

On the Historical Background of the Book of Esther¹

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This article aims at a reassessment of the historical background of the Book of Esther by presenting a new hypothesis concerning the conflict between Mardochai and Haman.

The following main arguments have been advanced against the historicity of the Book of Esther²:

- 1) A Jew (Mardochai son of Yā'īr, grandson of Šim^Cf and descendant of Qīš the Benjaminite), who was deported in 597 B.C., could not be still active in Xerxes' reign (485-465 B.C.);
- 2) Xerxes' wife was named neither Vashti nor Ester but Αμτροις³.
- 3) The Achaemenid kings married wives only from the seven highest Persian families;
- 4) It is difficult to imagine that a Persian king would tolerate the massacre of thousands of his own people by an intrusive ethnic element.

Regarding (1), it is not impossible that the deportee was originally Šim^Cf and not his grandson Mardochai. Šim^Cf could have lived as early as 597 B.C.

1 This article is an expanded version of a lecture delivered on 25.2.1982 at the University of Haifa. - Abbreviations as in S. SCHWERTNER, Internationales Abkürzungsverzeichnis für Theologie und Grenzgebiete, Berlin - New York 1974 and W. VON SODEN, Akkadisches Handwörterbuch, Wiesbaden 1959-1981, except for the following:

ASN = W. HINZ, Altiranisches Sprachgut der Nebenüberlieferungen, Wiesbaden 1975;

BNF = Beiträge zur Namenforschung;

EO = R. ZADOK, The Elamite Onomasticon, Naples 1984;

OIran. = Old Iranian.

2 See H. BARDTKE, Das Buch Esther (KAT XVII, 4/5), Gütersloh 1963, 246; G. GERLEMAN, Esther (BK 21), Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1975, 37f.; H. RINGGREN, Das Buch Esther (ATD 16), Göttingen³ 1981, 373f.; E. WÜRTHWEIN, Die Fünf Megillot (HAT I, 18), Tübingen 1969, 166f. Cf. L.B. PATON, Esther (ICC), New York - Edinburgh 1908, pass.; J. LEWY, HUCA 14, 1939, 127ff.

3 Herodotus VII, 61.

As for (2-3), it is by no means certain that Αμίστις was the only wife of Xerxes, who like other Persian monarchs might have had concubines as well. It is known that his son and successor, Artaxerxes I, had at least two non-Persian concubines. The first, Ανδία (< Akk. and WSem. 'Antiya), is explicitly designated as a Babylonian. The second, Κοσμορτιδηνή, also originated from Babylon. Her name is hybrid, namely Akkadian with a West Semitic theophorous element⁴. Parysatis, Kosmartidene's daughter, was the wife of Darius II and mother of Artaxerxes II.

It is difficult to refute the fourth argument. This can be done only on the assumption that an armed struggle between two rival parties in the Achaemenian court was used by the author of Esther as a novelistic device to present the struggle between the Jews and their opponents⁵.

The theory of P. JENSEN⁶ that Haman and Zeresh represent the Elamite deities Humban and Kiri(ri)ša respectively is to be rejected also on phonological grounds⁷.

The author of Esther was familiar with the customs, procedures and terminology of the Achaemenian court⁸. It was argued⁹ that the language of this book is not earlier than 300 B.C., which could well be the approximate date of its final edition. However, a slightly earlier date, which still falls within the Achaemenian period, cannot be excluded¹⁰.

The authenticity of the Book of Esther should be examined against the background of Achaemenian Susa. It should be remembered that Susa was one of the Achaemenian capitals. Obviously, the political activity in any Achaemenian capital reflected not only local interests, but also antagonisms that existed in other parts of the vast Achaemenian empire.

As far as we can gather from the pertinent sources, which are very limited, there was no reason for antagonism between the diaspora Jews and their neighbours. Judging by the written evidence from Achaemenian Babylonia, which had close cultural, economic and political ties with Susiana, the Jews did not

