

Athens, Persia and The Book of Ezra*

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There are two largely unconnected disciplines, Biblical studies and classical scholarship. They deal with places a few hundred miles apart across the much traveled Mediterranean. Because the scholars are from separate disciplines, they treat each of the areas in isolation. But they were not, in fact, isolated. What happened in one affected the other. Read accounts of the Persian Wars in most Greek history textbooks, however, and you will find no reference to Jerusalem or to the prophet Ezra. Read the standard Biblical commentaries on the Book of Ezra, and, until you reach those of the last decade, you will find no mention of the Persian-Greek Wars. This paper attempts to bridge that gap between the Greek and Biblical worlds.¹

In 458 B.C., at a time when Persia was fighting Athens in Egypt, Ezra the scribe,² a Babylonian Jew, received an appointment from the King of Persia to go as a Persian official to Judah to enforce religious law and to bring offerings of the Persian court and other funds to the temple.³ He was permitted to take with him a group of Babylonian Jews to resettle in Jerusalem. The mission of

* This article is dedicated to the memory of David Lewis. An earlier version was presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Philological Association in Atlanta, Georgia, 28 December 1994 and at the British School of Archaeology, Athens, 29 June 1995. I am grateful to Barbara Paris for preparing the maps.

¹ Others have previously made connections between the Persian Wars and Ezra. See Heichelheim; Smith 93; Yamauchi 248-53. See also Myres.

² On the position and function of scribes see Oppenheim 253-57; Rainey.

³ The date of the Book of Ezra is disputed by scholars. The tendency in the past several decades had been to assign it to 458 B.C., the traditional date based on the text of Ezra. According to Ezra 7:7, Ezra came to Jerusalem in the seventh year of Artaxerxes. Traditionally it was believed that this was Artaxerxes I, who ascended the throne in 465 B.C., which would date Ezra to 458 B.C. Some scholars have emended the text to make it conform with their notions of events, and have put Ezra in the 27th or 37th year of Artaxerxes. Still others have argued that the Artaxerxes of the text is Artaxerxes II and the seventh year of his reign would be 398 B.C. In the earlier part of this century, a dominant scholarly trend wanted to put Ezra after Nehemiah. However, in the late 1960s the pendulum swung toward the traditional date, which most scholars now accept. Those who argue against 458 B.C. do so against the weight of the text, and consequently they must carry the burden of proof, which they do not. For a summary of the arguments and the most recent discussion see Yamauchi 253-56. Yamauchi favors 458 B.C., as does Smith 91-92. See especially Kellermann, and also Cross 4-18, esp. 14; Emerton; Morgenstern; Bright; Snaith; Albright.

Ezra is recorded in the Book of Ezra. The thesis of the present paper is that the motive of the Persians in sending Ezra to Jerusalem was twofold, first to quiet the province, and second and more important, for Ezra to carry out a strategic military function directed against the Athenians, namely the refortification of Jerusalem.

The Book of Ezra is a work of religious history. Its focus is the return of Ezra and his religious reforms, including introduction of the law and divorce of foreign wives. To the author of Ezra any other motivation is secondary. The Book of Ezra makes no mention of any affairs outside Judah. The Persian rulers were interested in local laws and practices within their empire and in their codification to ensure a smooth running of the provinces. A parallel to Ezra's mission can be seen in Darius I's commission to Udjahorresnet, an Egyptian priest and scholar, to restore the cult at the national and dynastic shrine of Sais, as well as the reorganization of the judicial institutions.⁴ Darius had also written to his satrap of Egypt, Aryandes, with orders to assemble the wise men of the province and make a new code of laws.⁵ Cyrus allowed the Jews to return from Babylon, and he encouraged the rebuilding of their Temple, as did Darius (Ezra 1:1-11; 4:24).

Jerusalem commanded a key strategic position, as all have acknowledged, but that key position was not of much use without a strong military presence. A fortified Jerusalem with its own water supply could hold out almost indefinitely against attack, as was demonstrated by Hezekiah's defence of the city at the end of the eighth century.⁶ While a quiet province was advantageous to the Persians, it was of little avail without the ability to combat the Athenians militarily.

