

Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino, Judaism Before Jesus, Session 4, Persian Influence on the Jewish People

Abstract:

This lecture by Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino examines how **Persian culture and Zoroastrianism** shaped the development of **intertestamental Judaism** and early Christianity. The Persians influenced Jewish society through the **standardization of laws**, the adoption of **Aramaic**, and the elevation of the **priesthood** as a teaching authority. Religiously, contact with Persia likely encouraged a shift toward **dualism**, introducing more complex hierarchies of **angels and demons** and a more defined figure of **Satan**. The text also explores how the **Zoroastrian emphasis on the afterlife** and a final judgment may have accelerated Jewish beliefs regarding the **resurrection of the dead**. While Tomasino acknowledges the difficulty of proving direct origins, he argues that God can use **pagan sources** to reveal truth and refine religious thought. Ultimately, the source highlights the **Elephantine papyri** as historical evidence of how Jewish identity and rituals were becoming **standardized** during this era of foreign domination.

Briefing Document:

Persian Influence on the Development of Judaism

This briefing document analyzes the profound impact of Persian culture and the Zoroastrian religion on the Jewish people during the intertestamental period. Drawing from the analysis provided by Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino, it explores how Persian domination facilitated shifts in Jewish societal structure, language, and core theological beliefs, ultimately shaping the transition from the "Yahwistic" religion of the Old Testament to the Judaism and Christianity of the New Testament era.

Executive Summary

The Persian Empire exerted a transformative influence on Jewish life for over 200 years, acting as a catalyst for cultural and religious evolution. While the Persians were "eclectic" borrowers of culture—adopting architecture and gardens from Babylon and Aramaic as a *lingua franca*—their most significant legacy lies in the ideological "shove" they provided toward religious standardization and the refinement of cosmic dualism.

Key Takeaways:

- **Societal Shift:** In the absence of a Davidic king, the Jewish priesthood rose to prominence, evolving from ritual practitioners into civil leaders and teachers.
- **Standardization of Faith:** Persian administrative policies, particularly under Darius and Artaxerxes, pressured the Jews to standardize their laws and rituals, contributing to the eventual canonization of scripture.
- **Linguistic Evolution:** The adoption of Aramaic as a common tongue and the influx of Persian loanwords (such as *raz* for "mystery" and *dat* for "law") fundamentally altered Jewish expression.
- **Theological Trajectory:** Contact with Zoroastrianism likely encouraged a shift toward ethical dualism. This period saw the "Satan" figure transition from a celestial prosecutor to a personalized "anti-God," the naming and ranking of angels, and the emergence of a belief in individual resurrection and a "lake of fire."

Persian Cultural Eclecticism and Administrative Impact

Persian culture was characterized by its ability to draw elements from diverse civilizations and improve upon them. Originally nomadic, the Persians borrowed heavily from the Babylonians—specifically in architecture and the development of the legendary Persian gardens.

The Linguistic Shift

Although the Persians spoke an Indo-Aryan language, they adopted Aramaic as the official *lingua franca* of the empire to maintain administrative efficiency. This decision had lasting impacts on the Jewish people:

- **Aramaic Adoption:** Jews became part of a broad linguistic union, facilitating trade and travel across the Mediterranean world.
- **Hebrew Bifurcation:** Hebrew became a language of the "intelligentsia" and a nationalistic symbol, while also evolving into a "vulgar tongue" for the common people.
- **Loanwords:** Persian terms became deeply embedded in Jewish thought, including words related to law (*dat*) and spiritual mystery (*raz*).

Political and Social Restructuring

Under Persian rule, the Jewish community lacked a sovereign king, leading to the **increasing prominence of the priesthood**.

- **The High Priest as Leader:** The high priest often served as the native leader of the local Jewish community.
- **Priests as Teachers:** As noted in the book of Malachi, the role of the priest shifted toward being a source of wisdom and teaching, a departure from the purely ritualistic focus of earlier eras.
- **Standardization of Laws:** Darius I required the standardization of local laws throughout the empire. This administrative pressure likely pushed the Jews toward the solidification of their own religious laws and the eventual canonization of the Hebrew Bible.

Archaeological Evidence: The Elephantine Papyri

The Elephantine Papyri (dating 495–405 BC) provide a rare window into the lives of a Jewish military colony in Egypt during the Persian era. These documents reveal a lack of standardization before Persian reforms took full effect.

