

On Dating Biblical Texts to the Persian Period

Edited by
RICHARD J. BAUTCH
and MARK LACKOWSKI

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101



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Discerning Criteria and Establishing Epochs

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Introduction

The extent to which the Persian period affected the development of the Scriptures has been the subject of renewed interest in the last two decades. Increasing numbers of texts have been suggested as coming from or edited during the Persian period, but these discussions do not always reflect extensively on the assumptions used in making these claims or the implications on a broader scale. For example, in earlier generations, it was sufficient for scholars to categorize secondary material in many of the biblical books simply as “late” or “postexilic” without adequately trying to determine when, by whom, and why material was incorporated into earlier texts over this 200-year period. That practice is and should be changing as scholars must now take the question of Persian-period influence seriously in the case of virtually every text.

Further, discussion about Persian-period influence on the Bible has largely taken place in isolated clusters. Those working on prophetic texts tend to converse with other specialists in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve. Those working on the development of the Torah and the Former Prophets have had, perhaps, more conversations among specialists about the extent of material from the Persian period in those writings, but much remains to be done in relating those conversations to other parts of the canon. Work on Psalms regarding their composition, collection, and editing needs to be included, as well as narratives whose setting depicts events and characters in the Persian period (Ezra-Nehemiah, Esther). Significantly, the Persian-period provenance of these narratives has come under increased scrutiny, with many now claiming these texts may derive from or were extensively revised during the Hellenistic period. In short, the claims for Persian-period influence or origins have ballooned, but there is a place for sustained discussions across the boundaries of the Tanak. Likewise, there are biblical themes that extend across the Tanak, such as the legacy of monarchic Israel, the burgeoning perspective of the Priestly writers expressed in different textual forms, and the ongoing interpretation of prophecy and in particular of earlier prophetic oracles. Each of these themes was reiterated in the Persian period with all manner of variation. Because the themes are expressed variously in the Scriptures, there is real value to locating them not generically in the Persian period but with specificity in the time between Cyrus and Alexander.

This volume’s distinctiveness is found in 1) the focus upon a specific time period whose importance for biblical studies is becoming increasingly appreciated; and 2) the interdisciplinary approach to topics being discussed in isolation. The editors and contributors hope to spur serious discussion between and among

scholars who approach the Persian period through the Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketubim. The fruit of this discussion will include, among other things, a greater degree of precision when scholars assign texts to the Persian period; many of the essays in this volume employ the designations early Persian, middle Persian, and late Persian in their analysis of biblical texts. These eleven studies provide a more granulated understanding of the historical context from which the Scriptures emerged in Yehud and the corresponding diaspora. Collectively, the studies provide a close picture of the Persian period subdivided into three stages that are both literary and theological in design. To continue this introduction, each essay is described and its salient points distilled.

Employing literary, historical, and linguistic criteria, David Carr's programmatic essay distinguishes between texts produced early in the Persian period and those from later in the period. Carr observes that literarily texts from the beginning of the Persian period would be less likely to feature an emphasis on pentateuchal traditions (particularly Priestly pentateuchal traditions), less inclined to reflect Persian sponsorship (and perhaps more likely to feature extravagant hope for a return to a sovereign Israel), and more likely to be written in archaic Hebrew. By the end of the Persian period and beginning of the Hellenistic period, there appear texts with a more explicit emphasis on Persian sponsorship, links to the combined Pentateuch (with an increasing emphasis on Priestly traditions), and the occasional breakdown of the archaic Hebrew literary dialect, including more mixing of Aramaic and other (especially Persian) isoglosses. Carr asks who might be responsible for the Persian period texts found in the Bible and finds it more likely that priests have accounted for most of the Hebrew textuality in Persian-period Yehud (as opposed to a scenario in which both priests and non-priests shared or transferred control over major normative texts across this period). He concludes that a consistent differentiating feature *across* the Persian period appears to be the move from remnants of scribal diversity and old literary standards at the outset to some breakdown of those scribal standards along with the emergence of Priestly domination of scribalism toward the end of the Persian period.