The Persians were motivated by more than altruism in this endeavor. The Greek and Persian Wars were by no means over at this period. At this time the Athenians attacked Cyprus, which was used as a base for Persian trade in the Mediterranean (Thuc. 1.94.1-2). While the Athenians were on their expedition in Cyprus, in the winter of 461/60, Inarus, King of the Libyans, came into Egypt, and with Amyrtaeus of Sais, led a revolt of Egypt from Persia. The rebels defeated the Persian satrap Achaemenes, and took control of the Delta region (Thuc. 1.104.1-2). Seeing this as an opportunity, the Athenians aided the revolt in Egypt with a fleet of 200 ships. By 459 B.C. the rebels with Athenian help had captured Memphis, the capital of Lower Egypt, and only a

⁴ The account of Udjahorresnet is largely found on a statue inscribed with 48 lines of Egyptian text in the Vatican Museum. See Blenkinsopp 419.

⁵ From an inscription on the Demotic Chronicle of Darius, quoted in Gardiner 366ff.

⁶ II Kings 18:13-16; also *Annals of Sennacherib* in Pritchard 287-88.

small portion of Egypt remained in Persian hands. The Persians tried to divert Athenian attention and tried unsuccessfully to bribe the Spartans with gold to attack Athens (Thuc. 1.109.1-2). We find in the casualties for the Erechtheid tribe of Athens in 459 B.C. a list of men who had died fighting in various places. Egypt is mentioned, as is Cyprus and Phoenicia (Meiggs and Lewis 73 ff.; Bradeen).

Since the sea was dominated by Athens, Persia pursued a land strategy. In order to maintain its military position in Egypt, Persia had to have a means of reinforcing its troops. With Athens in control of the sea, it was imperative that Persia should keep open its land routes through Syria and Judah. However, the Athenians had already gained a foothold along the coast of Judah, at the city of Dor.

Dor, which sits on the coast just below Mount Carmel, appears in the Athenian Tribute Lists for 454 B.C., and the presumption is that it was under Athenian influence during this period.⁷ Figure 1 shows the location of Dor, along the coast of Palestine, approximately 50 miles from Jerusalem. Athenian pottery begins to appear at Dor in the sixth century and increases in the fifth, including both black and red figure; an Athenian tetradrachm has also been found (Stern 1994: 186, 193). The city of Dor is in the process of being excavated by Ephraim Stern of Hebrew University, which should reveal the full extent of Athenian and Greek influence in the city.

If we look at a map of the area (Figure 2), we can see that the Persian empire to the north is connected to Egypt by a thin band of land through Judah and Phoenicia. Whether the Athenians ever had intentions of sending land troops across the territory of Judah and attacking Jerusalem, we will never know. But any glance at a map shows that if Athens controlled the sea, and

⁷ Meritt, Wade-Gery, McGregor II 177 believe that Doros (Dor) was an Athenian base for the war in Egypt (cf. *IG* I² 929). See also *ATL* (III) 9 ff., 22.260. For the Egyptian Expedition *ATL* III 168, 174, 177, 253, 260 ff. Avi-Yonah 17 (Hebrew) believes that Dor was for a time a member of the Delian League, though no epigraphic material confirming this has been uncovered in excavations. Heichelheim 251-53 believes that the Dor of the Athenian Tribute Lists is the same as the city on the coast of Palestine. Ephraim Stern, the excavator of Dor, wrote the present author, "I certainly believe that there is no connection between Dor mentioned in the Athenian tribute list and ours." There is evidence for a tremendous amount of Athenian and Greek pottery in Palestine during this period; see Stern 1982, especially 283-86. On Dor in general, see Stern 1994. Even if Stern is correct that Dor was not part of the Delian League, there was still a strong Athenian presence and influence, both economic and military along the coast of Palestine at this period. If Dor was part of the Delian League, that strengthens the evidence for Athenian influence in the area. As excavation continues in Dor and in Israel, we are developing a picture of greater distribution of Greek wares, and of a greater presence of Greeks in the area.

