Writing a History of Yehud in the Persian Period: Creating Understanding

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Modern and post-modern historiography is a recreation of the past that links together critically evaluated evidence in a chain of cause-and-effect. It is an interpretive act, the aim of which is to create understanding; it is idiosyncratic in that it reflects the creative genius of the individual historian (Edelman 1991; 1999). History-writing is not a science but an art; the same evidence can be construed differently in terms of causation and meaning. For this reason, we should not expect “the definitive” history of any subject; instead, we should accept and embrace the existence of a range of histories on a subject (Edelman 1996). We cannot complacently read one recreation and rest content that it is the final, undisputed “solution” or understanding. Rather, we have to become active participants in the creative process presented to us in different visions of the same topic and decide for ourselves which evidence we consider to be relevant and which interpretive framework we find most convincing.

All historians of Yehud in the Persian period would agree in principle that their task is to identify primary and secondary artifactual and literary sources that might provide relevant evidence for various aspects and issues associated with the province in the years between 538 and 333 BCE and then to evaluate these sources to determine what evidence they think they actually contain.¹ Once done, their next task is to create understanding by arranging their critically evaluated “data” in an interpretive framework that provides meaning by attributing cause and effect in order to suggest “why” something took place.

Differences emerge between historians already in the carrying out of the first step in the historical enterprise. Depending, for example, on where the boundaries of the province are set and whether a person thinks that they remained stable or changed over time, the archaeological site data used to understand developments and policies will differ dramatically. A decision about whether a site that yields pottery from the Iron IIC period and the Persian period was

¹ An exception might be my respondent, T. Thompson, whose scientific approach to generating data eliminates all details that cannot be independently verified from a second source, and who tends to eliminate secondary material from consideration as potentially legitimate sources of information from the outset, with the result that these are not evaluated at all. He might not agree with my claim of what constitutes an agreed principle here.
continuously occupied during the Neo-Babylonia period or was destroyed in 586 or 582 BCE and only resettled at some point after 538 BCE has important ramifications for understanding the provincial policy in Yehud when the Persians assumed responsibility and any changes they might have felt compelled to introduce.

Differences also emerge in the evaluation of the biblical texts that are generally thought to have been written in the Persian period. These include Ruth, 2 and 3 Isaiah, Joel, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Ezra, and Nehemiah. While it is generally accepted that the date superscriptions in the prophetic corpus are later editorial additions of questionable historical reliability, the dates attached to the books of Haggai and Zechariah that place the building of the temple in years 2 and 4 of Darius have been deemed reliable universally. Unlike the situation with prophets who lived in the monarchic period, there is a widespread assumption, not always stated, that the dates of these two compositions either were added within a few years of the pronouncements made by Haggai and Zechariah (e.g. Meyers and Meyers 1987:xliv) or at least, within the prophets’ lifetimes (e.g. Mitchell 1912:42). As a result, the reign of Darius I has been seen as the political context in which changes were introduced into Yehud. A minority position has accepted the reliability of these dates but argued that they reflect the reign of Darius II instead of Darius I (e.g. Havet 1889:799; DeQueker 1993: 68). When these dates are rejected as historically reliable, however, other evidence can be used to situate the rebuilding of the temple. I have argued in my forthcoming book, for example, that the temple was rebuilt under Artaxerxes I, when the provincial seat was moved from Mizpah to Jerusalem and the destroyed city was rebuilt in order to accommodate a garrison, administrative buildings, and a civilian population (Edelman 2005).

The recognition that biblical texts have been edited and expanded in the Greek period forces the historian to evaluate the purpose and literary and rhetorical strategies of the original author, the extent and nature of any underlying sources that were used to create the original composition, and what is likely to be a secondary expansion, when it would have been added, and why. There is no fool-proof way to accomplish this task with any degree of certainty; it involves a series of judgment calls, any one of which can be challenged by another who assesses things differently. Yet the end result yields what is going to be considered a reliable pool of data by that individual historian. A fellow historian might only agree with half or a quarter of the information that has been deemed reliable by the other. A different understanding of how to interrelate the differing set of “facts” into a cause-and-effect framework is likely to emerge from the
differently defined set of relevant information. Even in cases where historians agree in large part about the relevant evidence, if it is scanty, as is the case for the early Persian period in Yehud, for example, it is possible to suggest a number of different causational frameworks.