Whereas Carr develops his essay increasingly along literary-critical lines, Joseph Blenkinsopp takes a more historical-critical approach, especially for dating texts early in the Persian period. Blenkinsopp eschews terminology such as *exilic* and *postexilic* because of what he calls its imprecise parameters. He instead adopts categories that refer to well known, specific, external events of immediate relevance to Jewish communities in Judah and elsewhere, including deportations that can be dated (597, 586, and 582 B.C.E.) and well-documented imperial epochs, namely the "Neo-Babylonian" (597–539 B.C.E.) and the "early Persian" (539–486 B.C.E.). Regarding the latter, Blenkinsopp develops a flexible set of criteria for dating biblical texts to the early Persian period: 1) dates within the text can be synchronized with the chronology for the early years of an Achaeme-

nid king's reign, often by referencing the Behistun trilingual inscription; 2) the text mentions individuals with Persian or Median names, such as the two individuals with the Persian theophoric named Mithredath at Ezra 1:8; 4:7; 3) characteristic features of Persian court life attested in the Greek historians recur in biblical texts; 4) specialized vocabulary such as "the satan" (הַשָּׂטָן Job 1–2 and Zech 3:1–2) and "linen undergarments" (מְכַנְסִים Exod 28:42; Lev 6:3; 16:4; Ezek 44:18) indicates a correlation between Persian royal discourse and biblical texts written in the 6th or 5th century B.C.E. These four elements, taken individually or together, serve to corroborate an early Persian period date for a given text. Blenkinsopp concludes by refining the standard view that prophetic collections such as Jeremiah and Isaiah underwent a process of expansion and reconfiguration during the Persian period. His treatment of Jeremiah is especially noteworthy as he examines prose passages, the Jeremian *Prosareden*, which are generally thought to be later and secondary. Blenkinsopp argues for dating one such passage, Jer 12:14–17, to the Neo-Babylonian period but cautions against attempting a more precise dating such as 582 B.C.E., when the Babylonians made their final assault on Jerusalem. Blenkinsopp notes how a Davidic successor, intimated in *Prosareden* such as Jer 23:5–6 and its parallel in Jer 33:14–16, is referenced in Zechariah (Zech 3:8; 6:12) as well as Jeremiah. He concludes that such multiple attestations provide stronger support for the hypothesis of an early Persian period date for these two Jeremian *Prosareden*.

While Blenkinsopp focuses on prose passages in the book of Jeremiah, oracles that may be dated to the Persian period and ascribed to Jeremian tradents are no less noteworthy. Dalit Rom-Shiloni's essay focuses, among other things, on the notion of the empty land, an "axiomatic myth" that scholars often associate with the Persian period but which, as Rom-Shiloni shows, has its origins early in the 6th century B.C.E. Jeremiah as well as Ezekiel paved the way for notions of the empty land by conceiving of the Babylonian destruction theologically as a divine judgment. The empty land, in fact, was simply one element in Jeremiah's account of an omnipotent God who fights against his own people after they have sinned. As a sole and omnipotent warrior, God causes tremendous transformations to the land and its environs, much beyond what human kings and armies could ever have done. As a result, the cities become heaps of ruins (גְּלִים, Jer 9:10; עֵיִם, Jer 26:18) as destruction is visited upon the temple (Jer 22:5) and the city (Jer 26:17). When the oracles of Jeremiah were rearticulated slightly thereafter, tradents delimited the prophet's scope and focused on one aspect, the empty land of Judah. Rom-Shiloni notes that after Jeremiah, the portrayal of the empty land motif comes to the fore in both the Babylonian exilic prophecies associated with this prophet and the repatriate layers of the Jeremian tradition (Jer 33:10–11, 12–13).

Like Rom-Shiloni, Georg Fischer focuses on oracles in Jeremiah that are prophesied anew in the Persian period, but in the name of another prophet,

namely Zechariah. To begin, Fischer observes that Jeremiah's literary dependence on the Twelve Prophets is extensive. Specifically, Jeremiah draws upon Amos, Hosea, and Micah from the 8th century as well as Nahum, Habakkuk, Obadiah, and Zephaniah from the 7th century. By the early Persian period, however, such literary dependence reverses direction as Zechariah uses Jeremiah as a source. Fischer demonstrates how Zechariah adopts expressions and ideas from the book of Jeremiah only to reverse them. Whereas Jeremiah details Jerusalem's downfall and destruction, Zechariah describes positively the new role of Judah's capital. Linguistically, there are exclusive relationships between Jeremiah and Zechariah such as גֵּאוֹן הַיַּרְדֵּן "the jungle of the Jordan" (Jer 12:5; 49:19; 50:44; Zech 11:3) and אֶרֶץ צָפוֹן "the land of the North" (Jer 3:18; 6:22; Zech 2:10; 6:6, 8). Fischer concludes that the author(s) of Zechariah used motifs and ideas from Jeremiah to effectively reverse the negative portrayal of Jerusalem that is found in Jeremiah. By using the same terms and similar ideas as Jeremiah, but in a different manner and context, Zechariah extends the work of his prophetic predecessor in new directions. In Fischer's view, these developments clearly point to some time within the Persian period, and not simply in terms of Zechariah's composition; in this period Fischer locates both the emergence of the book of the Twelve and the compilation of the book of Jeremiah. Studying the links between Jeremiah and the Twelve allows a glimpse into their concurrent literary processes, likely in the 4th century B.C.E.