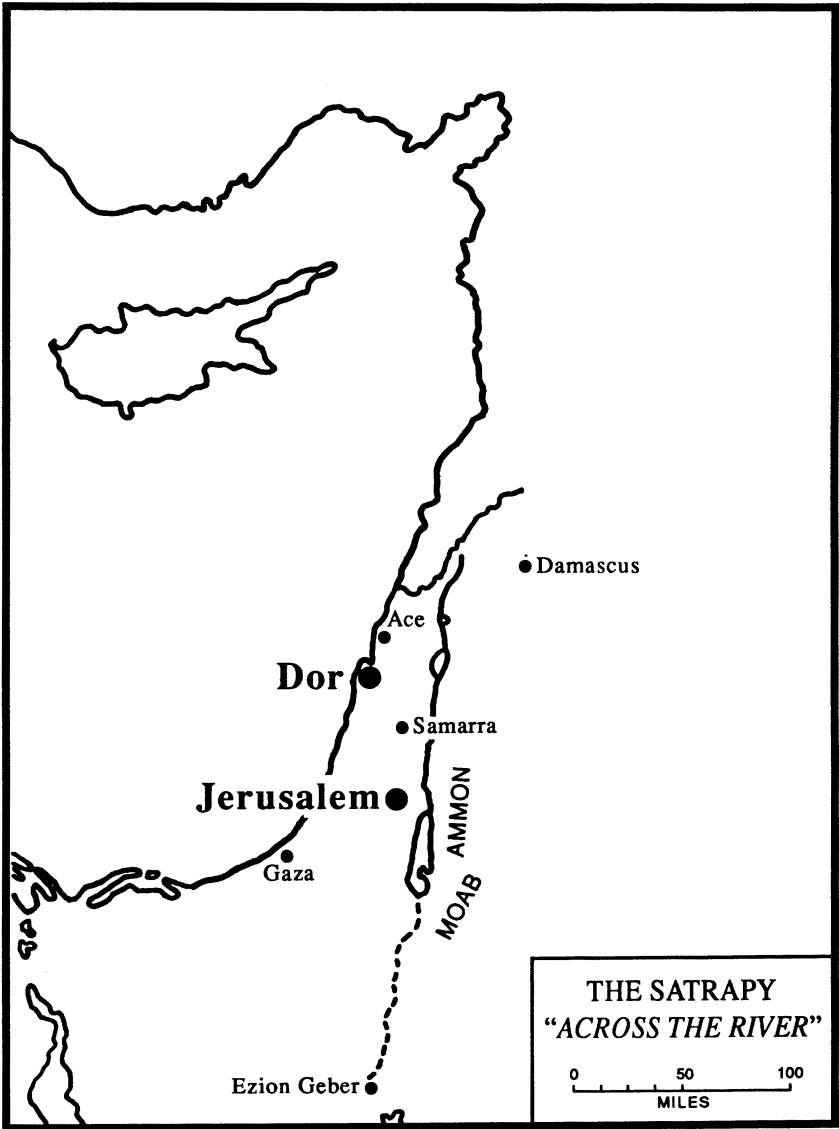


FIGURE 1

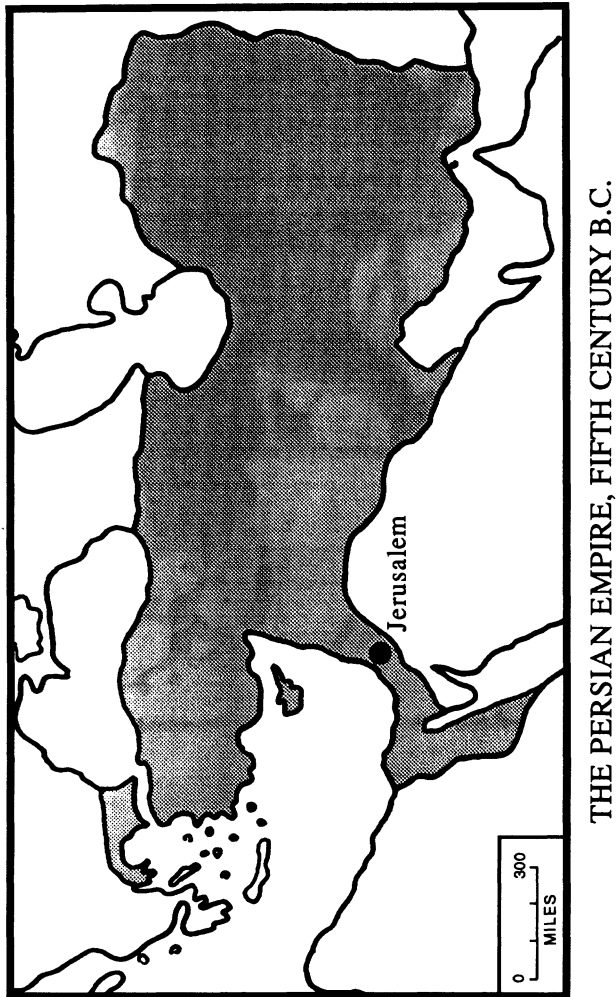


FIGURE 2

could take Judah, or at least the southern part of it, Persia would be cut off from Egypt and would have found it difficult to bring up reinforcements either by land or sea. Since the Persians had historically used the Syro-Palestinian coast as a highway to Egypt and through this route first conquered Egypt, they realized the strategic importance of Judah. The Athenian presence in Dor could not have gone unnoticed. Hence, any competent military leader would have seen the necessity for a strong Judah as a linchpin in the defense of Egypt. Jerusalem was the capital of the province, and its location was of strategic importance. It was for that reason that King David had made the city his capital 500 years before.

It was, in fact, the use of this coastal land route that led to Persian victory in Egypt. In 456 B.C. Megabyzus marched with 300,000 Persian troops (D. S. 11.75.1-2) through the Phoenician coast, by the edge of Judah to Egypt, where he defeated the rebels and their Athenian allies. In the process he killed thousands of Athenians and destroyed their fleet, perhaps most of their 200 ships. Another 50 triremes, sent by the Athenians to aid the rebels, were also destroyed.⁸ Only a few Athenians escaped through the desert to Cyrene. The disaster in Egypt was second only to the Athenian losses during the Sicilian Expedition. A cylinder seal depicts Artaxerxes' defeat of the Egyptian rebels (Hinz illustration #10).

