

ON THE RELIABILITY  
OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

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## CHAPTER 3

### *Home and Away — Exile and Return*

Already, in the last 150 years of the divided and Judean monarchies, we have seen through Assyrian eyes (besides biblical ones) the imposition of exile — removal from their homeland — of people(s) rebellious against their would-be overlords. Tiglath-pileser III removed people from Galilee and environs in the 730s; Shalmaneser V and Sargon II between them sent away many Israelites to eastern lands in 722-720; and Sennacherib did this to Judah in 701. Tiglath-pileser III took 13,520 people (totaled from lesser amounts — 226, 400 + x, 656, and [lost]).<sup>1</sup> Then Sargon II boasts of having removed 27,290 (var. 27,280) people from Samaria.<sup>2</sup> And in 701 Sennacherib claimed to have reduced forty-six of Hezekiah's walled towns and to have taken 200,150 people from them.<sup>3</sup> Such measures did not necessarily depopulate a given region entirely, and some Assyrian kings brought in new populations from elsewhere (Sargon II and 2 Kings 17; contrast Tiglath-pileser III). But the "Assyrian exile" of both Israelites and Judeans was considerable — and in the former case, permanent. As we shall see (cf. chap. 6), neither the concept nor the practice of "exile" even began with these later Assyrian kings. It was already a millennially old tradition, into which the Babylonian exile of the Judeans merely fits as one more such episode in a very long series, taking the long-term historical perspective.<sup>4</sup> The difference is the close-up impact that the Judean exile to Babylon makes upon the modern reader, particularly in 2 Kings and Jeremiah.

## 1. THE PERIOD OF THE EXILE

### A. EN ROUTE TO BABYLON

#### (i) The Biblical Accounts

These are 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Jeremiah, and allusions in Ezekiel and Daniel. They have Nebuchadrezzar (II) of Babylon taking over the Levant, ousting the king of Egypt (cf. 2 Kings 24:1, 7), having Jehoiakim of Judah as a vassal (cf. 2 Chron. 36:6-7, a threat of exile, not fulfilled), and taking away selected personnel and goods (cf. Dan. 1:1-7) in 605/604. Then, three years later (by 601), Jehoiakim rebelled against Babylon (2 Kings 24:1). He did not live to witness Babylonian retribution. That fell upon his youthful son and successor, Jehoiachin, whom Nebuchadrezzar carried off to Babylon (597) with his family, his courtiers and officials, and 10,000 other ranks that included 7,000 soldiers and 1,000 craftsmen and artisans (and much loot), leaving only the rural population behind (2 Kings 24:10-16; 2 Chron. 36:10; Jer. 24:1; 52:28, citing 3,023 people). His uncle Zedekiah learned nothing from all this, but in turn rebelled (in conjunction with Hophra of Egypt, Jer. 44:30; cf. 37:5), only to bring down the wrathful Babylonian king again upon Jerusalem, who seized and destroyed that city (in 587/586), carrying away the remnant of its inhabitants, 832 people; cf. 2 Kings 25:1-21; 2 Chron. 36:17-20; Jer. 39:1-40:6; 52:1-27, 29. Finally Nebuchadrezzar's appointee governor, Gedaliah, was murdered by a dissident party (2 Kings 25:22-26), which led to further punishment and 745 more exiles, four years after Jerusalem's fall (Jer. 52:30), in 582. Ezekiel dated various of his visions by years-of-exile of Jehoiachin (Ezek. 1:2 and *passim*). Finally, thirty-seven years after the young king was carried into captivity in 562, Nebuchadrezzar II's successor, Awel-Marduk ("Evil-Merodach"), released Jehoiachin from arrest and gave him a palace food allowance (2 Kings 25:27-30). So far, the biblical data.

#### (ii) External Background

The series of Babylonian invasions of the Levant from 605 down to 594 (after which date, the records are lost) is well attested, if in brief form, in the Babylonian Chronicles.<sup>5</sup> The chronicle recounts the Babylonian victory at Carchemish (in 605; British Museum 21946 = Chronicle 5) that enabled Nebuchadrezzar to oust Egypt from the Levant, chasing Egypt's forces to the region of Hamath and beyond and taking over "the whole area of the Hattu-land" (= Syria-Palestine).

