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**Silverman, Jason M**

**Rose, Jenny; de Jong, Albert; Stewart, Sarah**

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# ZOROASTRIANISM/PERSIAN RELIGION IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

*Jason M. Silverman*

The religion of the Persians was not a conscious concern for the writers of the Hebrew Bible. Already thirty-five years ago, Barr (1985: 209) noted that the Hebrew Bible had a 'striking indifference' to Iranian religion. For example, Cyrus is noted as not a worshipper of YHWH (Isa 45:4–5), but nothing is made of this. Instead, Cyrus is referred to as 'mashiach' earlier in this passage, holding YHWH right hand and called by name. Cyrus's religion is certainly not seen as threatening.

One does, however, get a glimpse of an essentially positive relationship between the Great Kings and the cults of YHWH. Traditionally, this has been interpreted in terms of so-called Persian tolerance and imperial laissez-faire. A more productive way to think about this, however, might make use of Bourdieusian field theory (Bourdieu 2005; Spunaugle 2024). If one is willing to posit the existence of a religious field (in the Bourdieusian sense of field) in the Ancient Near East – while rethinking Bourdieu's own understanding of the religious field – and to accept 'supernatural social capital' as its structuring capital (Silverman, Töyräänvuori, and Wasmuth 2024: 265), then one might see the Persian Empire as a period of change in the field. This field and its changes are sketched here in three movements. First is to see this as a refraction of imperial religion, or, in other terms, the Great Kings' practice and understanding of rule as it impacted matters of religion and cult. Second, a case can be made that the experience of the Persian Empire was formative for the Judaean imagination of YHWH's heavens and thus of YHWH himself, something one might argue for Zoroastrianism as well (Jong 2010: 89; 2015). Lastly, while these are indirect reflections on Iranian religion, one can make a case that it is illuminating to study both traditions together, as examples of traditions that were strongly shaped under the same empire. In both cases, however, we are dealing essentially only with rarified expressions of religion, entirely lacking sources from everyday and marginalised groups.

## The cult of Yahweh and the Persian Empire

Ancient cults shared a conviction that the gods existed and established the world order, even if which gods and which order remained up for debate. In fact, identifying the responsible deity was essential for ensuring well-being or solving a problem. Nonetheless, in general, divine worship in the ancient world was not exclusive. Rulers were tasked with maintaining the divinely ordained order, a responsibility that could be supportive of or corrosive to their claims to rule.


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As a rule, the Persian king recognised the remit of local gods (Kuhrt 2014: 161). Cyrus credited Marduk with his victory over Babylon (Cyrus Cylinder), Darius declared himself son of Re in Egypt (DZc), and Herodotus claims Xerxes sacrificed to Thetis in Magnesia (Herod. 7.191.2). This would appear to have included YHWH in Jerusalem (Ezra 6:9–10; cf. Ezra 7–8) without a divine consort (Zech 5:5–11) as well as at Gerizim and Elephantine (with a consort) (TAD B7.3, C3.15, cf. A2.1).

The question this raises is whether this is merely Realpolitik, standard ancient religious practice, or the continuation of earlier ideas of patron deities of subject peoples. Whichever option one chooses, it cautions against the tendency in some scholarship to read every assertion of YHWH's responsibility and agency in the Hebrew Bible as 'resistance' against the Persian king, and, by implication, Ahura Mazda.[1] Indeed, Herodotus claimed every Persian prays for the king when he sacrifices (I.132.2); similarly, the renewed Jerusalem cult was to pray for the king and his sons (Ezra 6:10). This would appear to paint the king as a traditional patron of cults, explicable from both traditional Ancient Near Eastern and Zoroastrian perspectives (Kellens 2021: 1218). In contrast to some imperial systems, this patronage did not appear to involve the imposition of or proselytising for imperial deities. Nonetheless, patronage has strong implications for the structure of the political and social fields and, through the king's control over priestly prestige and appointments, impact on the structure of the religious field.[2]

The context of an officially recognised cult, if one understands Jerusalem and Gerizim as such, implies that priests and administrators would be familiar with wider imperial religious practice. An obscure reference in Third Isaiah (66:11) might reference cultic activities that mirror imperial practices: the prophet condemns placing a table before Gad (Heb. Fortune) and wine for Min. The former could be seen in parallel to *khwarenah*, while the latter, which is typically understood as the Aramaean god of fate, could also be seen as a shadowy Persian god of wine (*Minam*, NN 2259; Henkelman 2021: 1234). The latter was associated with wine warehouses and could have been a part of the provision system along the royal road.

