

DARIUS AS “KING OF ASSYRIA” (EZRA 6:22)

Jason M. Silverman
University of Helsinki

In a paragraph concerning the celebration of Passover, Darius is given the surprising title of “King of Assyria” (Ezra 6:22).¹ This has given most commentators pause.² A number of scholars have seen it as a vague reference to imperial powers and the Levantine experience of them,³ while Levin (2022: 229) argues that it merely evinces a lack of historical basis on the part of the author. The problem with all these is that it is typically Babylon, not Assyria, that is used within biblical tradition as a metonym for empire.⁴ A handful have suggested more specific references intended by the title. Galling (1954: 202) thought it was written by the Chronicler, and so referred to the Seleucid Empire. Blenkinsopp (1988: 133) suggested it was a reference to Hezekiah’s Passover, which saw a deliverance from Assyria. More recently, Becking (2018: 96) appealed to the Cyrus cylinder for precedent as a Persian claim to the Assyrian throne.

While it is true that the Cyrus cylinder refers to Ashurbanipal, it merely calls him “a king who preceded me”, without the title of “king of Assyria” (line 43). It is also true, in my opinion, that the Persians promoted an ideology of the succession of empires, in which they succeeded the Assyrians in world rule (Silverman 2012: 153–171). This is different, however, from taking the title “King of Assyria”. The Achaemenid monarchs indeed used the title “King of Babylon” – both in longer titularies in Babylonia and as a brief experiment with Cambyses⁵ – but I am not aware of their using the title “King of Assyria”.

A fact that appears to have gone unnoticed in this discussion yet may be relevant is the following. The satrapy in which Yehud is situated is called *Abar Naharā* in Aramaic and *Eber nāri* in Akkadian, but in Old Persian it was known as *Aθurā* (i.e. Assyria). This is apparent from

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2 Grabbe (1998: 25) calls it “puzzling”. Frahm (2017: 560) suggested it was merely a “more positive view of Assyria”. Myers (1965: 50) characterizes it as a “loose use” of the term Assyria.

3 Williamson (1985: 85–86) noted that Persia saw itself as a successor to Assyria, but regards it as merely a stereotype for foreign empire. Becker (1990: 41) considers it a “nachexilische Chiffre für die jeweilige Großmacht”. Fleischman (1998: 45) called it a “metonymic phrase” for all of Israelite history. Fried (2015: 287) sees it as a metaphor for “the source of all the Judeans’ difficulties ‘until today’ (Neh. 9:32)”. Frisch (2016: 42) holds it (with Ezra 5:13 and Neh. 13:6) to be an undifferentiated negative foreign empire.

4 E.g. Sals 2014. See, however, Holloway 2014. Later, Judith does conflate the two empires with “Nebuchadnezzar the Assyrian”.

5 On the use of the title “King of Babylon”, see Kuhrt & Sherwin-White 1987: 72–73, 75; Rollinger 1999; on the co-regency with Cambyses as King of Babylon, see Zawadzki 1996.

the Akkadian and Old Persian versions of DSf (line 23 of Akkadian and line 32 of OP; Scheil 1929: 6–9, 18, 27).⁶ Since the previous narrative in Ezra 6 concerned opposition within the satrapal administration and Darius’s supposed support for the temple from satrapal resources, one could read this as a reference to Darius’s primacy in the specific contexts that had caused obstacles. As in other narratives where officials were hostile but the king benevolent (Nehemiah, Daniel, Esther), this is evocative of court dynamics. One might imagine a setting in the satrapal court, with a contrast between the satrap as viceroy and the actual king. We do in fact have hints of possible Judaeans within the satrapal administration (e.g. Gedaliah in BM 74554).⁷ One might, therefore, see this as a reflection of similar power plays within the mini-satrapal court of *Abar Naharā*. This is not to say that the satrap himself had an honorary title of king of Assyria, as suggested by Batten (1913: 154).

One might object that the satrapy is usually referenced by its Aramaic term, rather than the Old Persian. This is true, but the king is usually referenced as Persian, so this is atypical usage, however one explains it.

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⁶ It is unclear whether the satrapy included the old Assyrian heartland or not. Compare Dandamaev 1987; Henkelman & Stolper 2009: 300–301; Jacobs 2011; Jacobs 2017: 14.

⁷ Stolper 1989: 286; Alstola 2020: 224–225.

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