The death of Nabopolassar compelled Nebuchadnezzar to race back to Babylon to secure his throne, before returning to Syria-Palestine to enforce his rule and “take the massive booty” back to Babylon (as in Dan. 1:1ff.). Then in his first to third years (604-602), Nebuchadnezzar returned each year to levy tribute and (in Year 2, 603) to besiege a city (name lost). But in Year 4 (601) Egypt and Babylon clashed in battle with such severe losses to both sides that the Babylonian army had to stay at home for a full refit the next year (600), with light skirmishes the next year (599). Thus, as 2 Kings 24:1 states, after three years as vassal to Babylon, Jehoiakim of Judah rebelled — evidently after the clash of 601. Hence, of course, Nebuchadnezzar’s determined reaction in his seventh year (598/597), when he “marched to the Hattu-land [Levant], besieged the city of Judah [Jerusalem], and captured the king” (by now, Jehoiachin, Jehoiakim having died). The young man was exiled to Babylon, as the chronicle reports that instead Nebuchadnezzar “appointed a(nother) king of his own choice” (= Zedekiah) and “received its (Judah’s) heavy tribute, and sent (it) to Babylon,” in agreement with the report in 2 Kings 24:13. The chronicle reports further visits to the Levant by Nebuchadnezzar in his eighth, tenth, and eleventh years (597 to 594), levying tribute regularly.

For the numbers of Judeans exiled by Nebuchadnezzar II (especially in 597 and 586), we have no Babylonian statistics so far — only the Hebrew figures in 2 Kings 24:14, 16 and Jer. 52:28-30. But these (7,000, 1,000, 3,023, 832, 745 people) are entirely consistent in scale with the range of figures for deportations from Israel practiced earlier by the Assyrian kings (cf. just above). Two facts here are worthy of comment: the relative modesty of almost all these figures compared to what the total populations of Israel/Samaria and Judah/Jerusalem would have been; and the status of the people taken away, and those left behind. The idea that the Babylonians carried *everybody* from both Jerusalem and Judah off to Babylon is true neither archaeologically nor to the biblical text itself. In the Hebrew accounts, we read that “the poorest people of the land were left (behind)” for 597 (2 Kings 24:14), and that “the commander [i.e., Nebuzaradan] left behind some of the poorest people of the land, to work the vineyards and fields” (2 Kings 25:12; Jer. 52:16). In other words, the land of Judah became in effect an imperial estate, to be cultivated for the profit of its conquerors by the local food-producing community (farmers and pastoralists). Precisely such procedures had been followed by Egypt’s New Kingdom pharaohs nearly a millennium before this, and in turn by the Assyrians. Empires were not run just to give ancient kings militarily glorious ego trips, but to yield revenue! See further below. Nebuzaradan (also in Jer. 39:11-13) is known from the Babylonian “court list” as Nabu-zer-iddin, a high officer of Nebuchadnezzar’s administration.<sup>6</sup>

The status of the people taken away to Babylon (royalty and the court,

army personnel, artisans; cf. 2 Kings 24:14, 16) is significant, and very readily paralleled from the external sources. Exiled were: (a) the rebel king and his governing circle, as prisoners/hostages to be kept out of mischief, when not summarily executed (as in 2 Kings 25:18-21 = Jer. 52:24-27); (b) military personnel, to be conscripted into the imperial army; and (c) "useful" people, artisans and craftsmen, musicians, cultivators, etc., to be redeployed in the conqueror's service.

Regarding exiled rulers, 2 Kings (25:27-30) ends with Jehoiachin in Babylon being released by Awel-Marduk at his accession (562) into the court circle in Babylon, and being given his own regular allowance. This happened not for the first time, and he is not the only such person, as original Babylonian sources make clear. From a vaulted building closely adjoining the royal palace proper came a series of cuneiform tablets dated to the tenth to thirty-fifth years of Nebuchadnezzar II (595-570), being "ration tablets" for people kept or employed in Babylon and its palace. Among the beneficiaries in receipt of oil were "Jehoiachin king of Judah" (just once, "king's son of Judah") and "the 5 sons of the king of Judah in the care of (their guardian?) Qenaiah" (cf. fig. 10C). Thus the exiled young king and his infant children were already on a regular allowance in Nebuchadnezzar's time (one tablet is of Year 13, 592), but under the palace equivalent of house arrest. They were not the only royalties there at that time; oil was issued to "2 sons of Aga, king of Ascalon."<sup>7</sup>

As for the second category of exiles, redeployed military personnel, we go back briefly to Assyrian precedent. Tiglath-pileser III may have taken Israelite troops into service by 732; Sargon II conscripted Israelite chariots from fallen Samaria very explicitly, as from other defeated small states. This precedent was followed thereafter by other Mesopotamian rulers (e.g., Assurbanipal), hence too by Babylon.<sup>8</sup>