Text Type	Insight into Jewish Life
Marriage Contracts	Revealed that prenuptial agreements (<i>ketuvah</i>) were standard; divorce and intermarriage with pagans were common.

Passover Papyrus	A letter from Jerusalem leadership (likely inspired by Darius II) instructing Egyptian Jews on the proper observance of Passover.
Petition to Bacchus	Shows Egyptian Jews built a temple and sacrificed animals (goats) in Egypt, leading to conflict with locals and a eventual compromise to only sacrifice grains.

The Religious Impact: Judaism and Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrianism, the state religion of Persia founded by the prophet Zoroaster, shares significant "common ground" with Judaism. Both are forms of ethical monotheism where worship is tied to a code of behavior.

The Evolution of Dualism

The Old Testament generally suppresses spiritual warfare to emphasize that there is only one God. However, the New Testament is a dualistic religion featuring a cosmic struggle between good and evil.

- **Ahura Mazda vs. Angra Mainyu:** Zoroastrianism posits a "Great Wise God" (Ahura Mazda) in conflict with an evil spirit (Angra Mainyu). While not equal, they are locked in a real struggle.
- **The Transition of Satan:** In early Old Testament texts, "the satan" is a title for an "adversary" or a "prosecuting attorney" (as seen in Job). By the late Persian era (1 Chronicles 21:1), "Satan" appears for the first time as a proper name, moving toward the New Testament concept of the Devil.

Angelology and Demonology

The intertestamental period saw a massive expansion in the complexity of the spiritual world:

- **Named Spirits:** While the Old Testament avoids naming angels, the Persian-era book of Daniel and the later 1 Enoch introduce names (Michael, Gabriel), ranks, and specializations.

- **Demonic Hierarchy:** The idea of demons having names, ranks (like "Prince of the Powers of the Air"), and the ability to possess or tempt humans appears to have been encouraged by contact with Zoroastrian "minions" of evil.

Life After Death and Resurrection

The Old Testament is largely silent on individual life after death, focusing instead on the shadowy realm of *Sheol* or the national restoration of Israel.

- **Individual Resurrection:** By the end of the Persian period (Daniel) and into the era of the Pharisees, belief in individual resurrection became central.
- **The Lake of Fire:** Zoroastrianism teaches that at the end of time, the righteous pass through a purifying lake of fire, while the evil are destroyed. This imagery is mirrored in the New Testament book of Revelation.

Conclusion: The "Contact Conundrum"

The influence of Persia on Judaism does not necessarily imply "contamination" or apostasy. Rather, it suggests a "trajectory" where existing Jewish ideas were encouraged and refined through cultural dialogue. As Dr. Tomasino notes, "God can use pagans if he chooses to do so, to teach truth to his people." The 200 years of Persian domination served as a vital incubator for the beliefs that would eventually define the New Testament world.

Study Guide:

Study Guide: The Persian Empire and its Impact on Ancient Judaism

This study guide examines the history of the Persian Empire as presented in Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino's "Judaism Before Jesus." It details the rise of the Achaemenid dynasty, its administrative and religious policies, its interactions with the Greek world, and its pivotal role in the restoration of the Jewish people and the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

I. The Origins of the Medes and Persians

The Persians and Medes were Indo-Aryan nomadic horsemen who migrated into the Middle Eastern lands, settling in what is now Iran circa 1500 BC. While the Bible often links them together, they were distinct but closely related groups.

- **The Median Empire:** Preceding the Persians in dominance, the Medes became major international players around 836 BC. Under the leader Cyaxares, they helped overthrow the Assyrian Empire and established a realm larger than Babylon, though less populated.
- **The Persian Transition:** Originally vassals of the Medes, the Persians were culturally similar but possessed a distinct language and writing system. In 550 BC, Cyrus the Great revolted against the Median King Astyages, transforming the Median Empire into the Persian Empire.

II. The Era of Expansion: Cyrus the Great (560–530 BC)

Cyrus the Great is characterized as a master of propaganda and a practitioner of cultural and religious tolerance. Rather than displacing local rulers, he often maintained them as client kings to ensure loyalty.

The Conquest of Babylon (539 BC)

Cyrus portrayed himself as a "liberator" rather than a conqueror. He took advantage of the unpopularity of Nabonidus, the last king of Babylon, who had alienated his subjects by attempting to replace the worship of the chief god Marduk with the moon goddess, Sin.