Personal religious belief is also an influencing factor in the evaluation of what historically reliable details may be contained in a given biblical text. Those who belong to protestant Christian denominations that view the Bible as inerrant truth are going to be less inclined to reject any detail contained within it as historically unreliable. As a result, their historical recreations will mirror the biblical interpretation of selected events that took place in Yehud in the Persian period. Some of those who have rejected Jewish or Christian religious tradition, on the other hand, may assume that nothing in the Bible is “truth” and, by extension, that it is all fiction and contains no details that are historically reliable. As a result, their historical recreations will depend on evidence provided by archaeological excavation and survey, and extrabiblical literary sources deemed relevant. They will deliberately differ from the biblical interpretation of selected events in Yehud during the Persian period. Those who belong to religious traditions that view the Bible as a collection of human compositions, that, if divinely inspired, use ancient writing conventions and worldviews to communicate their messages, and which acknowledge that changes have been introduced into the texts over time for various reasons, will still evaluate the reliability of textual details over a spectrum that will span the two extremes described above. So will many of those who do not belong to a confessional religious community.

Historical investigation centers on questions or issues: it is important that a historian clarify what specific question or focus his or her history-writing addresses. To talk about a history of the Second Temple period is unproductive; this is too vague a subject to convey any sense of what content is expected. Is the focus to be the political events that took place in Yehud and other geographical areas where diaspora Jews lived in the time period from 450 BCE to 70 CE? Is it to focus solely on Yehud? Will it look at the culture during this time period, examining building traditions, diet, pottery traditions, the use of imported vs locally fabricated items, burial customs, the average age at death, education, and literary preferences? Will it seek to identify key concepts in the worldview of the time and to determine if these changed over time? Will it look at the economic and military role of Yehud within the larger Persian, Hellenistic and Roman empires? How much comparative data will need to be examined from other parts of
these larger empires in order to gain an understanding of how the situation in Yehud was typical or a-typical within each empire? Will it focus on the religious history within Yehud and the emerging forms of early Judaism, or on the role of the temple within the religious, social, political, and economic fabric of the province? Will it address relations between Jews in Yehud and those in the diaspora? It is necessary to specify the topic(s) of investigation so that readers can know what to expect and also decide if a work is relevant to their interests or not. My earlier reference to a history of Yehud in the Persian period, while a more delimited topic than a history of the Second Temple period, suffers from the same lack of focus and would need to be more narrowly defined before being researched and written.

When there is limited evidence, analogy is often used in order to situate data in a chain of cause and effect. The analogy may come from other parts of the Persian empire, or from different time periods and different cultures. Historians may or may not be explicit about their use of analogy. The reader needs to be alert to places where analogies are being invoked or assumed and ask themselves whether they are appropriate and convincing or not.

In discussions about why the temple was rebuilt in the Persian period, a number of analogies have been used, which have generated very different schemes of understanding. One argues on analogy with the temple rebuilding projects that Cyrus undertook in Mesopotamia that he would have applied the same policy to other areas of the empire, including Yehud. The foundation inscription known as the Cyrus Cylinder is used as the basis of this analogy. Many have found it convincing, especially in light of the claim in Ezra 1 and 3 that the rebuilding of the temple began under Cyrus and that he restored the temple vessels (e.g. Noth 1960:306-15; Myers 1965:xxix; Ackroyd 1968:140-52; Hayes in Miller and Hayes 1986:440-60; Meyers and Meyers 1987:xxxi-xl; Blenkinsopp 1988:62; Ahlström 1993:841-48;). Others argue that the temple was not started historically until the reign of Darius, relying on the date superscriptions in Haggai and Zechariah to situate the event, but they still argue that Cyrus issued a decree giving permission, on analogy with the Cyrus Cylinder and accepting the genuineness of one or both alleged citations from Cyrus’ edict in Ezra 1:2-4 and 6:2-5, which was not acted on due to various circumstances (e.g. Williamson 1985:7, 79; Bedford 2001:301-310).

