

TATTENAI AND HAMAN

ZVI RON

THE TATTENAI EPISODE

Tattenai appears in Ezra chapters 5 and 6. He was the Persian governor of the province west of the Euphrates River during the time of Zerubbabel and the reign of Darius I. When the Jews resumed construction of the Second Temple after a long hiatus, Tattenai questioned whether they had the legal right to do so. He sent a query regarding this matter to King Darius to see if they indeed were permitted to build the Temple. King Darius wrote a letter confirming that the statements of the Jews were true. Darius asked that Tattenai and his people do everything they can to support this rebuilding financially, and that they do nothing to impede it lest they suffer harsh punishment.¹

Ezra 5:3-4 tells how Tattenai came upon the Jews building the Second Temple and questioned their right to do so. *At once Tattenai, governor of the province of Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their colleagues descended upon them and said this to them, “Who issued orders to you to rebuild this house and complete its furnishing?” Then he said to them, “What are the names of the men who are engaged in the building?”* Tattenai then sent a letter to King Darius asking him to verify the claim of the Jews that they were given permission to build the Temple back in the time of Cyrus. *And now, if it pleases the king, let the royal archives there in Babylon be searched to see whether indeed an order had been issued by King Cyrus to rebuild this House of God in Jerusalem. May the king convey to us his pleasure in this matter* (Ezra 5:17).

The permission issued by Cyrus was indeed found written in a memorandum (Ezra 6: 2-5), and so Darius replied to Tattenai: *“Now you, Tattenai, governor of the province of Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai and colleagues, the officials of the province of Beyond the River, stay away from that*

Zvi Ron received semikhah from the Israeli Rabbanut and his Ph.D. in Jewish Theology from Spertus University. He is an educator living in Neve Daniel, Israel, and the author of Sefer Katan ve-Gadol (Rossi Publications: 2006) about the large and small letters in Tanakh, and Sefer Halkkar Haser (Mossad Harav Kook: 2017) about the variant spellings of words in Tanakh. He is the Editor of The Jewish Bible Quarterly.

place. Allow the work of this House of God to go on; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this House of God on its site. And I hereby issue an order concerning what you must do to help these elders of the Jews rebuild this House of God: the expenses are to be paid to these men with dispatch out of the resources of the king, derived from the taxes of the province of Beyond the River, so that the work not be stopped. They are to be given daily, without fail, whatever they need of young bulls, rams, or lambs as burnt offerings for the God of Heaven, and wheat, salt, wine, and oil, at the order of the priests in Jerusalem, so that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of Heaven and pray for the life of the king and his sons. I also issue an order that whoever alters this decree shall have a beam removed from his house, and he shall be impaled on it and his house confiscated. And may the God who established His name there cause the downfall of any king or nation that undertakes to alter or damage that House of God in Jerusalem. I, Darius, have issued the decree; let it be carried out with dispatch” (Ezra 6: 6-12).

The last we hear of Tattenai is that he *carried out with dispatch what King Darius had written* (Ezra 6: 13).

TATTENAI: GOOD, BAD OR NEUTRAL?

There is a difference of opinion as to how to regard Tattenai. Is he a villain who tried to stop the building of the Temple, or perhaps he is just a pedantic busybody, a stickler for rules who just wants to make sure everything is in order? Biblical scholars to this day are not entirely sure why Tattenai cared to investigate the building of the Second Temple.²

Rashi (Ezra 5:3, 5:4) calls Tattenai and his entourage “adversaries of Judah and Benjamin” a reference to the term used to describe the Samaritans who opposed building the Temple in Ezra 4:1. Rashi also explains that Tattenai is the obstacle referred to in Zechariah 4:7, when the prophet is told that the *great mountain in the path of Zerubbabel will turn into level ground*.

This approach is corroborated by the lone reference to Tattenai in the classical Rabbinic literature, *Shir haShirim Rabba* 5:1[6], where *The watchmen found me, they struck me, they bruised me* (Song of Songs 5:7) is interpreted as a reference to Tattenai and his cohorts. Another negative association is that the name Tattenai ben Pachat (an obvious play on Tattenai the governor, *pa-*

chat) was given to the apostate Jew who in the later work *Midrash l'Channuka* suggested to the Greeks in the time of Antiochus that they abolish the daily sacrifices of the Jews in the Temple. He later offered other ways to oppress the Jews, prohibiting marriage contracts (*ketuba*), and extinguishing the *ner tamid* in the Temple.³

Malbim (Ezra 5:3) however specifically writes that Tattenai was not an adversary of the Jews, and that it was Divine providence that Tattenai was the one who raised this issue rather than actual enemies, like the Samaritans, who would not hesitate to use force against the Jews. Malbim explains that Tattenai simply wanted to know who gave them permission to build the Temple. Evidence of this non-adversarial position is that Tattenai did not stop the Jews from building the Temple until he heard back from Darius. Malbim further notes that Tatennai related that the Jews are building the Temple of *hewn stone, and wood is being laid in the walls*, so it is clearly not intended to be a fortress built to withstand attack by burning, and that *the work is being done with dispatch and is going well* (Ezra 5:8), indicating that even the local Samaritans are not up in arms about the Temple being built, evidence of his view that Tattenai was not an enemy of the Jews. Furthermore, Tattenai faithfully records all the claims of the Jews that they received permission from Cyrus to build the Temple in Ezra 5:13-15, further demonstrating that Tattenai was not opposed to the construction of the Temple as such.

