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Book Review: Cyrus the Great: Life and Lore ed. by M. Rahim Shayegan

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Shayegan, M. Rahim (ed.). *Cyrus the Great: Life and Lore*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018. Pp. vii, 264. \$24.95 (pb.). ISBN 9780674987388.

Cyrus the Great: Life and Lore, consists of fourteen wide-ranging essays by a cast of distinguished scholars. They offer a representation of Cyrus' impact on his own age, his legacy, and his reception history.

An overview of the topics treated in this work includes: (1) Elamo-Persian acculturation; (2) Mesopotamian antecedents of Cyrus' religious policy; (3) Cyrus' Baupolitik, and the genesis of Persian imperial art; (4) the Babylonian exile of the Jews; competing Biblical references to Cyrus, and his influence on the return of Judean exiles; (5) Cyrus' exalted but conflicted image in the later Greco-Roman world; (6) his reception and function in the genealogical construct of the Hellenistic and Arsacid periods; and (7) Cyrus' enigmatic evanescence in the Sasanian and Muslim traditions.

Cyrus' decree allowing the Jews to return to the land of Judah to reconstruct the Temple (Ezra 1:1-4; 2 Chronicles 36:22-33) reflects his magnanimous policy as an archetypal prince. Deutero-Isaiah, Ezra, and Chronicles refer to Cyrus as a divine instrument of the Israelite God for benevolently allowing the return of some Judean exiles and the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. Isaiah 44:28 and 45:1 refer to Cyrus as "God's messiah."

Schniedewind's essay defines the vacuum that the Babylonian exiles (led by Ezra and Nehemiah) filled as a "post-collapse society" in the wake of the destruction wrought by Nebechadnezar in the year 586 BCE, as chronicled by the prophet Jeremiah in Lamentations. Schniedewind cites the statistical data of archeological excavations documenting the destruction of Israel to propose the thesis that the leadership role of the messiah was projected upon Cyrus de facto with the encouragement of the Levitical priesthood, who sought to displace the monarchal Davidians as the leaders of the Jews.

Sweeney's outstanding essay rightly suggests caution about the possibility that Cyrus was promoting the Levitical priesthood to supersede the Davidian royal line as leaders. Sweeney makes clear that among the later 12 Prophets, especially Zechariah and Haggai, the Archaemenid house was regarded with a hostility that had to be overcome. Zechariah and Haggai internalized the then historical turmoil occasioned by the war campaigns of Darius. The minor prophets embrace a Davidian monarchal independence and the overthrow of Persian rule. Zechariah thus entered into a genre of apocalyptic literature forecasting the ultimate triumph of the Hebrew monotheistic God. Whereas Deutero-Isaiah calls for submission to the Persian empire, Zechariah does not. Zechariah and Haggai differ from Isaiah with regard to the new political turmoil of their time – turmoil that centered on whether God was about to depose the Archaemenid monarchy with a hoped-for restoration of the Davidic dynasty. The prophets Joel and Micah give voice to God's longer-term plan for the reappearance of a Davidic messianic King who will defeat the nations that oppress Jerusalem, thereby achieving the messianic kingdom so that all may come to recognize the G-d of Israel as world Sovereign on Mt. Zion. Haggai calls for the establishment of Zerubabel ben Shealtiel, the grandson of Jehoiachin ben Jehoiakim, the last ruling monarch of the Judean dynastic house of David that is referred to as "God's signet ring." That prophecy serves as a paradigm for the cryptic call for the restoration of the royal house of David. Such views challenge the Deutero-Isaiah call for the recognition of Cyrus as the only messiah in God's destined plan in history to

help rebuild God's Temple.

My one caveat with this excellent scholarly collection is the absence (except for Sweeney's essay) of the role that Cyrus plays in Rabbinic lore and history. Midrash Esther Rabbah attributes significance to Cyrus in God's plan by allowing the Jewess Esther to have offspring with the Persian King Ahashuerus, a mysterious and hushed lineage of Cyrus himself. A pattern emerges of contradictory views about Cyrus in the Jerusalem vs. Babylonian Talmudim. While the Palestinian Rabbis in the Jerusalem Talmud tend to offer a favorable portrait of Cyrus, the rabbis of the Babylonian Talmud often present a more ambivalent view. For example, Tractate Rosh Hashanah 3-4a notes that Cyrus only allowed the 2nd Temple to be made out of wood so that it could be easily destroyed if the Jews later rebelled against him. Elsewhere, in Song of Songs Rabbah 5:5 it is noted that when Cyrus realized that the Babylonian cities had become desolate as a consequence of the Jews returning to Zion, Cyrus revoked his edict and forbade Jews to emigrate, offering enticements of a higher material standard of living for them not to return. Rabbinic texts commenting on Cyrus such as Pesikta Rabbati 35, Rosh Hashanah 3b, and Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 20 are not mentioned, and the book would have been enhanced by a chapter on the image of Cyrus in Rabbinic history and lore.

This book is heartily recommended for scholars and students of ancient Near Eastern studies, biblical history, ancient archeology, and those interested in Cyrusiana and "the Cyrus effect" throughout the history of Jewish messianism.

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