For the redeployed craftsmen, etc., we return to the Babylonian ration tablets cited for Jehoiachin. Here we meet a series of men of different origins and occupations. With Jehoiachin and family were Shelemiah a gardener and others untitled. From Philistine Ascalon came 3 sailors, 8 leaders, and an unknown number of chiefs of musicians. From Phoenicia, 126 Tyrians and  $x \times 100 + 90$  Tyrian sailors; 8 carpenters hailed from Byblos and 3 from Arvad. From the east a leader, refugee, and 713 other men had come from Elam, plus 1 Mede and 4 Persians. From the far northwest in Anatolia, more sailors and carpenters were deployed to the boathouse or shipyard; from the far southwest, a large group of Egyptians included sailors, leaders, guards, and a keeper of monkeys! All on Nebuchadnezzar's payroll.<sup>9</sup> This is typical of the motley variety of people who were sucked into the central service and economy of the Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian empires alike. Being exiled to Nineveh or Babylon was not a purely Hebrew hazard!

On the greatness of Babylon as redeveloped by Nebuchadrezzar II (cf. Dan. 4:30) we can be brief. It had become a large city (by ancient standards), straddling the river Euphrates, its two parts linked by a bridge. The maximum width of both parts was about 3.5 kilometers (just over 2 miles) wide (west to east), and the north-south extent (omitting suburbs) about 2.5 kilometers (some 1½ miles), all surrounded by massive defense walls, pierced by named gates. The western part was the “new city.” The heart of the city extended along the east bank of the Euphrates, from the “North Palace,” museum, and royal gardens (origin of the “hanging gardens”) to the main or “South Palace” adjoining the splendid Ishtar Gate, brilliant in deep blue tiles with alternating figures of dull yellow bulls and white and dull yellow lions and dragons. From there the long Processional Way ran straight as a die near to the south end of the city, separating off the palaces, the “tower of Babel,” and main temple of the god Marduk from the main bulk of the old city, with its houses, bazaars, squares, many streets, a canal, and various temples. Compared with the towns of Palestine, it would have seemed a vast metropolis to anyone coming in from the Levant.<sup>10</sup> Cf. fig. 10A-B.

## B. A REMNANT IN JUDEA

While the main groups of exiled Judeans were finding new employ in Babylon and still very sore about it (cf. Ps. 137), the rural population in Neo-Babylonian Judea had to become productive taxpayers for the new administration. For this purpose Nebuchadrezzar had appointed as local governor Gedaliah son of Ahikam, son of Shaphan (Jer. 40:5-6), with headquarters at Mizpah, now generally conceded to have been the modern Tell en-Nasbeh (in Benjamin) about eight miles north of Jerusalem.<sup>11</sup>

Among the clutch of late Judean seals and bullae of owners attested under kings Jehoiakim to Zedekiah (cf. p. 21 above), we have two men Gedaliah, either of whom may well have been our Gedaliah. One was “Servant of the King,” the other was a high steward “who is over the house/estate.” Most scholars prefer identification of the biblical Gedaliah with the high steward; this is not certain, but certainly possible.<sup>12</sup> As for Mizpah/Tell en-Nasbeh, restudy of the site-reports and records suggests that the Iron II town was internally redeveloped to become the Neo-Babylonian administrative center for Judea, as a Neo-Babylonian and Persian level can now be distinguished. The old outer gate was kept, but a stretch of old wall and inner gate were done away with, and large new buildings constructed.<sup>13</sup> This may well have been done by Gedaliah with Babylonian support during his brief four-year regime. That ended in his mur-

der by jealous rivals (Jer. 40:7–41:15), egged on by Baalis, king of Ammon, for whom we also have a seal impression and the seal of one of his subjects.<sup>14</sup> So this dossier gives us some background for Judah becoming an economic unit early in the “exilic” period.<sup>15</sup>