4 See P. ROST, OLZ 1, 1898, 356; cf. Israel Oriental Studies 7, 1977, 97.

5 Cf. BARDTKE, loc. cit.

6 WZKM 6, 1892, 64f.

7 Cf. BARDTKE, loc. cit. and ZADOK, ZAW 89, 1977, 268.

8 See Sh. SHAKED, Irano-Judaica, Jerusalem 1982, 292ff. with previous lit.

9 By H. STRIEDL, ZAW 55, 1937, 73ff.

10 See O. EISSFELDT, Einleitung in das Alte Testament, Tübingen 1964, 691.

occupy political or economic positions of any significance (Nehemiah was an exception) during the Chaldean and Achaemenian periods, but rather belonged mostly to the working class¹¹. The tension between Jews and Egyptians in the military colony of Elephantine cannot be used as an analogy, because it was not based on socio-economic grounds, but stemmed from the Egyptian resistance to the Achaemenian authorities whom the Jewish soldiers served¹². Elephantine is an exception in this regard and cannot serve as a model of Jewish-Gentile relations elsewhere in the Achaemenian empire, surely not in its central regions, namely Iran and Babylonia. The diaspora Jews had no political aspirations during the Achaemenian period.

Consequently, there remains - in my opinion which is based on the assumption that the Book of Esther does have an historical background - a possibility that the anti-Jewish agitation in the capital (Susa) reflects political antagonism in the only place where it could have existed and did exist, viz. in Palestine. This is, of course, a purely tentative surmise presented with all due reserve. The rivalry in Palestine was between the Judeans and the 'Samaritans'¹³. The latter were led by an elite which consisted, inter alia, of Susian Elamites¹⁴. It is reported in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah that this elite repeatedly presented its case before the Achaemenian provincial and imperial authorities. The Judeans did the same¹⁵. Such a lengthy dispute before the authorities, especially from the reign of Xerxes ('ḥšwrš) onwards, must have left its impression upon political circles in the Achaemenian capital(s), the more so since the Susian Elamites of Samaria were more likely to gain the sympathy of some Susian courtiers such as Haman. Judging from his name, patronym and surname, Haman could have been of mixed, Elamite-Iranian extraction. *Hmn* suits a derivation from Elam. *Humpan* > *Human*

11 See M.A. DANDAMAYEV, *Rabstvo v Vavilonii*, Moscow-Leningrad 1974, 328, and my *The Jews in Babylonia during the Chaldean and Achaemenian Periods* according to the Babylonian Sources, Haifa 1979, 39.51ff.86f.

12 See B. PORTEN, *Archives from Elephantine: The Life of an Ancient Jewish Military Colony*, Berkeley 1968, 278-301.

13 I avoid here the term 'Samaritans' which has mainly a religious connotation. The inhabitants of Samaria do not seem to have already developed a religious system of their own in the early Achaemenian period.

14 See W.F. ALBRIGHT, *JBL* 40, 1921, 111 with n. 17; 121; A. MALAMAT, *IEJ* 3, 1953, 27f.

15 For the authenticity of the documents contained in the Book of Ezra see E.J. BICKERMAN, *JBL* 65, 1946, 249-275.

(cf. LB *Um-man-né-šu* for Elam. **Humpan-niš*), which shows that the divine name *Humpan* was also used as an anthroponym¹⁶. Haman's patronym, *Hamdātā*, is Iranian¹⁷. There are several cases of mixed (Elamite-Iranian) genealogies in Chaldean and Achaemenian Susa¹⁸. Haman's surname, (hā-) 'ġgāgfī (nisbe of 'ġgāg), which is understandably associated in Esther with the linguistically unrelated royal Amalekite homonym, can be equated with the Elamite name *A/Ag-ga-ga*, recorded as early as the beginning of the second millennium B.C.¹⁹.

Of course, Haman did not refer to the Judeo-Samaritan political struggle. According to the hypothesis presented here, the reason that he refrained from doing so was perhaps because he assumed that a more provocative tactic would be to present the conflict as taking place in a universal framework. After all, this was not the only ethno-political conflict in the Achaemenian provinces, and, for Haman, a purely political line of anti-Jewish propaganda would not have been effective enough. Therefore, perhaps in collaboration with the Samaritan elite, Haman chose to point out what he considered fundamental Jewish disloyalty towards the imperial authorities. This element in Haman's strategy accords well with the accusation expressed in the epistle of the Samaritans to the Achaemenian king, namely that the Judean capital had always been rebellious against imperial authority. This characteristic goes back to the pre-Achaemenian empires, viz. the Assyrian and Babylonian. It should be remembered that the Achaemenian rulers until the beginning of Xerxes' reign inclusive, considered themselves the legitimate heirs of the Chaldean kings of Babylonia. In addition, Sanballat, who was a member of the

16 See M. LAMBERT, RA 68, 1974, 11 with n. 5; cf. EO, §§48,164; BNF NF 18, 1983, 100 with n. 135; 109 with nn. 442-443; 118 with n. 688.