The general theory about the motivation of the Persians in sending Ezra to Jerusalem was that they intended him to institute religious reforms, to quiet the province, and to prevent unrest. If Jerusalem, which was a key strategic city, were to revolt and call in the Athenians, this could cut the line of Persian communications with Egypt and result in the loss of Egypt. The Persian court was anxious to please its subjects and prevent a revolt, and for this reason sent Ezra with money and offerings for the Temple. This is the position of such scholars as Morton Smith and Fritz Heichelheim. But no one has previously argued that Ezra was sent with primarily a military purpose.

By the end of 459 B.C. Memphis had fallen to the Egyptian rebels, and the Persian position in Egypt was precarious. The Persians were on the brink

⁸ There is much dispute about the size of Athenian losses. Thuc. 1.104 relates that 200 ships went to Egypt, and then six years later 50 more came, and that a majority of these were lost (1.110.4). If the original 200 ships were still in Egypt, this would mean a total of around 230-240 ships were destroyed. Modern scholars have argued that Athenian naval activities against Corinth and Aegina shortly after the defeat in Egypt suggests that Athenian losses were not so great in Egypt. Meiggs 1972:101-108; 439-41; 473-77 has returned to the earlier views, as has Holladay, who posits an Athenian loss of 100 ships and 20,000 men. See also Wallace and Westlake.

of losing all of Egypt. Ezra left Persia in March/April 458 B.C. and arrived in Jerusalem in July/August.⁹ Given the time needed to assemble the returning Jews and make preparations, the decision of Artaxerxes to send Ezra to Jerusalem must have been taken at the end of 459 or the very beginning of 458 B.C. The timing of Ezra's mission is more than coincidental. The Persians needed to take every effort to stop the Athenian advance. With Egypt in disarray and the Athenians at Dor, rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem seemed an obvious military strategy.

