speaks of the Jews in Shushan participating in a meal using vessels looted from the Temple, the message is that the Jews had given up on the Temple being rebuilt, and did not even mourn its destruction. The Book of Esther itself may be seen as subtly criticizing the Jews of Shushan when the term *bira* (fortress) is used to describe the castle of Achashverosh in Shushan, a word used in I Chronicles 29:1, 19 to describe the Temple, suggesting that the Jews “replaced” the Temple in Jerusalem with the palace of the king in Persia.<sup>14</sup> This message is preserved and even strengthened when we understand events in their proper historical setting.

The Jews who decided to remain in Shushan rather than move back to Israel did in fact display indifference to the Temple. They did not come in the

time of Cyrus to help in the construction, nor did they move to Israel after the Temple was built during the reign of Darius, before the events of the Book of Esther. In our reinterpretation of this aggadic comment, it is because the residents of Shushan displayed indifference to the Temple, already constructed and functioning, that they deserved to be punished.

#### CONCLUSION

The true function of *midrash aggada* is to use the biblical text as a means of delivering a message. Due to the lack of precise knowledge about the Persian period, the rabbis understood that Achashverosh ruled before the Second Temple was completed, leading them to express their ideas in ways now seen as anachronistic. While not historically accurate, the messages found in these midrashim are equally valid and meaningful when applied to the actual historical setting of the reign of Achashverosh.

#### NOTES

1. See the comprehensive treatment of this issue in Mitchell First, *Jewish History in Conflict* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1997). There are textual variants regarding the length of the Persian period as recorded in Seder Olam, see First, p. 156, note 6; Heinrich W. Guggenheimer, ed., *Seder Olam* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1998), chapter 30, p. 256.
2. *Seder Olam*, chapter 30, p. 255. This is also found in TB *Rosh Hashana* 3b. See also Rashi to Ezra 4:7 and 7:1.
3. *Seder Olam*, chapter 28, p. 242; chapter 29, p. 252. See also the chronology presented in Meir Zlotowitz, *The Megillah: The Book of Esther* (Brooklyn, New York: Artscroll Mesorah Publications, 1987) p. xxiv.
4. For a comprehensive overview of this identification, see First, pp. 175-180 and Amos Hakham, *Da'at Mikra – Esther* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1990) pp. 3-5.
5. See First, p. 180; Mordechai Zer-Kavod, *Da'at Mikra – Ezra* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1993) p. 27, Jacob Myers, *The Anchor Bible Ezra-Nehemiah* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1965) p. 36.
6. Identified here by Rashi as another term for Cyrus.
7. Lisbeth S. Fried, *Ezra and the Law* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2014) pp. 32, 33.
8. See Raḥamim haKohen, *Pirhei Kehuna* (Djerba: Bouaz Haddad, 1961), vol. 1, p. 56a.
9. Mordechai Zer-Kavod, *Da'at Mikra – Ezra* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1993) p. 28.
10. See Maharsha on TB *Megillah* 15b.
11. Targum Sheni was already known in the late Geonic period, see Mordechai Leib Katzenelboigen, *Torat Chayyim – Megillat Esther* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 2006) p. 197.

12. R. Yehoshua Bachrach, *Kitvuni l'Dorot* (Mercaz Shapira: Yeshivat Bnei Akiva Or Etzion, 1995), p. 38. He also suggests that this emphasis may be the reason why Jerusalem here is spelled plene, with all the letters *vav* and *yod*, something rare in the Tanakh.

13. See Mordechai Zer-Kavod, *Da'at Mikra – Ezra* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1993) p. 46, note 1a.

14. See Esther 1:2, 5; 2:3, 5, 8, 3:15; 8:14; 9:6, 11, 12. See also “Megillat Esther and its Hidden Message” part IV by R. Menachem Leibtag for other connections between the palace and the Temple. <http://www.tanach.org/special/purim/purims1.htm>



עשה תורתך קבע

**THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR**  
DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

July	Song of Songs	1 – 8
	Ruth	1 – 4
	Lamentations	1 – 5
	Ecclesiastes	1 – 12
August	Esther	1 – 10
	Daniel	1 – 12
	Ezra	1 – 6
September	Ezra	7 – 10
	Nehemiah	1 – 13
	I Chronicles	1 – 11
October	I Chronicles	12 – 29
	II Chronicles	1 – 10
November	II Chronicles	11 – 36
	Genesis	1 – 2