TARGUM RISHON

There is an unusual reference to Tattenai in the Geonic era work *Targum Rishon* to the Book of Esther.⁴ When Zeresh, the wife of Haman, is introduced in Esther 5:10, *Targum Rishon* writes that Zeresh was “the daughter of Tattenai, governor of the province of Beyond the River.” This is an idea that does not appear anywhere else in Rabbinic literature, even in *Targum Sheni* to Esther which generally contains more aggadic material than *Targum Rishon*.⁵ It is not immediately clear what is the point of connecting Zeresh to Tattenai. The book *Magen David*, a 17th commentary on the *Targum Rishon*, explains that Haman had multiple wives but Zeresh was singled out for mention because she came from an important family, the family of Tattenai.⁶ However, a close reading of the Tattenai narrative reveals why the *Targum* made a connection with Zeresh.

Taking the traditional approach that Tattenai was an adversary of the Jews who wanted to halt the construction of the Second Temple, the story of Tattenai can be summarized as follows:

1. Tattenai, a government official, tried to cause harm to the Jews.
2. He turned to the Persian king for support.
3. A forgotten incident is recalled (the permission given by Cyrus).
4. Instead of receiving this support, the exact opposite result is achieved (to assist the Jews with the building of the Second Temple).

In terms of the plot structure, this “Persian backfire” story bears similarity to the story of Haman, (1) a government official who wants to kill Mordecai and (2) enlists King Ahasuerus to write a decree against the Jews. When Ahasuerus cannot sleep he is (3) reminded of how Mordecai saved his life. Ultimately Haman’s plan fails and (4) the exact opposite result is achieved, Haman must honor Mordecai and he is ultimately hanged on the wooden beam he had intended to hang Mordecai from.

This basic plot structure is also seen in Daniel chapter 6. There (1) government officials try to get Daniel in trouble with the king (Daniel 6:6). They (2) trick Darius into writing a decree that outlaws prayer (Daniel 6: 14). Daniel is rescued from death in the lion’s den, and (4) the king orders the officials to be put to death in the lion’s den (Daniel 6:25). In the Daniel story there is no element of the “forgotten incident”, however there is an element of the king having a sleepless night (Daniel 6:19) as in Esther 6:1. Additionally, there is a reverse parallel in that Daniel is in trouble for bowing in prayer (Daniel 6:11) and Mordecai is in trouble for refusing to bow (Esther 3:2).

The Tattenai/Haman parallel is particularly strong as both narratives not only contain a “forgotten incident” element, they even use a similar term regarding it, the *sefer zichronot* (book of records, literally “book of memories”) in Esther 6:1 and the decree of Cyrus, called a *dichrona* (memorandum, an Aramaic term parallel to the Hebrew *zichron*) in Ezra 6:2. Additionally, the punishment Darius issues for interfering with the building of the Temple, *I also issue an order that whoever alters this decree shall have a beam removed from his house, and he shall be impaled on it and his house confiscated* (Ezra 6:11), recalls the punishment of Haman, *So they impaled Haman on the beam* (Esther 7:10) and Mordecai was put *in charge of Haman’s property* (Esther 8:2). Furthermore, as in the punishment stated by Darius, the beam

that Haman was impaled on was from his house (Esther 7:9). Note that “impaling was a Persian practice...generally reserved for the most serious crimes, especially sedition,”⁷ adding an additional irony to the Tattenai reversal. While initially Tattenai accused the Jews of possible rebellion, Darius responds that failure to support the construction of the Temple will in fact make him accountable for treason!

The Targum was sensitive to this parallel between Tattenai and Haman, and so further connected the narratives by making Zeresh the daughter of Tattenai. When we read, *There Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends everything that had befallen him. His advisers and his wife Zeresh said to him: 'If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish stock, you will not overcome him, you will fall before him to your ruin'* (Esther 6:13), the question arises, how was Zeresh so sure that Haman would not be able to succeed against a Jew? The answer provided by the Targum is that she knew this from her own experience, seeing her father fail against the Jews at the time of the rebuilding of the Temple.⁸

From this perspective, the plot structure itself draws a comparison between Tattenai and Haman, backing the view expressed in Rashi that Tattenai was indeed an enemy of the Jews.

CONCLUSION

Despite the fact that in the Tattenai narrative “the officials give the impression of being about their regular business, reporting on possibly significant developments in the territory under their jurisdiction, and having no axe to grind in local disputes between Judeans and Samaritans” and that the language used “is not charged with any antagonism,”⁹ as noted by Malbim, we have seen that the plot structure of the episode links Tattenai to Haman, an idea reflected in *Targum Rishon*, and leads to the understanding that Tattenai is indeed to be counted among the many adversaries of the Jews.

NOTES

1. Regarding the historicity of this account, see F. Charles Fensham, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1982), pp. 79-80.

2. Joseph Fleishman, "The Investigating Commission of Tattenai: The Purpose of the Investigation and its Results", *Hebrew Union College Annual*, vol. 66 (1995), pp. 81-102.
3. Adolph Jellinek, *Beit haMidrash I* (Leipzig: 1853), p. 134.
4. Regarding the dating of the Targumim to Esther, see Bernard Grossfeld, *The Two Targums of Esther* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), p. 20.
5. Bernard Grossfeld, *The Two Targums of Esther* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), p. 66, note 31.
6. David ben Judah of Lublin, *Magen David* (Cracow: 1644), p. 13a. About this work, see Marvin Heller, *The Seventeenth Century Hebrew Book – vol. 1* (Brill, Leiden: 2011), p. 595.
7. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Old Testament Library: Ezra-Nehemiah: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), pp. 127-128.
8. Regarding the issue of the building of the Second Temple prior to the events of Esther, see Mitchell First, *Jewish History in Conflict* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1997), pp. 175-180.
9. J.G. McConville, *The Daily Study Bible Series - Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1985), p. 35.



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