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THE PERSIAN NAMES IN ESTHER AND
THE RELIABILITY OF THE HEBREW TEXT

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I N his recent Anchor Bible volume on Esther, C. A. Moore has taken up the question of the personal names, purportedly Persian, occurring in the book. He concluded "most of the personal names are probably Iranian in origin," but their original forms might not be easily discovered since "Successful analysis of personal names presupposes . . . their reasonably accurate transmission" and we must "have reservations about the Hebrew consonantal text of Esther" on the basis of divergencies in the versions.[1]

I. *The Evidence of the Versions*

Moore has supplied a chart to display each name as given in MT, LXX, a manuscript influenced by the Hexapla (MS 93), the "Lucianic" text, Josephus, the Old Latin, and the Vulgate. Three examples, amended from Moore, demonstrate its variety:

Esth 1:10 MT *zēthar* LXX *abataza* MS 93 *zarath* OL *zatai* Vg *zarath*

Esth 1:10 MT *karkas* LXX *tharaba* MS 93 *acharbas* OL *tharas* Vg *carchas*

Esth 9:7 MT *ʾaspāthāʾ* LXX *phasga* MS 93 *aeiphatha* Lucian *pharna* Vg *espatha*

The chart shows the text-types nearest to the MT are those dating from the period when the Hebrew consonants are considered to have been set. The Vulgate has slight differences of vocalization (e.g. *bazatha* for MT *bizthāʾ*) and a transposition (*zarath* for *zether*). The Hexaplar-influenced MS 93 (to which MS 53 can be added) has some more striking variants, as can be seen above. The Old Latin copies vary among themselves, sometimes being closer to MT than to LXX, e.g. *narbona* for *ḥarbônāʾ* at 1:10, LXX *tharra*. The 'Lucianic' text, where available, and the LXX show the widest divergences when placed beside MT. In theory these two text types could reach back to a time before the Hebrew text was standardized, before A.D. 70, and so supply

[1] C. A. Moore, *Esther* (AB 7B; Garden City: Doubleday, 1971) xliv.

Greek forms representative of Hebrew originals that might be superior to the MT tradition. To prove such superiority is almost impossible, however. Looking beyond Moore's list to the critical apparatus in standard LXX editions, especially R. Hanhart's Göttingen volume, we discover the major manuscripts often vary in their writing of the name, though some similarity survives in each. Thus for *bizthā°* in 1:10 LXX B and S have *mazan*, S^{ca} *bazan*, for A *bazea*; for *°abagthā°* LXX B has *zatholtha*, A has *zēbathatha*; in 9:7 for *°aspātha°* LXX B has *phasga*, A⁺ *phaga*, S*⁺ *phiaga*; for *wayzāthā°* in 9:9 LXX B gives *zabouthaion*, S⁺ *zaboudethan*, A^z*zabougatha*, while the Sahidic Coptic has *phagan* and *zabouda* for these two. Simple scribal errors within the Greek can be detected, confusion of uncial *alpha* and *delta*, for example, producing LXX B *pharadatha*, S⁺ *pharaatha* for MT *pōrātha°*, 9:8. Other errors might be perceived were earlier copies of Greek Esther to be found. (Damage to the Chester Beatty copy of the early third century A.D., Göttingen no. 967-68, robs us of its witness to the lists of names.) Confusion may have arisen, too, in the transfer of strange names from the Hebrew to the Greek script, as Moore observed. When allowance is made for these factors, there would still seem to be elements in the Greek that might support arguments in favour of other Hebrew forms than the MT's. Yet the failure of LXX to render all the names in 1:14 (MT), and the technical terms in 8:10 that include a good Hebrew reproduction of a Persian word, gives grounds for treating its evidence with some scepticism.

II. *The Sources for Old Persian Names*

Instead of questioning Hebrew spellings in the uncertain light of LXX, it may be more profitable to continue the search for Persian parallels. The quest has been pursued by scholars over the past century; earlier results were summarized by L. B. Paton in his ICC volume on Esther (1908), 66-71, and Moore gives references to later studies (*Esther*, xliv n. 51). The older comparisons relied upon F. Justi's *Iranisches Namenbuch* which collected the names preserved in literature. The recovery of ancient texts, often rich in personal names, has advanced the study of Old Persian since Justi's compilation of 1895. A small proportion of these texts are written in the Persian cuneiform syllabary on imperial monuments and seals; the majority are in other scripts. Part of the administrative archives of Persepolis, written in Elamite cuneiform upon clay tablets during the years 509 to 458 B.C. is the principal source.[2] Their records indicate a mixed population at the court, so that any name in them may be Old Persian, East Persian, Median, or non-Iranian, especially Elamite. Further problems of identification arise because the scribes had to reproduce Iranian phonemes with their differently stocked Elamite syllabary. By analysis of some 1900 names, M. Mayrhofer has established the patterns followed. As a result, Old Persian forms can be