- **The Cyrus Cylinder:** A monumental inscription where Cyrus claims that Marduk chose him to restore the god's proper place.
- **The Fall of the City:** Babylon was taken with little bloodshed, possibly through the diversion of a river or assistance from the priests of Marduk who opened the gates.

Impact on Judaism

Cyrus's policies allowed Jewish captives to return to Jerusalem, a move described in Isaiah 45 as the work of the "anointed of the Lord."

- **Restoration:** He sent Sheshbazar, a member of the royal family, to Jerusalem to begin rebuilding.

- **Funding:** Cyrus likely provided state funds for the initial rebuilding of the city and the temple foundations.

III. The Administrative Genius of Darius the Great (522–486 BC)

Following the brief and somewhat intolerant reign of Cambyses (who conquered Egypt), Darius I consolidated the empire through unprecedented administrative reforms.

Key Reforms and Achievements

Reform	Description
Satrapies	Reorganized the empire into 20 administrative districts, each governed by a local native.
Coinage	Standardized currency by creating the "derrick" and fixing the value ratio of gold to silver.
Postal System	Created a courier system using horse riders that served as the model for the modern Pony Express.
Law Codification	Mandated that ethnic groups codify and standardize their own traditional laws.

Relationship with Judah

Darius sent Zerubbabel, a descendant of David, to Jerusalem. Under Darius's patronage, the Second Temple was finally completed in 515 BC. His insistence on legal standardization likely contributed to the eventual canonization of Jewish scriptures.

IV. Xerxes and the Greco-Persian Wars

Xerxes (485–465 BC) transitioned the empire toward a more ruthless and religiously assertive stance.

- **Conflict with Greece:** Xerxes led famous incursions into Greece, including the Battle of Thermopylae (against the 300 Spartans) and the naval Battle of Salamis. Despite his victories, the Persians were ultimately defeated at the Battle of Plataea (479 BC).

- **Religious Policy:** Unlike his predecessors, Xerxes demonstrated limits to Persian tolerance. The "Daiva Inscription" records his destruction of sanctuaries dedicated to "daiva" (demons) in favor of the worship of the Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazda.
- **The Esther Connection:** While the Book of Esther is set during his reign, historians note difficulties reconciling the biblical Esther with his historical wife, the formidable Amestris.

V. The Cultural Phase and the Fall of the Empire

Under Artaxerxes I and his successors, the empire entered a "cultural phase" focused on architecture and internal arts rather than conquest.

- **Ezra and Nehemiah:** Artaxerxes I commissioned Ezra to bring the Mosaic law to Jerusalem and supported Nehemiah in rebuilding the city walls.
- **Decline:** The later Achaemenid period was marked by incompetence, palace intrigues, and the rising power of royal eunuchs (such as Bagoas).
- **The End of the Dynasty:** The empire fell in 332 BC to Alexander the Great after the defeat of Darius III.

VI. Subsequent Persian Legacies

Though the Achaemenid Empire fell, Persian culture and Zoroastrianism persisted through subsequent iterations:

1. **Parthian Empire (247 BC–242 AD):** Founded by the Parni tribe, they styled themselves after the Achaemenids and frequently clashed with Rome.
2. **Sassanid Empire (224–651 AD):** Known as the Second Persian Empire, it was a self-consciously Zoroastrian state where Jewish communities thrived until the Muslim conquests.

Review Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2-3 sentences based on the provided text.

1. How did the relationship between the Medes and the Persians change in 550 BC?
2. Why was the Babylonian king Nabonidus unpopular with his own people?
3. What was the "propaganda war" conducted by Cyrus the Great prior to his entry into Babylon?
4. How did Darius the Great standardize the economy of the Persian Empire?
5. What was the role of the "satrapies" in Darius's government?
6. According to the text, what happened at the Thermopylae Pass?
7. How did the religious policy of Xerxes differ from that of Cyrus the Great?
8. What evidence exists regarding the destruction of Athens by Xerxes?
9. Why were eunuchs, such as Bagoas, often given positions of high authority in the Persian court?
10. In what way did the Sassanid Empire provide a beneficial environment for the Jewish community?

Quiz Answer Key

1. Originally, the Persians were vassals of the Median Empire, which was larger and more established. In 550 BC, Cyrus the Great revolted against the Median King Astyages, successfully displacing him and transforming the realm into the Persian Empire.
2. Nabonidus was a religious reformer who disenfranchised the traditional priests of the chief god Marduk. He instead promoted the worship of the moon goddess, Sin, and neglected the city while taking long absences, which angered the common people and the religious elite.
3. Cyrus sent messengers to Babylon portraying himself as a friend of the Babylonian gods and a "liberator" rather than a conqueror. He claimed that the god Marduk had personally asked him to rescue the people from the incompetent and impious Nabonidus.