## C. IN EGYPT

Finally, some of the Judeans fled to Egypt, to escape Babylonian domination, and feared revenge in the wake of the murder of Gedaliah (Jer. 41:16–43:7), taking an unwilling Jeremiah with them. Their stopping point at Tahpanhes (Jer. 43:7ff.) had brought them to a fort of Psammetichus I, established for a garrison of Greek mercenaries, known to Herodotus as Daphnai. This name appears in modern Arabic Tell Defenneh. Tahpanhes is Egyptian: *Ta-ha(t)-pa-nehesi*, “The mansion of the Nubian/Panehsi,” not yet known in Egyptian inscriptions, but it is attested in Phoenician (spelled as in Hebrew) from a sixth century B.C. papyrus found in Egypt. This document is a letter that invokes “Baal-Zephon and the gods of Tahpanhes.”<sup>16</sup> Jeremiah’s prophecy (44:30) of Pharaoh Hophra’s coming untimely end was fulfilled when he was supplanted by Amasis II in 570, losing his life in consequence.<sup>17</sup> His further threat (Jer. 43:8ff.) that Nebuchadnezzar would invade Egypt, even hold court at Tahpanhes, may possibly have been fulfilled in 568, to judge from a fragmentary text that alludes to the thirty-seventh year of Nebuchadnezzar II, marching against Egypt for battle, seemingly against “[King Ama]su,” i.e., (Amas)is II.<sup>18</sup> The continuing presence of Jews in Egypt is attested under Persian rule, in the late sixth and the fifth/fourth centuries B.C., as we shall see. Thus the people of Judah ended up in three different locations by about 580 — the elite and “useful” people in Babylon; the ordinary working people still in Judea; and sundry fugitives in Egypt.

## 2. THE EPOCH OF THE RETURN

### A. BIBLICAL DATA

#### (i) Sources, Biblical

The biblical data that reflect the fall of Babylon to Cyrus of Persia in 539 and the Persian dominion down through the late sixth into the fifth/fourth centuries are (in explicit terms) basically the books of Ezra (from which 2 Chronicles

took its closing colophon), Esther, and Nehemiah. The transfer of power from Babylon (in the person of Belshazzar) to Cyrus is also mirrored in Daniel. (Belshazzar: Dan. 5; 7:1; followed by Darius the Mede [Year 1 only]: 5:31; 6:1ff.; 9:1, who is paralleled by Cyrus the Persian in 6:28; Cyrus: Year 3, in 10:1.) Some genealogies in 2 Chronicles come down into the Persian period.

In the first part of Ezra (1–6) we have an outline of events from the accession to power of Cyrus of Persia (539) down to completion of rebuilding the temple at Jerusalem in the sixth year of Darius I (516); within this section is an insert (4:6–23) on outside interference against the Jews' attempt to renew the walls of Jerusalem, not just work on the temple. This happened early in the reigns respectively of Xerxes and Artaxerxes (I). The second part of the book (7–10) records Ezra's mission (in the seventh year of Artaxerxes [I]) to regulate the life of the Judean community in accord with their traditional Law — of YHWH to them, and of "the God of Heaven" in "Persian-Kingspeak." The book includes summary registers of returnees both of Cyrus's time and of Ezra's visitation.

The book of Nehemiah follows on from all this. In Year 20 of Artaxerxes (I), Nehemiah got word of Jerusalem's problems, with vandalized gates and walls, and sought his sovereign's permission to sort matters out. The king granted his cupbearer full facilities and the governorship of the district of Judah. Thus, on completion of the wall, Nehemiah and the veteran Ezra held appropriate ceremonies, sought to build up the city's population by bringing in new residents from the other Judean settlements, and sought further to encourage the people to live by their traditional Law (on Sabbath observance, mixed marriages, etc.). During his building work, Nehemiah had three foes among his neighbors: Sanballat, governor of the Samaria district to his north; Tobiah, the Ammonite, from just east, across the Jordan; and Geshem (or Gashmu), the Arabian, to his south. The latest date in his book is most likely the mention (Neh. 12:22) of the time of a king "Darius the Persian," in relation to records of priestly and Levitical families under the high priests from Eliashib to Jaddua (cf. for these, Neh. 12:1, 10; Ezra 2:36; 3:2), running down to Darius II.

In between the time of Darius I (with the temple's completion) and that of Artaxerxes I (restoring city walls and rule of ancient law) comes the reign of Xerxes, the setting of the book of Esther. This is set entirely within the Persian court in the palace of Susa, in what had been northernmost Elam, east from Babylonia. Going back in time, the transplanted people in Syria and others in Judea (Ezra 4:2, 10) harked back to Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal of Assyria.

## (ii) Places

Quite a few have turned up, in outlining the biblical sources. The returning Jews had set forth from Babylon in the east but had lived in other districts — Tel Melah, etc., Ezra 2:59; the series of “Tel” names may reflect settlement of Jewish captives on abandoned terrain. Ezekiel long before mentioned the river Chebar (Ezek. 1:1; etc.), the Kabaru of the Murashu archives. Esther became a queen in Susa to the east; her sovereign’s empire of 127 provinces extended from India in the east to (Egypt and) Kush in the west. Her mentor was a Jewish palace official, Mordecai; we read of banquets, daybooks of the realm. The temple decree by Cyrus had to be tracked down to Ecbatana in Persia (Ezra 6:1-2). Back in Palestine, besides Jerusalem and Samaria, we have listings of places in Judea when the returnees settled: Anathoth, Bethel, Gibeon, Netopha, Jericho, etc. (Ezra 2:21-35 paralleled by Neh. 7:26-38; further listing, Neh. 11:25-35).