17 Poss. **Hauma-dāta*- "Created by *Hauma*-" (cf. ASN, 120, top) with a monophthongization.

18 E.g., (1) *Hu-pan-a-ah-pi* son of *Man-ka₄-nu-nu* (cf. EO, §§2,48; BNF NF 18, 118 with n. 674); (2) *Ma-nu-nu* (Elam., BNF NF 18, 103 with n. 223) son of *Ū-nu-ka-ka* (OIran. **Hunu-ka*- 'little son' with a reduplicated final syllable); (3) *Si-mi* (MDP 9, 125, 5; prob. = *Si-mi-mi*, 169 r. 26; cf. BNF NF 18, 105 with n. 293; 117 with n. 711) son of *Pir-na* (OIran. **Farnah*-, cf. ASN, 94); (4) *Pir-an-za-an* (Akk.-Elam., see V. SCHEIL, MDP 9, 89 ad loc.) son of *Ir-ma-ak-ka* (OIran. **Armaka*-, cf. I. GERSHEVITCH, *Studia Classica et Orientalia* Antonino Pagliaro Oblata, Rome 1969, 191, s.v. *Irmama*).

19 See ZADOK, BNF NF 18, 99 with nn. 90.91.

Samarian Elite, might have originated from the Assyrian officials who governed Samaria from 722 until after 625 B.C.²⁰

Although the above-mentioned epistle was sent to Artaxerxes (very probably I), there is good reason to think that it did not significantly differ in contents and tenor from the epistle forwarded by the Samaritans to Xerxes, Artaxerxes I's father and predecessor. This epistle was written at the beginning of Xerxes' reign and one may harmonize the account of the Book of Esther about the success of the Jews in the time of Xerxes with the fact that the Samaritans had to write another anti-Judean epistle in Artaxerxes I's time. They did not try to do it again during Xerxes' reign which lasted for more than twenty years presumably for fear of failure. They resumed their struggle only when the new ruler came to power. Another point which may favour a dating of the Book of Esther in the reign of Xerxes/^{hšwrš} is that the date of the Purim festival falls before the end of the winter. This can be harmonized with the fact that Susa served as a winter residence for the Achaemenids. Especially Xerxes would have preferred Susa over Babylon, since the latter had revolted against him at the beginning of his reign. On the other hand, there is good reason to think that Xerxes' successors resided off and on in both Babylon and Susa during the winter months²¹.

Haman combined the Samaritans' accusation with a more specific one, namely that the Jews were a peculiar and particularistic element that did not adhere to the royal law (*dāta*-). Haman incited the court circles to believe that the fact that the Jews were scattered all over the Achaemenian empire made them even more dangerous to the central authority.

I must point out that the working hypothesis proposed above does not solve several cardinal problems and very likely raises new questions. This is inevitable because of the nature of the sources, for the Book of Esther is primarily a tendentious narrative rather than a historical record. Nevertheless, the Book of Esther is not an anachronistic composition. Its authenticity is highly plausible in view of the resemblance of the orthography of its onomasticon to that of the contemporary imperial Aramaic²², and the

20 See ALBRIGHT, JBL 40, 111,121.

21 Cf. A.T. OLMSTEAD, History of the Persian Empire, Chicago 1948, 236f.291f.

22 Cf. I. SCHEFTELOWITZ, Arisches im Alten Testament 1, Berlin 1901, pass.;

genuineness of its Iranian terminology and Persian background. Regarding the historical background, my working hypothesis is that, despite its generalized and sophisticated presentation, the anti-Jewish agitation of Haman was not primarily due to his "dislike of the unlike". The attitude of the Susian courtier might very well have been determined and motivated by the protracted conflict between the Judean repatriates and the Susian element among the elite of Samaria, whose claims and counterclaims were continuously 'lobbied' by the leaders of both parties in the Achaemenian capital(s).

ASN, 118, s.v. *hātaka-; 238, s.v. *tršaiča-; ZADOK, VT 26, 1976, 246f. An article of mine (forthcoming in ZAW) contains several Iranian etymologies for names in Esther.