4. Darius standardized the economy by introducing a single coin called the "derrick" for use throughout the entire empire. He also fixed the value ratio of gold to silver, ensuring that citizens and traders knew exactly what their currency was worth.
5. Darius divided the empire into 20 administrative districts called satrapies, each headed by a native governor. This allowed the people to report to leaders who spoke their language and understood their specific culture, while the governors reported directly to the king.
6. At the Thermopylae Pass, a small troop of 300 Spartan soldiers held off the advancing Persian army for several days. This delay allowed the Athenians enough time to evacuate their city before the Persians arrived.
7. While Cyrus was known for broad religious tolerance and funding various native cults, Xerxes was more intolerant of what he deemed "demon" worship. He destroyed sanctuaries of the "daiva" and mandated the proper worship of the Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazda.
8. While Greek historians claimed that Xerxes burned Athens to the ground, there is no archaeological evidence to support the total destruction of the city. Such wanton destruction would have been largely out of character for the Persians, who generally preferred to preserve local structures.
9. Eunuchs were trusted with great responsibility because they could not father children and therefore could not establish their own rival dynasties. This perceived lack of long-term political ambition made them ideal candidates for sensitive roles like royal cupbearers or harem guards.
10. The Sassanid Empire was a self-consciously Zoroastrian state that practiced a high degree of religious tolerance. Under this "umbrella of protection," the Jewish community in the region of Persia thrived and engaged in significant intellectual and cultural growth.

Essay Questions

1. **The Master of Image:** Analyze the methods Cyrus the Great used to win the loyalty of conquered nations. Contrast his "liberator" persona with the more traditional "conqueror" model of the Assyrians and Babylonians.
2. **Administrative Legacy:** Evaluate the long-term impact of Darius the Great's reforms—such as the postal system, standardized coinage, and legal codification—on the stability of the Persian Empire and subsequent civilizations.
3. **The Divergence of History and Scripture:** Discuss the historical difficulties in reconciling the biblical account of Esther with known Persian history, specifically regarding the identity of Xerxes' wife and the nature of Persian court life.
4. **Greco-Persian Conflict:** Explore the reasons why the smaller Greek armies were frequently able to defeat the much larger Persian forces. Consider factors such as training, armor, tactics (like the phalanx), and soldier motivation.
5. **The Restoration of Yehud:** Detail the specific ways in which Persian kings influenced the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the development of Judaism. How did Persian imperial policy indirectly lead to the standardization of Jewish law?

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Achaemenid:** The primary dynasty of the Persian Empire, named after the ancestor Achaemenes, to whom kings like Darius claimed descent.
- **Ahura Mazda:** The "Great God" of Zoroastrianism, frequently cited by Persian kings like Xerxes and Darius as the source of their authority.
- **Artabanus:** The commander of the royal bodyguard who assassinated Xerxes in 465 BC.
- **Bagoas:** A powerful royal eunuch and "kingmaker" who was involved in the assassinations and installations of several later Persian emperors.

- **Behistun Inscription:** A monumental multi-language inscription made by Darius the Great that allowed for the decipherment of Persian history and lineage.
- **Cyrus Cylinder:** A clay cylinder containing an inscription in which Cyrus the Great justifies his conquest of Babylon and outlines his policy of repatriating displaced peoples.
- **Daiva:** An Indo-Aryan term for divine spirits; in the Zoroastrian religion of the Persians, these were regarded as demons.
- **Derrick:** A gold coin introduced by Darius the Great as part of his effort to standardize the imperial economy.
- **Indo-Aryan:** A group of peoples, including the Medes and Persians, who migrated from northern regions into the Middle East around 1500 BC.
- **Nabonidus:** The last king of the Babylonian Empire, whose religious reforms and absence from the city made him unpopular and facilitated Cyrus's conquest.
- **Satrapy:** One of the 20 administrative provinces created by Darius the Great to manage his vast empire through local governors.
- **Sheshbazar:** A member of the Jewish royal family sent by Cyrus the Great to Jerusalem to initiate the rebuilding of the temple.
- **Zoroastrianism:** The monotheistic/dualistic religion of the Persian Empire that emphasized the worship of Ahura Mazda and influenced Jewish thought during the Second Temple period.