The Book of Ezra records that Ezra made an unsuccessful attempt to rebuild the walls. In Ezra 4:7-23 an Aramaic letter is quoted from Rehum, the high commissioner in Samaria, to King Artaxerxes, reporting that the Jews who had left him and had come to Jerusalem were rebuilding the city, and were in the process of completing the walls. Rehum asserted that if they completed the walls, the Jews would rebel. Artaxerxes sent back a letter to Rehum ordering him to stop the rebuilding of the walls: "Therefore make a decree to cause these men to cease, and that this city be not rebuilt, until a further decree is given from me" (Ezra 4.21). Rehum went to Jerusalem with armed troops to enforce the king's edict. That "further decree" allowing the rebuilding of the walls came thirteen years later.

This paper suggests that King Artaxerxes sent Ezra in 458 B.C. with the main purpose of militarily strengthening Jerusalem against possible revolt and attack from anti-Persian forces, especially the Athenians. Ezra's religious agenda was secondary to that Persian agenda.¹⁰ But when Samaria objected to the refortification of Jerusalem, the dangers of unrest in Samaria and the threat of perhaps armed conflict between Samaria and Judah outweighed the advantages of a fortified Jerusalem. Thus Artaxerxes stopped the refortification. His edict nevertheless made it clear that the rebuilding was to be halted only temporarily. This would assuage the Jews for the time and satisfy the Samaritans. Thirteen years later, in 445 B.C. the Persians sent the Jew Nehemiah, the King's cupbearer, as a new governor to Judah. By this time, the revolt in Egypt had been quelled, as had a revolt of the general Megabyzus (Ctesias *Pers. Epit.* 68; Olmstead 312), and a peace treaty either *de facto* or *de jure*

⁹ These dates are based on Ezra 7:8-9, which states that Ezra left on the first day of the first month of the year and arrived at Jerusalem in the fifth month. This would correspond to March/April (April 8) and July/August (August 4) in our calendar.

¹⁰ In Ezra 8:22, Ezra says he was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen for an escort since he had expressed confidence in God's protective might. The fact that Ezra did not have a military escort does not negate the military purpose of his mission. Presumably, the route which Ezra took was safe, as confirmed by the fact that Ezra had no difficulty during his journey, despite the fact that he was carrying a great amount of gold and silver.

existed between Persia and Athens.¹¹ If we look at the text of The Book of Nehemiah, sections of which are generally accepted to be the memoirs of Nehemiah,¹² we find that Nehemiah began his rule with the restoration of the walls of the city (Nehemiah 2:11-17). During this rebuilding, Nehemiah faced opposition from the neighboring peoples, including Sanballat, the ruler of Samaria (Nehemiah 2:19; 4). Although Nehemiah had the authority of the King, he nonetheless divided his work force in two and used half as armed guards to defend the workers (Nehemiah 4:10). This time, however, since peace had decreased the importance of Samaria, the Persian authorities allowed Nehemiah to finish his task. The Book of Ezra can thus give us insight into Persian military strategy during this last period of the Persian Wars. This example of Ezra and Persian policy emphasizes the need to look at Greek history, not in isolation, but in conjunction with the history of the Near East.

¹¹ The Peace of Callias of 449 B.C. Most scholars regard this peace as genuine. For a perceptive treatment, see Badian.

¹² Nehemiah's career is found in the Book of Nehemiah, of which 1.1-7.5a and 13.4-31 are thought to be his genuine memoirs. See Smith 96-112; Pfeiffer 834; Eissfeldt; von Rad, 176ff.

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