

# PETER ACKROYD'S VIEWS ON PERSIAN INFLUENCE

Dr. Kersey Antia, Jan 16, 2020

In *Israel Under Babylon and Persia*, Peter R. Ackroyd (Oxford University Press, 1970) touches many important aspects of the Persian rule in Judea. He sees a conciliatory governing policy in the declarations of Cyrus cylinder and other Persian documents. He sees “sympathy for the religious susceptibilities of Jews and subject peoples,” in various Persian policies but somehow hesitates to call it tolerance as “it is too modern a title”. He does not see tolerance, for example, in Cambyses destroying Egyptian temples, which, however, recent archaeological research has found to be totally untrue, as already noted. In view of the very close relationships between the Persian authorities and Jewish leaders, Ackroyd concedes, it is not unreasonable to find Persian influence on the Jewish thought but he finds it difficult to establish with any certainty precisely at what points such influence may be observed or, as I myself have often maintained, how far outside influences could really turn out to be the normal processes of development in Judaism. While he believes the Old Testament developments need to be studied in themselves, he thinks, albeit rightly, that it is not possible to “fully understand them without taking account of the rich life of the Near East to which they belong. Old Testament language and literature, religion and daily life, belong in that context, and the problem is often to distinguish what is the special character of the Old Testament thought and material in the context of all that it shares with the ancient world of the Near East,” as I myself have tried to bring it out often on this subject. I have often noted how different were the Near Eastern roots of Jewish people from the Indo-Aryan roots of the Persian Zoroastrians and yet I for one was so very surprised to see they had more in common than most, if not all, other peoples in the world. And so it is not unlikely that when they got to know each other they may have been inspired in various ways to acquaint themselves with each other, especially as one of them happened to be their supreme but also quite a cordial and tolerant ruler they were hitherto (or thereafter) never destined to have.

From thereon, as one can imagine, a very cordial bond may have developed between the two – a bond that is reflected in our own times by a Zoroastrian, Zubin Mehta, being hitherto a lifelong director of the Israel Philharmonic.

Even Ackroyd concedes that a clear Persian influence can be seen in the linguistic, but he finds it more difficult to assess Persian influence on the realm of ideas and practices. He concedes it is possible that the

rise in the emphasis on Satan and the demonic powers during the Greek and Roman periods may be due to "the influence of Persian thought" but holds that "precise documentation is difficult to find," which apparently is so true for such remote times. He expresses similar views about the Persian influence on angelology, especially as it "much more fully evolved" after and not during the Persian period itself. Here too he wonders how far this development is due to the Persian impact and "how far to the gradual development and elaborating of ideas already existing within the Old Testament thought," but he does concede the likelihood of "a subtle inter-relationship between the two." It seems the research on the Persian influence had not advanced in his time to the degree it has attained today which may well have hampered Ackroyd from reaching firm conclusions.

Ackroyd, however, deals less with the Persian influence compared to the history of the Persian period. Even so, it reveals how firmly the missions of Nehemiah and Ezra were able to establish Judaism in Israel with the full support of Persian kings. "The great moment of the Persian period as the chronicler saw it," observes Ackroyd, "was when the people accepted the Law afresh as it was read to them by Ezra." Ackroyd adds: "The Jews looked to this moment as a climax in their history. --- It is a joyous way of life (compare Deuteronomy 30), "of the way by which through centuries of opposition and persecution the Jewish community has maintained its existence ----. It is this spirit which breathes in some of the psalms" (pp. 312-2). No wonder therefore that the Jews prayed "to bring upon the Persian empire the favour of the God of Heaven, a title appropriate to the supreme deity," which I have noted stands for Ahura Mazda. (p. 269). Even regarding the Jews in Elephantine in far off Egypt, despite "the whole matter being shrouded in secrecy," declares Ackroyd, but "one point stands out, namely that such a concern for the detail of the worship of a subject community was shown by the Persian authorities." (p. 289). With such a level of popularity of the Persian rule as well as of its agents, Nehemiah and Ezra, it is hard to imagine there were no exchanges on both sides. The recent findings on this subject however do indicate such a possibility which is born out in this work, though it is not complete and more work is called for.