Others, including myself, have not found the analogy convincing (e.g. Kuhrt 1983). First, the claim that the temple repairs were initiated under Cyrus and that he returned the temple vessels is the result of the author’s desire to show how prophetic predictions concerning the temple were fulfilled in history. These claims illustrate
the fulfilment of visions expressed by 2 Isaiah. Secondly, the Cyrus cylinder is a foundation inscription and its contents reflect the tropes associated with that particular genre. Cyrus’ policy of the restoration of exiled gods to their shrines was designed to have him appear to be the legitimate successor to the Neo-Babylonian throne and empire, chosen by Marduk. There is physical proof that he undertook repairs at a number of major temples in Mesopotamia (de Vaux 1968), which demonstrated his role as king and legitimate temple-builder. It is unlikely, however, that he would have bothered to restore a temple in the backwater of Yehud, which had been a province of the Neo-Babylonian empire for forty-eight years and no longer had a native dynasty for the Persian king to replace and assume its traditional roles, including temple-builder.

Another analogy that has been used to understand the role of the rebuilt temple is the Mesopotamian temple-city. Joel Weinberg has argued that Cyrus authorized the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem to serve as the economic and cultural center of a newly restored golah-community (1992). He admits that the Jerusalem community represents a unique form of the historically attested temple communities, and his proposal rests on an acceptance of the Persian-era biblical texts as an accurate reflection of events and attitudes at the time.

Like a few others (e.g. Williamson 1998:154-56; Carter 1999: 294-307; Bedford 2001: 207-17), I have not found the underlying analogy convincing. Weinberg has not explained why Cyrus would transplant a non-Persian, Mesopotamian form of political and economic organization to a region where it had never existed. Traditionally, these temple cities had tax –exempt statuses as well, so to institute such an arrangement would have gone against the interest of the economic interests of the king. P. Briant may be correct that the Persian kings took measures to eliminate the tax-exempt status of long-established temple-cities in order to benefit from their extensive profits (2002: 72-75). If so, this institution was modified under the new regime to be economically productive for the imperial court. Even so, it was not a familiar form of organization to the Persian monarchs or within Yehud and so is not likely to have been introduced there by Cyrus or Darius.

A third analogy that could be invoked is the trilingual Xanthus inscription, which records how citizens and dependents of the Lycian garrison-town of Arnos/Xanthus received permission from their satrap to establish an official cult for the Carian deity, Lord of Caunos, within the settlement. Permission was granted in the first year of the reign of Artaxerxes (IV?). The locals were responsible for all costs involved in the initiation and upkeep of the cult. Lands were dedicated to the
temple and a priest was appointed, who was given tax-exempt status (Teixidor 1978; Briant 2002:708, 1011-12). Relying heavily on the accounts of the temple’s building in Haggai and Zechariah 1-8, where there is no mention of imperial involvement in the rebuilding process, the Xanthus inscription could be seen to illustrate a common policy within the empire for the creation of new, locally-sponsored temples.

The failure of Haggai-Zechariah 8 to mention the role of the Persian king in the rebuilding of the temple has two likely sources. One is the desire to motivate the people to undertake and complete the work, which could not have been undertaken without some sort of official permission. If the people had been ordered to undertake the project and did so as corvee labor, for example, then a reference to the king’s order would not have helped motivate them. Rather, a use of the native temple-building tradition and its rationales would have had a better chance to succeed. The second is the decision to organize the two sets of prophecies from the time of the temple’s rebuilding to follow the pattern of a temple-building account. Within this context, the native king is charged by his deity to build or rebuild the temple, which, under the circumstances where Yehud had no native king, had to be modified. The editor(s) of these two books had two choices: they could have named the Persian king as the temple-builder, as the author of 2 Isaiah did in hopeful anticipation of a change for the better in Yehud with the change of imperial regime under Cyrus. Or, they could have transferred this responsibility onto the people. The latter option was followed in both instances. As a result, the texts give no explicit reference to the involvement of the Persian king in the rebuilding of the temple in Yehud. Yet the Xanthus inscription provides proof that no temple could have been built under any circumstances without imperial approval, which could be issued at the satrapal level rather than by the imperial court itself.