Another biblical collection, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, is synonymous with the Persian period, but the essays here by Yigal Levin and Reinhard Achenbach make temporal distinctions that demarcate strata within these two texts. Levin takes up a historical issue embedded in Ezra 4:2: "They approached Zerubbabel and the heads of families and said to them, 'Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of King Esarhaddon of Assyria who brought us here.'" Levin asks, Why would the leaders of Samaria in the early Persian Period, both when addressing the Jewish returnees with their offer to participate in the building of the Temple and in their letter to Artaxerxes denouncing the returnees, choose to present themselves as the descendants of those foreigners whom the Assyrians had deported to Samaria two centuries earlier? If they wanted Zerubbabel and his group to give them a role in the new temple, why emphasize their foreign origins? Levin first establishes the comparability of the Babylonian returnees to Yehud under Zerubbabel's leadership and the inhabitants of Assyrian-ruled Samaria, after its final conquest in 720 B.C.E., when the Assyrians populated the former northern kingdom of Israel with foreign elites as well as craftsmen and farmers. Levin proposes that because the leaders of Samaria engaging Zerubbabel were the descendants of the deportees to Samaria, they saw in the Judahite returnees a group very similar to their ancestors: people sent by the ruling empire to settle a depleted land; they worshipped the local deity but remained somewhat aloof

from the local population, as evidenced a generation or so later in the “mixed marriage crises” of Ezra 9–10 and Neh 13. They may have considered the new arrivals to be natural allies, and as a result they emphasized what they saw as their common characteristics: “We worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of King Esarhaddon of Assyria who brought us here” (Ezra 4:2). Methodologically, Levin’s study exemplifies the value of locating a text such as Ezra 4:2 with precision, that is in the early Persian period, in order to interpret and explain historical references that are embedded in the verse.

Achenbach’s essay focuses on the literary core of Neh 10, which comprises a range of legal measures including endogamy; merchandise sold on the Sabbath and on holy days; seventh-year rules (fallow ground and cancellation of debt); obligatory contributions that are offered in temple worship; the delivery of wood, firstfruits, and firstborn; the tithe of the Levites; and a general commitment never to neglect the temple of God. Because each of these concerns appears as well in the pentateuchal traditions, Achenbach compares the Bible’s first five books with what is found in Neh 10. With each issue, Achenbach differentiates the legal approach in Neh 10 from that found in the pentateuchal sources, be it the Deuteronomic and Deuteronomistic writers (on for example the issue of endogamy), the Covenant Code (on for example the question of seven-year rules), the Priestly writer (on the issues of temple sacrifices and the preeminence of Aaronites or Zadokites), or the writers of the Holiness Code (on for example both Sabbath regulations and the seven-year rules). Achenbach demonstrates that the legal precepts of Neh 10 consistently stand apart from and often predate the pentateuchal regulations, especially those of the Holiness Code. He concludes that H was not established sacred law at the time of Nehemiah, and so H should not be dated earlier than the 2nd half of the 5th century B.C.E., which is when Achenbach locates the original core of the book of Nehemiah. He moreover underscores the value of Neh 10 for dating texts within the Persian period; in the middle of the 5th century, Judean legal discourse was much more fluid than we might imagine. Nehemiah 10 provides a valuable Achaemenid window on the development of Torah and the formation of the Pentateuch.

Situating the formation of the Pentateuch within the Persian period is a thorny matter. Konrad Schmid’s essay on the Pentateuch demonstrates the various ways in which the first five books reflect the Persian Empire as the historical background of their authors and compilers. To start, Schmid reviews the considerable evidence that the Pentateuch is basically a pre-Hellenistic text. Because there is no correlative evidence that the Pentateuch is pre-Persian, he situates the Pentateuch temporally in the Persian period. The primacy of the Persian context is maintained with the understanding that the Pentateuch also contains older texts that date back to the monarchic period. Schmid further considers the methods of linguistic dating that have been brought to bear on the Pentateuch. With a few exceptions, the Pentateuch is written in Classical Biblical Hebrew (CBH), a fact