[2]Published by G. G. Cameron, *Persepolis Treasury Tablets* (OIP 65; Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1948), 114 tablets, and R. T. Hallock, *Persepolis Fortification Tablets* (OIP 92; Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1969), 2087 tablets.

projected for many of the names with equivalents in contemporary or later Persian sources. Even so, ambiguity persists over a considerable number, and scholars well-qualified to comment upon them have stressed how much remains unknown about Old Persian names, both the newly recovered and the long known ones.[3]

Equally careful investigation is required for the examples supplied by Akkadian cuneiform texts, where similar problems arise.[4]

Beside the cuneiform scripts, the Aramaic alphabet was current in the capital and the provinces. Papyrus and leather documents from Egypt continue to contribute to the Persian onomasticon.[5] Recently R. A. Bowman's edition of Aramaic annotations on stone pestles and mortars has added further names in this script in the Persian homeland. Bowman has examined the methods of transliterating Persian names into Aramaic on these objects, noting similarities and contrasts with rabbinic reflections of Middle Persian in the Talmud.[6] A smaller number of Persian names in Aramaic letters are found on monuments, seals, and coins from every region of the Persian Empire.[7]

Progress in the understanding of Old Persian has increased in recent years, therefore, yet the interpretation of personal names is still far from complete; the opacity of foreign scripts, and the limited amount of Old Persian vocabulary recovered hinder the work.[8]

It follows that a name claiming to be Persian but without immediate explanation should not be treated as suspect unless very strong grounds exist; the likelihood of an unknown Persian original should be the first consideration. In the case of the names in Esther we have suggested the ways the Greek versions vary arise from inner Greek scribal failures rather than divergent Hebrew exemplars. Here we take issue with the attitude adopted, though not without qualification, by C. A. Moore in his commentary and in a

[3]M. Mayrhofer, *Onomastica Persepolitana* (Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse, Sitzungsberichte, 286; Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences, 1973), with numerous alternative meanings and uncertainties; see also E. Benveniste, *Titres et noms propres en iranien ancien* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1966) 75-99, and D. N. MacKenzie's review of Hallock in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 34 (1971) 608-10.

[4]See recently R. Zadok, "On the Connections between Iran and Babylonia in the Sixth Century B.C.," *Iran* 14 (1976) 76-78 and "Three Iranian Words in Late Babylonian Documents," *BO* 33 (1976) 5-6.

[5]P. Grelot (*Documents araméens d'Egypte* [Littératures anciennes du Proche-Orient, 5; Paris: Cerf, 1972] 460-502, 506-8) explains the majority of them.

[6]R. A. Bowman *Aramaic Ritual Texts from Persepolis* (OIP 21; Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1970); the transcription methods are described on pp. 64-65.

[7]Beside the standard handbooks, see F. Vattioni, "I sigilli, le monete e gli avori aramaici," *Augustinianum* 11 (1971) 46-69 for Aramaic seals.

[8]See R. G. Kent, *Old Persian* (AOS 33; 2d ed.; New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1953); W. Brandenstein, M. Mayrhofer, *Handbuch des Altpersischen* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1964); W. Hinz, *Neue Wege in Altpersischen* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1973).

survey of the historical background to the book of Esther. After observing the confusion his table of versions displays, he continued:

> The nub of the problem in Esther, then, is that we are not always very confident about the accuracy, or essential correctness, of the Hebrew spelling of many of the non-Hebrew personal names. Consider, for example, the names of our hero and heroine. While agreeing that the Hebrew word *Mord^akay* represents a more corrupt spelling of *Marduka* than does that the Greek *Mardochaios*, scholars do not agree on whether the Hebrew *str*, "Esther," derives from the Persian *stara*, "star," or from the Babylonian Ishtar, the goddess of love.[9]

Agreeing that the vowels of *Mardochaios* may be more exact than the Hebrew form, we would stress that the accuracy of the Hebrew *str* is not affected by this. Moore continued to show the proposed etymologies, neither need be right. Moore continued to show "exactly how complicated and confusing all this can be" by setting beside *parshandātha*, the name of a son of Haman, Greek renderings from three major LXX manuscripts: S has *pharsannestain*, A has *pharsanestan*, B has *pharsan* and *nestain*.[10] This was an example of "puzzling variations" to be found for "many, if not most, of the non-Jewish names in Esther."