## (iii) Usages

Cyrus is seen consciously reversing his Babylonian predecessors’ policy, by restoring symbols of deity (and adherents) to their home sanctuaries, as in Ezra 1:1-4. Both he and Darius (latter, 6:2-12) are shown giving support to local temple and cult, as at Jerusalem. We are shown incessant communications via letters to and from the imperial court, and issue of appropriate royal decrees, in part cited in Aramaic (4:8-6:18; 7:12-26).

# B. THE NEAR EASTERN SETTING

## (i) Sources

For all its vastness, and its immense impact in ancient history, we possess only very uneven original and allied sources for the Persian Empire.<sup>19</sup> Most familiar to Western readers are the accounts given by Herodotus, in his famous *Histories* — of great value, but much of it necessarily at second hand.<sup>20</sup>

We still have the Babylonian Chronicles, laconic but invaluable so far as they go. The Persian kings themselves left a series of official royal inscriptions (particularly at Persepolis) written in Old Persian, in its special cuneiform syllabary; best known is the Behistun inscription on a towering cliff face. In Babylonia, a series of business records, etc., from everyday life preserves regnal dates and contemporary customs. At Persepolis, from the treasury and the



northeast fortification wall have come large series of administrative tablets written in Elamite cuneiform, being part of the accounts of the palace complex there, during the reigns of Darius I to Artaxerxes I. And from the west in Egypt we have a long series of Aramaic papyri and ostraca, the greater part hailing from archives of the Jewish community based on Elephantin  Island (close by Aswan) below the First Cataract of the Nile. Other finds come from Hermopolis in Middle Egypt and from Saqqara (cemetery of Memphis) in the north, plus an unprovenanced postbag and its leather scrolls. From Palestine come the Wadi Daliyeh papyri of the fourth century and various ostraca.<sup>21</sup>

## (ii) The Historical Framework

The major rulers of the later Babylonian and Persian empires that touch on the biblical record can be tabulated simply, as follows.

Table 6. Neo-Babylonian and Persian Rulers in OT and External Sources

Late Neo-Babylonian, OT	Late Neo-Babylonian, other	B.C.
Belshazzar	Nabonidus (plus son, Bel-shar-usur as deputy)	(556-539)
Persian Empire (OT)	Persian Empire, other	B.C.
Cyrus (+ Darius the Mede)	Cyrus (II)	(539-530)
—	Cambyes (II) (and brief usurpers	(530-522) [522])
Darius I	Darius I	(522-486)
Xerxes (“Ahasuerus”)	Xerxes	(486-465)
Artaxerxes I	Artaxerxes I	(465-424)
Darius (II) the Persian	Darius II	(424-405)
(No more rulers mentioned)	(Artaxerxes II — Darius III	[405-331])

Most of this is self-explanatory, and shows overall correspondence. In the late Babylonian empire Nabonidus was largely an absentee ruler, spending ten of his seventeen years far, far southwest of Babylon (about 450 miles) in and around Teima in northwest Arabia, and returning barely a year or so before Babylon’s fall in 539. During that long span, circa 550-540, the effective ruler in Babylon was in fact his son Belshazzar, as local documents attest, wherein oaths are sworn in the names of both men. Without actually having the title of king in official usage, Belshazzar enjoyed the powers, for (as one cuneiform chroni-

cle has it) his father had in practice “entrusted the kingship into his hand.” Thus it is (as often remarked) understandable that (in Dan. 5:7, 29) Daniel was reputedly offered the third- and not the second-highest place in the kingdom by Belshazzar — who was himself but second. In that same passage Belshazzar is, with almost mock obsequiousness, called “son” of his “father” Nebuchadrezzar (if one translates literally) — but this is a left-handed compliment, contrasting the prince with his (and his own father’s) far more illustrious predecessor. Usurpers or indirect successors (and Nabonidus was not a direct successor of Nebuchadrezzar) often liked to claim a greater predecessor as an *ex officio* “father.” (In Egypt, Sethos II was flattered by a correspondent as having Ramesses II [his grandfather] as his “father.”) Darius the Mede (as such) is an ephemeral figure (only in Year 1), and bracketed directly with Cyrus the Persian (Dan. 6:28); here the simplest and best analysis is that the two are the same.<sup>22</sup>