The other weakness with this approach is that the circumstances are too different in each case for the situation in Xanthus to inform the one in Yehud. While both sites housed fortresses, Xanthus was an established garrison site with one or more temples to native Lycian deities (Leto, Artemis, Apollo/Hshatrapati) already in place. The possible arrival of Carian mercenaries after the region was placed under the jurisdiction of the satrap of Caria may well have prompted a request that they be allowed to build a temple to their native god, which would be used side by side with the existing native temple(s). Jerusalem, on the other hand, was an uninhabited site that had been chosen to become the provincial seat. In the process of its rebuilding and resettlement, a garrison was established, the city walls were repaired, administrative buildings were erected, and a civilian
population was moved inside the walls alongside the soldiers who served in the garrison and the bureaucrats. The cult of the native god was transferred from the former regional seat to the new regional seat. In my opinion, the temple was rebuilt as an integral part of this process, to serve two functions. It became a place for the population to worship the native deity and also served as a provincial treasury.

My reconstruction assumes that the temple in Yehud functioned in part as a storehouse for precious metals as well as for foodstuffs (so also e.g. Torrey 1936; Schaper 1995). This is based on analogy with the widespread use of temples in this capacity throughout the ancient Near East both prior to the Persian period, and afterwards, through the Roman period. It also rejects the biblical depiction of a restored temple in an otherwise destroyed and abandoned city 70 years prior to the rebuilding of the city found in Ezra and Nehemiah as implausible. There would have been little reason for Darius to have authorized the creation of a pilgrimage site essentially; it would not have yielded enough economic gain for the imperial court to have made it worthwhile. My reconstruction assumes instead that the temple was most logically built at the same time that the city was refurbished and resettled and that as a treasury, it served imperial interests that justified its rebuilding.

Are all historiographies equally valid? No. In some instances, invalid data is relied upon that can skew the results and invalidate certain conclusions and interpretations. This data primarily will be archaeological in nature, since it usually is impossible to verify the accuracy or inaccuracy of texts, which are always open to interpretation. Sites known from survey that belong to the relevant time period might be overlooked, on the one hand, and others might be wrongly included, which have no firm evidence of occupation in the period under investigation. A failure to assess the relative size of a site in the relevant period, when the percentage of sherds from various periods of occupation collected are broken down in the published report, can lead to a misunderstanding of the likely nature of the site and a miscalculation of its possible population, using whichever of the many possible co-efficients that have been suggested for this process. Claims that a site was unwalled because the wall systems did not date to the period under investigation can be challenged if the walls retain a decent height even today. Walls can remain intact and in use for centuries. The failure to include all the artefacts recovered from the period under study at a site or from a given locus in an assessment of its function can skew results. Thus, all recreations are not equal.
Written interpretations of the past that fail to account for all the evidence that has been deemed relevant by the historian/author can be judged to be less successful and less valid than those that incorporate all the identified data into the proposed interpretive framework. Sadly, there are instances where historians will knowingly omit information from their data pool because it does not square easily with their recreation. It is harder to uncover this kind of deceit, but not impossible.

If you consider something to constitute relevant evidence that does not appear anywhere in the recreation of another historian whose work you are evaluating, ask yourself if that information contradicts or is inconsistent with the proposed recreation. If it is, you can challenge the motives for its omission and the plausibility of the proposed recreation. If the evidence has been discussed but dismissed, consider whether the argument made to disqualify it is strong and well-reasoned or not. If the latter, you should also challenge the motives underlying its omission and wonder about the integrity of the proposed recreation.

History-writing is not identical to history, when the latter term is used to designate the past or events that transpired in the past. It is an interpretation of past events or, in some cases, of ideas that were current at certain times, and always involves a subjective element in the attribution of significance to events or ideas. For this reason, we should have as many historiographical accounts of a given issue or topic involving the past as there are historians who investigate it. There will be points of agreement and points of difference. It is possible to assess the success or validity of an individual recreation by critiquing its internal consistency and, in some cases, its motives for excluding certain evidence. In the final analysis, it is not solely up to other historians to critique other recreations. Interested readers must compare and contrast various recreations and decide for themselves what arguments are most convincing in establishing what is relevant evidence and which are most persuasive in explaining the topic under investigation. The evaluation of historiographies that propose differing understandings of the same topic requires an active engagement of the reader in a critical assessment; those with an uncritical, passive, couch-potato approach need not bother.

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