that has led scholars to associate the text with the preexilic period. To challenge, Schmid argues that composition in CBH as opposed to Late Biblical Hebrew (LBH) indicates a text's *theological* perspective within the biblical tradition and not, or at least not directly, its *historical* date. Schmid, moreover, cautions against using linguistic features *alone* for dating and shows that they should be employed in conjunction with other data and perspectives, such as theological profiles, intertextual links, and geographical as well as archaeological studies. Regarding geography, Schmid notes that the Pentateuch is an "exilic text" inasmuch as the narrative occurs outside of the land of Israel, with the exception of Gen 12–36. To complement this position, Schmid observes that although biblical monotheism did not originate in the exilic period, its articulation in the Pentateuch seems to belong to this period rather than to an earlier one. Next, Schmid presents observations for, first, why the main narrative of P is not likely to predate the early Persian Period and, second, why texts dependent on these portions of P may therefore be confidently assigned to the Persian Period as well. He further notes the plausibility of a date for P in the neo-Babylonian or the Persian period, based on additional factors: linguistic grounds, the literary relationship between P and Ezekiel, and the political geography of P. In the last evidence considered, Schmid examines portions of the Pentateuch with strong affinities to Persian period texts: Gen 24 as it reflects intermarriage concerns in Ezra and Nehemiah, or Numbers as it includes the type of Levitical issues that are emphasized in Chronicles.

To complement Schmid's study, Raik Heckl investigates the Aaronide blessing in Num 6:24–26, with attention as well to the introduction in 6:22–23 and to the theological interpretation that follows in 6:27. Heckl demonstrates that the several verses related to blessing constitute a singular and integral unit in a neatly delineated form. Moreover, the comprehensive concept of blessing reflected in Num 6 arises within Israelite theology as a result of the exile; the blessing revolves around the forgiving grace of the God of Israel. In fact, Num 6:24–26 articulates unconditional forgiveness and reconciliation mediated from the central shrine in words attributed to God. As such, the blessing implies that one could receive salvation only there at the temple of Yhwh and not at the temples of other gods, such as the temple of Yaho in Elephantine or the temple in Beth El, where the heavenly court was once venerated. Only in Jerusalem was there available a blessing that assured reconciliation between Yhwh and the people. The emphasis on a single, central cult, Heckl maintains, is derived from Deuteronomy 12, although in other respects the Aaronide blessing in Numbers clearly departs from Deuteronomic thought by, for example, declaring that the blessing is unconditional and not the effect of Torah observance. In another strategic departure from Deuteronomy, the contemporary Priestly authors of the books from Exodus to Numbers claimed that the blessing mediated via Aaron and his sons is identical to that which Moses received from God. Ultimately, the writers employ Mosaic authority as it is established in Deuteronomy in order to confirm changes they have subsequently

made to sacral concepts and understandings. Hence, Mosaic authority is at issue throughout several consecutive stages of Pentateuchal formation, but its function differs over time. The final stage comes with the presentation of certain Priestly texts, such as Num 6:24–26, at the end of the Persian period.

Richard Bautch's essay, like that of Heckl, correlates Pentateuchal developments involving the figure of Moses with a liturgical text that dates to the late Persian period. The book of Isaiah contains an extended prayer of lament (Isa 63:7–64:11) that has perennially raised questions of historical context. With regard to dating texts to the Persian period – early, middle, or late – the case of Isa 63:7–64:11 is an enigma. Some studies date the passage very early, pre-Persian in fact. An early Persian period dating of 538–520 B.C.E. is argued by other scholars, and still others favor the middle Persian period, or the 5th century. Finally, there is the view that Isa 63:7–64:11 fits best in the context of the late Persian period, specifically the end of the 4th century when Hellenism began to have an impact in Judea. Toward resolving this impasse, Bautch compares data from Isa 63:7–64:11 with pentateuchal developments that took place late in the Persian period during the 4th century B.C.E. A key data point is the figure of Moses, who is featured in Isaiah's prayer of lament and as well in Deut 34, with both texts metonymically associating his greatness with his hand. Because this and related evidence links the two texts closely, one may conclude that they belong to the same late milieu. Tracking the preeminence of Moses allows for a significant correlation between the prayer in Isa 63:7–64:11 and the Pentateuch as it came to light late in the 4th century. The second half of Bautch's essay demonstrates that another distinguishing feature of the lament prayer in Isa 63:7–64:11 is the pervasive influence of Deuteronomic (D) thought and theology. A D perspective prevails in three distinct segments of the prayer (Isa 63:11, 17b–18a; 64:4b–5a). Interestingly, the lament prayer in Isaiah reflects, alongside the D influence, a Priestly (P) viewpoint, and the text shares elements of both the D and P traditions. Building upon the work of Ulrich Berges, Bautch argues that the tradents responsible for the final form of the book of Isaiah understood themselves to be priests of Yhwh for the nations, and as such, these priestly figures are informed by Deuteronomy and its precepts. Moreover, the Priestly circles that integrated the D concepts of Moses and Sinai into Isaiah were simultaneously giving the Pentateuch its shape. Berges thus suggests that the redactional and compositional processes behind the Pentateuch and the prophetic books are closely related, and Bautch concludes that this is plausibly the case as well with Isa 63:7–64:11, a text from the late Persian period.