In the Persian series, the would-be usurpers (Gaumata and the like) do not appear in the biblical accounts, as they were only ephemeral figures, usually far from Palestine. Nor does Cambyzes, whose short reign saw no particular incident affecting the Jews in Judea. The main series of the Old Testament’s Persian kings corresponds clearly and directly with the well-known emperors of the firsthand records and of Herodotus. Ezra’s visitation in Year 7 of Artaxerxes I would fall in 458, the twelve-year governorship of Nehemiah of Years 20-32 of the same king in 445-433, and his second visit in about 432 (no lower limit given). Alternative interpretations for these dates have often been suggested, but fail to account any better for the total evidence.<sup>23</sup>

Of the lesser rulers that opposed Nehemiah, some evidence is known, even well known. Sanballat the Horonite, governor of Samaria, is now known to have been Sanballat I (first of three governors of this name, the second being named in the Wadi Daliyeh papyri, and a probable third by Josephus). He occurs as governor of Samaria and father of two sons, and is appealed to for help by the Jews in Elephantiné in Year 17 of Darius II in 407.<sup>24</sup> Tobiah the Ammonite was an early member in a long line of Tobiards established in Transjordan, west from Rabbath-Ammon. In the third century B.C., burial caves were used at ‘Iraq el-Amir, next to which the name Tobiah was engraved in large Aramaic lettering; the family had dealings with Zeno in Ptolemaic Egypt, and about 180 B.C. Hyrcanus of this family built the magnificent structure (Qasr el-‘Abd; a palatial residence?) still to be seen at ‘Iraq el-Amir.<sup>25</sup> Nehemiah’s third foe, Geshem the Arabian, turns out to have been a king of Qedar in northwest Arabia. In a small pagan sanctuary in Wadi Tumat, in Egypt’s East Delta, were found some splendid silver bowls, one being inscribed in Aramaic: “What Qaynu son of Geshem, King of Qedar, brought in offering to (the goddess) Han-ilat.” The script, along with the finding of Greek coins of

the fifth to early fourth centuries B.C., indicates a date of about 400 for this bowl, and the time of Qaynu; so his father Geshem may well have reigned in the 440s/430s as a foe of Nehemiah. A Geshem (as “Jasm”) of some importance occurs in the date line with one ‘Abd, governor of Dedan, in an inscription at Dedan (Al-‘Ula); this is perhaps also our man.<sup>26</sup> So each of Nehemiah’s opponents is attested from documents close to him in time, or by descendants in Tobiah’s case. See, e.g., figs. 11A, B, C.

### (iii) Places

In the East, some places are well known while others are not. Susa, location of a Persian palace in Nehemiah (1:1) and Esther (1:2; etc.), has been the site of much excavation by French expeditions. There the once-splendid buildings include a palace built by Darius I and Xerxes, and another of Artaxerxes I. Brilliant glazed tiling showed warriors at the entrance and lions in the outer court. Three great courts lay between the pillared audience-hall to their north and the large suites of royal apartments to their south, including inner halls or courts. Surviving Persian metalwork in gold, silver, etc. hints at the sumptuous wealth once found there.<sup>27</sup> Ecbatana was originally the capital of Media, then of that land as a Persian province; it is largely undug, but a variety of finds have come from its mound amidst modern Hamadan.<sup>28</sup>

In the West, in Palestine, many places listed in Ezra and Nehemiah are either not securely identified with present-day sites or have not been dug (or cannot be) — through no fault of theirs! And conversely, we have numerous sites in Palestine that show attested Persian-period remains or occupation, many of which find no mention in our two authors or are unidentified either in the Bible or in other sources. However, quite a number in Ezra-Nehemiah are also attested for this period archaeologically.<sup>29</sup>

### (iv) Usages

The books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther show the Persian Empire “at work,” and its early rulers vigilant in securing their authority by (positively) supporting a “local” cult such as that of YHWH in Jerusalem (Ezra 1:2-4; 6:1-12; 7:12-26), or by (negatively) restraining the building of city defense walls, if it presaged even a hint of rebellion (cf. 4:8-22). Letters of safe conduct, like passports, could be issued (Neh. 2:7). Communication was by letter through couriers (e.g., Esther 3:15; 8:10, 14), between all parts of the empire and the effective capitals at

Susa and Babylon, besides the great ritual center at Persepolis and the old Median capital at Ecbatana. The royal administration and all such letters were conducted in Aramaic, already the current language in Syria-Palestine and Mesopotamia; hence, its use in several citations from official correspondence in Ezra 4–7. Versions were put into local languages as needed; cf. Esther 3:12; 8:9.