Another set of practices that clearly continued through the Persian period, despite some resistance, was care for the ancestors; for example, Isa 65–66 evinces what appear to be mortuary practices, and Nehemiah expresses concern for his ancestors' tombs (2:3). As the Persian kings also venerated their predecessors, this is another set of similar practices.[3] One might also see the *fravashis* in a similar light. As Sonia (2020: 10) has noted, one was able to 'adopt' ancestors through assuming mortuary duties for them. This might have provided another way for the Judaeans and Persians to have parallel or convergent practices, by 'adopting' royal and other ancestors. This would then represent a strategy for increasing both social capital and supernatural social capital.

## The Achaemenid Empire as a model of the heavens

Humans often imagine the supernatural world in homology with their earthly socio-political structure, and one can posit that the Judaeans reimagined YHWH's heavens in homology with the Achaemenid Empire (as one can argue the empire shaped Persian religion as well, see above). However, one must take care in using such argumentation for understanding Persian religion of the period to avoid circularity, as methodologically one must first establish contemporary traditions on their own terms before their comparison.

Elements of YHWH's heavens one might see as reflections of the empire include the relationship between YHWH and his angels that mirrors the Great King and his satraps (e.g., Dan. 10); systems of divine surveillance similar to imperial ones (watchers, accusers, and royal commissioners);[4] and the abode of YHWH as a *paradise* in Eden (LXX Gen 2:8; Song 4:13).

Davies has previously suggested that depictions of YHWH strongly mirror those of Ahura Mazda. He bases this on an identification of YHWH (and Marduk) with Ahura Mazda on the basis of mutual aniconism (Davies 1995: 223; cf. 2016: 32). Neither Marduk nor the Persians were aniconic, despite Herodotus' statement, though a general nonuse/absence? of cultic statues may have made the Persian system seem more relatable. It is possible that the restoration of the Jerusalem cult without a cult statue enabled the identification of what had previously been separate manifestations of YHWH.[5] Nonetheless, better than aniconism, a closer parallel between the two deities is the depiction of YHWH as a creator (Silverman 2017). The non-martial, benevolent nature of creation and the central place it held in Achaemenid discourse suggests that the latter may have been instrumental in re-defining the symbolic capital of deities in the religious field. In this discourse goodness and creative ability overtake older models of warrior-gods fighting back chaos. While the Hebrew Bible continues to utilise older divine warrior imagery, a more transcendent creator also becomes a more frequent understanding. An interesting difference is that whereas Achaemenid inscriptions never give Ahura Mazda the title 'king,'[6] Judaean sources continue to describe YHWH as king.

As noted above, the Persian king was in a dominant position to change the field and its rules of the game. Given several royal inscription prologues' insistence on the beneficence of Ahura Mazda ('who created happiness for mankind'), one might see a change whereby gods were no longer ranked solely in terms of relative power but in terms of their benevolence for their worshippers. Depending on the context, such benevolence could be understood either in terms of effectiveness or in ethical terms.[7] Deities perceived as 'good' would thus increase in relative status, capable of providing worshippers with greater supernatural social capital, and vice versa. This brings to mind such disparate issues as the numerous late prophetic passages insisting on the goodness of YHWH, the Enochic concern with theodicy, as well as the 'demotion' of the *daeva*s.