Providing further perspective on the late Persian period, Jill Middlemas's essay on Esther notes how trends in scholarship have located the narrative historically in either the Persian or Hellenistic periods. She begins with a critical review of the criteria that scholars have used when attempting to date Esther: historical details, linguistic evidence, theological information, and quotations

of and references to other biblical sources. In all such cases, the arguments raised in support of a Hellenistic provenance are not compelling, but neither is a conclusion that Esther should rather be dated to the Persian period. That is to say, Esther presents a dilemma in that both Hellenistic and Persian datings are plausible, but neither is certain enough to rule out the other. To resolve this issue, Middlemas demonstrates that Esther is not a reliable source of historical information, even though the text exhibits historical similitude. Rather, the exilic figure of Mordecai, along with his adopted daughter Esther, serve as a founding myth that provides a sense of identity for the Jewish ethnic minority in the eastern diaspora. The story of these two characters provides authorization for this community. The narrative, in fact, affords this diaspora community a degree of historical continuity *and discontinuity* with biblical Israel as the plot is aligned with the salvation history of ancient Israel. Middlemas thus speaks of “diaspora Esther” to refer to the bulk of the Hebrew (MT) text. On the matter of dating, consequently, Middlemas assigns the core of the narrative, 1:1–9:19, to the Persian period, as Esther shares features in common with diaspora literature of the Persian period, namely Ezra 1–6, and it could very well date from the 5th and 4th centuries. Middlemas separates as Hellenistic additions the focus on Purim in the penultimate chapter of the book (9:20–32) as well as the postscript highlighting the role of Mordecai as a loyal and high-ranking official (10:1–3). Methodologically, she concludes that Esther and similar books should be studied first with attention to genre and redaction before one moves on to questions of provenance and dating.

In sum, this collection of essays forms an arc beginning in the early Persian period and extending to the late 4th century when Hellenism began to transform the Levant. The arc of the essays suggests three stages within the Persian period. The early Persian period begins with Cyrus’s defeat of the Babylonians in 539 B.C.E. and continues until the death of Darius I in 486. At this point the middle Persian period begins and extends to the turn of the century; the terminus may conveniently be designated as 398, if one follows the view that Ezra lived during the reign of Artaxerxes II and arrived in Jerusalem in 398. The late Persian period coincides with the 4th century up until the time of Alexander, who died in 323 B.C.E. Collectively, the studies in this volume reify these three stages and illuminate history’s arc, with respect to the biblical texts and their composition. Examples abound, such as Zech 3–4, which Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer (in an essay not mentioned above) dates to the early Persian period, specifically the 6th century B.C.E. when the historical figures of Joshua and Zerubbabel were leaders in Jerusalem as the temple was about to be rebuilt. Her study renders doubtful those analyses of Zech 3–4 that date the material about Zerubbabel to the middle Persian period and place the priest Joshua even later, at the end of the Persian period. Tiemeyer, along with the other contributors, brings clarity to the dating of texts

in the Persian period. Collectively, they discern a range of criteria for assigning texts to this time with specificity. Regarding the Persian period and our dating the books of the Bible, this volume reflects a work in progress to be extended by scholars in the years to come.

Acknowledgments are in order, beginning with the contributors. The eleven authors engaged the history of the Persian period from fresh angles and produced penetrating studies of the Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketubim. Special gratitude goes to the colleagues who helped to launch this project, which began in sessions of the Persian Period program unit at the international meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature (2012–2014). The steering committee included Richard Bautch, Christine Mitchell, James Nogalski, Konrad Schmid, and Dalit Rom-Shiloni. In addition, James Nogalski contributed to the writing of this introduction. Thank you as well to those at Mohr Siebeck who have had a part in publishing the volume, including the series editors Konrad Schmid, Mark S. Smith, Hermann Spiekermann, and Andrew Teeter, as well as Henning Ziebritzki, the editorial director for Theology and Jewish Studies.

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