All of this has long been attested from a variety of documents, both in the sixth to fourth centuries and even surviving long afterward. Religion was the background and “social cement” in all communities in the ancient Near East throughout its early history. Support for a community’s cult(s) was a sure way to gain its loyalty, and the Persian emperors were quick off the mark to secure their rule over the vast domains they inherited from Babylon and Media by this means. Thus, as a matter of propaganda, Cyrus ostentatiously sent back the images of the gods that Nabonidus had gathered (for safety from Cyrus’s attack!) into Babylon, to their home temples throughout Babylonia, and he and his son Cambyzes took care to involve themselves in the cult of Marduk, god of Babylon, the very year they gained power there.<sup>30</sup>

Up in Asia Minor, we have two examples of imperial involvement in local religion and cults. First, down to Roman times, in Magnesia, the temple of Apollo preserved record of its rights confirmed by Darius I (522–486) to Gadata (probably the satrap there); the Greek text would be a translation from the Aramaic original.<sup>31</sup> Second, we have an original document from Xanthus in Lycia, of the first year of Artaxerxes III (358), whereby Pixodarus, the satrap of Caria and Lycia, regulates the introduction of the cult of a Carian deity into the temple of Leto at Xanthus, with appropriate provision for sacrificial offerings. What is noteworthy is that this inscription is *trilingual*. The decree from the satrap’s bureau is in Aramaic; next to it, on opposite sides of the stone to each other, are versions of the original request in Greek (main area language) and in Lycian (the local tongue). The three texts show significant differences in detail, reflecting their originators’ interests.<sup>32</sup> The whole setup illustrates the rather compressed formula in Esther (3:12; 8:9), that decrees and documents would be written in the script/language of each province, not only in Aramaic. In Babylon, Cyrus’s administrative orders to the Babylonian officers to repatriate the other Babylonian images would have been issued in Aramaic; but his propaganda texts for the temples were in traditional Babylonian cuneiform. This can be seen in the “Cyrus Cylinder” for Babylon; and in his building texts for the Ur and Sippar temples.<sup>33</sup>

In Egypt, under Cambyzes and especially Darius I, the Persian kings sought to patronize the local cults. For Cambyzes the high dignitary Udja-Hor-resenet acted in the role of an Egyptian adviser, and enlisted his interest in the temple of the goddess Neith of Sais. Darius I in turn was served by this same dignitary, sanc-

tioned building work on Egyptian temples, and caused to be built a whole new temple at Hibis in the Great Oasis (Kharga).<sup>34</sup>

Thus it cannot be so surprising to find (Ezra 1–2) Cyrus authorizing a restoration of what was (for him!) the local cult of “the God of heaven” (YHWH to his worshipers) at Jerusalem in Yehud (Judea) subprovince in Palestine, and therefore granting that the deity’s cult vessels (there being no image) and a goodly body of adherents should also go back there. Politically, we should remember, Palestine was the springboard for Egypt; a loyal populace there was a prerequisite for a successful Persian conquest there. And the same applies (both religiously and politically) in the case of Darius I, who confirmed the temple-building project, with appropriate provision for the cult (Ezra 5; 6:1–12), precisely as we saw happen later at Xanthus and as is implied in what remains of the Magnesian rescript of Darius I. Likewise, in Egypt Cambyses had the temple of Neith restored and renewed its revenues and festival provision; the Hibis temple of Darius I would also have had to be granted endowments to maintain its cult.

Direct royal Persian interest in Jewish cultic affairs is not limited to Ezra’s text. During Cambyses’ invasion of Egypt (525), much violence and damage was done, including to temples there, as Udja-hor-resenet (discreetly) and one of the later Jewish Aramaic papyri (Cowley, no. 30:13–14) from Elephantiné both agree. The latter also records that the Jewish temple at Elephantiné was not attacked then but was respected by Cambyses. Much later on we find direct Persian interest in its cult.<sup>35</sup> One document from Elephantiné (Cowley, no. 21) is a direct command from the Persian king, Darius II, that the Jews in Elephantiné should celebrate the Passover and feast of unleavened bread. Typically, the edict went from the king to the satrap of Egypt, Arsames, and by him via a Jewish emissary Hananiah (Cowley, no. 38:7) to the Elephantiné Jewish community itself. As one would not expect Darius II to know personally the details of these feasts, it appears that Hananiah was dispatched on a mission there by Darius II, much as Ezra (chap. 7) was sent out to the Jews in Jerusalem by Artaxerxes I. There is no rational reason to doubt the authenticity of Ezra’s commission any more than that of Hananiah under Darius II.<sup>36</sup> In turn, when the Jewish temple at Elephantiné was destroyed in 410, the Jews there made appeal to both the governor of Judea, Bigvai, and Johanan high priest in Jerusalem, and likewise to the sons of Sanballat I, governor in neighboring Samaria down to the seventeenth year of the king in 407. But unlike Zerubbabel governor of Judea and the priest Jeshua in Jerusalem, who asked for help for their temple via Tattenai (governor of “Beyond the River”)<sup>37</sup> in 520 (Ezra 4:24; 5–6), the appeal from Elephantiné seemingly fell on deaf ears; it may have been refused by the satrap Arsames.