## Yahwism and Zoroastrianism as co-evolving contemporaries

In the Persian Empire, worshippers of Yahweh and some Iranians shared an experience of dispersion under a 'universal' empire: the Yahwists largely as a result of Israelite and Judahite deportations and migrations and Iranians as imperial colonists. One might wonder, therefore, whether these similar experiences played a role in both traditions' gradual shift from merely the religious element of ancestral practice towards more codified 'religions' larger than ethnic ties. In other words, the variables of dispersion, universal hegemony, and openness to 'proselytes' effected a change in the structure of the religious field for YHWH-worship and potentially also for Zoroastrianism. Within the Hebrew Bible one can already see worship including more than 'Israel': Second and Third Isaiah and Zechariah expect proselytes to YHWH (Isa. 44:5, 49:6, 55:5, 56:3–8, Zech. 8:20–23; 14:16), and 2 Kings asserts various populations in Samaria had added YHWH to their pantheons (2 Kgs. 17:24–41; cf. Ezra 4:2).[8] At the same time, the Persian period represents a timeframe in which the number of deities worshipped alongside YHWH gradually decreased, meaning the specific cult of YHWH brought more cohesion between ancestral traditions and religious traditions to Judaeans and Samarians than similar ancestral traditions did for other groups. This does not mean 'monotheism' was a unifying factor per se, but the sharing of a singular cult despite dispersal might. One might wonder, then, if the apparent Persian-era codification of the Zoroastrian calendar and perhaps even Artaxerxes II's supposed establishment of Anahita temples were meant to provide a similar function for the Persian colonists throughout the empire.

The written text of the Hebrew Bible began to take shape in the Persian Empire, in contrast with the Avesta, which appears to have remained a mostly oral tradition. This difference can be analysed in terms of the relative positions of the communities within the empire. For the Judaeans and

Samarians, administrative positions – and thus the education in writing needed for them – were a strategy for social advancement, while for the elite Persians orality continued as part of the educational habitus.[9] Since the magi were closely associated with the king, his dispositions would have provided little incentive to change their medium of religious instruction.

The periodically noted phenomenological parallel between Judaean and Zoroastrian texts referring to purity rules (in particular Leviticus or 'P' and the *Vīdevdad*; e.g., Colpe 1995; Kiel 2013) could be seen as similar reactions to a need to actualise human agency in light of an increasingly remote cosmic emperor and perhaps also of dispersal. By linking daily practice to the structure of the cosmos, even a lay worshipper could find a personal connection and place within the structure. This would be a reaction in terms of *habitus* similar to the intellectual one of populating the heavens with semi-divine 'angels' to bridge the transcendence gap.

Lastly, one may consider the much-debated appearance of the title 'God of Heaven' in Persian-period Judaean sources (e.g., Beyerle 2010; Granerød 2020). It has been debated whether this represents a syncretism between YHWH and Ahura Mazda or a cypher for the head of a pantheon. One could read this title – which appears only in Judaean sources – as an attempt to ensure that YHWH was perceived as an 'imperial deity,' one providing supernatural social capital on par with other royally recognised heads of pantheons.

## Conclusions

A more precise frame for understanding the development of religion in the Hebrew Bible and Iran than the recurrent so-called Axial Age is the Persian Empire itself, with the Great King's royal 'theology' providing the rules of the game for practices of social distinction and thus the various elite habitus that shaped both religious traditions. Although the Hebrew Bible provides little to no direct reflection on Persian religion, it provides an interesting contemporaneous comparator as another tradition that survives into the present day. While the present author believes that Persian traditions (culture, administration, and religion) influenced the Judaeans, it is methodologically backwards to use posited instances of influence to study Persian traditions themselves. Interrelations within the imperial system, however, may help to understand changes in both traditions of the period, and Bourdieusian concepts provide a less-explored angle for comparing the co-evolution of both.

## Notes

1 For a study positing four types of responses, including resistance, see Achenbach (2013).
2 For an example of the political field's impact on temple social structures, see Waerzeggers (2015).
3 Henkelman (2003). One wonders if the Persian kings venerated previous pharaohs as well, by providing their expected offerings, as a proper Egyptian ruler, but the evidence is not sufficient for an answer. Melanie Wasmuth (personal communication) suggests one could read Udjahorresnet's concern for Sais, the former dynastic seat, this way.
4 All the given detailed arguments are in the author's previous publications; compare Esler (2017).
5 Assuming, e.g., with Niehr (1997), that the first temple had had a cult statue of YHWH.
6 Nor does the Avesta, as far as I can tell, though twice one of the *Amesha Spenta*s (*Khshathra, meaning 'rule'*) appears in close conjunction (Y. 28:7, 41:1).
7 The late fifth-century governor of Yehud, Bagavahya ('better through god'), could either have been a Persian official or a Judaean with a Persian name.
8 A late Greek addition to Daniel even has the Babylonians 'accuse' Cyrus of converting to Judaism (Bel and the Dragon 28).
9 For the dynamics of education and writing for the Hebrew Bible, see Silverman (2022). The classical statements on Persian education would appear to match the late writing of the corpus.

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