And so one might continue. In terms of Persian imperial involvement with local peoples and communities, what we find in Ezra-Nehemiah (and Esther) is in harmony with what we see in the contemporary firsthand sources that we do have. The Persian kings supported local cults as a focus of local loyalties to the center; and that the local groups should invoke their deities' blessings on their rule. Various minor details in the biblical sources find echoes in our external data. Thus Nehemiah (2:7) asked for letters of safe conduct for his journey to Judea. Just such a "passport," with requests (by the satrap Arsames for his adjutant Nahti-hur) to a series of officials for safe conduct (and provision) all the way from Babylonia to Damascus (en route to Egypt), has survived from only a few years after Nehemiah, preserved with other letters in a leather postbag such as couriers might have used on such journeys.<sup>38</sup> So we can see what Nehemiah might have expected from his king.

The terminology in the biblical copies of letters to and from the Persian court is directly comparable with what we find in the external, firsthand documents. Inferiors call themselves the "servant(s)" of superiors and kings; the idiom for issuing decrees (*sam t'e'em*) is the same; the body of the typical Official Aramaic letter begins with the phrase "Peace (*sh-l-m*) and much well-being I send you," which is what is presupposed in Ezra 4:17 (lit. "Peace, etc."), where the formula is abbreviated for brevity's sake.<sup>39</sup> And so on, we may also say, on this topic. The form or stage of language of Aramaic used in Ezra and Daniel is precisely that used in the Neo-Babylonian and Persian period (sixth to fourth centuries), and is currently termed Official Aramaic. In the Old Testament the sole difference is that the spelling has been consistently modernized, to bring it into line with the Aramaic otherwise in popular use among the Jews by the third century. This was because of sound-shifts in Aramaic from at least the fifth century. For example, the consonant *dh* had coalesced with plain *d*. Before this it had been written as a *z* in Old and Official Aramaic, as there was no separate letter in the (originally Phoenician) script for the sound *dh*. But to continue writing a *d* (as *dh* had become) with a *z*, when all other *ds* were written as *d*, could only lead to confusion. Already in the fifth century some scribes began to write the occasional *d* instead of *z* in such cases. So the change had to come. Thus with the fall of the Persian Empire, Aramaic largely ceased to be used except by those who spoke it (not just wrote it), and the change took place. But the change only dates itself, not the documents to which it was applied, as elsewhere in the ancient Near East. There is no good reason to deny the authenticity of the biblical Aramaic correspondence and other usages that we find in the biblical books relating to this period.<sup>40</sup>

### 3. BACK TO THE BALANCE SHEET

We may now cast a retrospective glance over this much briefer period, circa 600-400. For the period of the Babylonian conquest of Judah and the exiling of an important part of its population to Babylon(ia), the biblical and external sources match closely in terms of history and chronology. The numbers exiled to Babylonia are comparable with previous Assyrian usage. The elite and “useful” people (military; skilled folk) were the ones taken away (as always in such circumstances), and other folk were left to raise revenues from working the land, in accord with ancient imperial usage. In Babylon Jehoiachin’s presence and life on allowance is clearly evidenced. Babylon as an early metropolis is very visible. Back in Judea we have background for Gedaliah’s brief regime, Ammonite foe, and Mizpah as local administrative center. The flight of Jews to Egypt via Tahpanhes (a known location) had later consequences.

With the triumph of Persia, Cyrus appears as liberator in both the Babylonian and biblical view. Up to Babylon’s fall, Belshazzar had been prime mover in Babylon under a largely absentee father (so a Daniel could only play third fiddle). The sequence and dates of sixth- and fifth-century imperial rulers are closely agreed in biblical and other sources. Among lesser lights, Nehemiah’s three foes find good background (Sanballat and family in papyri; Tobiah through his descendants’ works; Geshem in contemporary records). As for places, Susa was indeed a major capital, and Palestine knew a period of developing resettlement. Persian interest in its subjects’ cults is well attested. Biblical Aramaic usage and cultural traits (even “passports”) correspond closely with external usage and data. We are in a clearly defined historical and cultural period with good mutual correlations.