The example chosen, Parshandatha, is unfortunate for Moore's case. In the ICC volume on Esther, published in 1908, L. B. Paton had already noted the existence of the name on an ancient cylinder seal. This cylinder is one of a group bearing typically Achaemenid designs with the owners' names in Aramaic letters. It is currently displayed in the Persian Gallery of the British Museum (Western Asiatic Antiquities Department, BM 89152), and has been included in the standard collections of Aramaic inscriptions and of seals bearing west Semitic legends.[11] The text reads *htm pršndt br 'rtdt* "seal of Parshandātha, son of Artadātha." Only in lacking the final *aleph* does this differ from the name in Esther. With this before us, there is hardly any reason to doubt the accuracy of the MT and the corruption of the Greek manuscripts.

Until a thorough analysis of all West Semitic transcriptions of Persian names has been undertaken, it would be rash to claim every strange name in Esther as a viable rendering of an Iranian one. However, it is worth listing a few that appear likely, with explanations proferred although they are far from certain.

Hammedatha, the name of Esther's father (Esth 3:1) causes Iranian scholars little hesitation. In the Aramaic ritual texts from Persepolis it occurs as *'mdt;* in the Persepolis Fortification Tablets it is written *ha-ma-da-da*. The Old Persian form surmised is **amadāta*, "strongly made."[12]

[9] C. A. Moore, "Archaeology and the Book of Esther," *BA* 38 (1975) 77.

[10] "Archaeology and the Book of Esther," 77; cf. *Esther*, 87.

[11] *CIS* 2. no. 100; K. Galling, "Beschriftete Bildsiegel der ersten Jahrtausends v. Chr. vornehmlich aus Syrien und Palästina," *ZDPV* 64 (1941) 196 and Taf. 11, no. 163; Vattioni, "I sigilli," no. 75. The seal was also noted by H. S. Gehman, "Notes on the Persian Words in the Book of Esther," *JBL* 43 (1924) 327.

[12] R. T. Hallock, *Persepolis Fortification Tablets* 666a; M. Mayrhofer, *Onomastica Persepolitana* no. 8.45; W. Hinz, *Neue Wege*, 46–47.

Mehuman, a eunuch (Esth 1:10) is as satisfactory a rendering of Old Persian *Vahumanah*, "intelligent," as it is of an Aramaic participle from *'mn*, Hebraized, meaning "trusty."[13]

Karkas, another eunuch in Esth 1:10, was noted by Moore in his commentary (p. 9) as an Elamite writing of a name at Persepolis. The equation with Avestan *kahrkasa*, "vulture," was made long ago (see Paton), and is maintained by modern scholars.[14] How badly the versions mauled this name is shown in the chart above.

Karshena, the name of a counsellor (Esth 1:14) is also found at Persepolis, in the Fortification Tablets and has been analysed by Mayrhofer as *karša*, "furrow," with the patronymic ending *ina*, a solution reached in part by Gehman. R. Zadok offers another explanation, "(beautiful) form" on the basis of Sogdian *kršn*.[15] LXX *arkesaios* ignores the termination or final consonant. *Marsena*, another counsellor, may exhibit the same patronymic.

Shethar, also a counsellor, may have an abbreviated name containing the element *cica*, "bright," the Old Persian *č* and *ç* being transcribed in the manner of the Aramaic from Persepolis.[16] If they stand for this name, LXX *sarsathaios*, A *sarestheos*, Hexaplaric type MSS *asatha*, Sahidic *zalathaios*, and Old Latin *sarothas*, demonstrate the confusion the versions may reach, and if they are equivalents of MT *taršīš*, the next name in the list but one, they are little better.

These selected instances are sufficient to counter Moore's case. Finding several names in Hebrew letters reflecting Persian ones so closely rules out any likelihood of corruption accidentally reaching a true form. That they occur whether the LXX is close to the MT (as for Hammedatha), or very different, suggests the MT has the superiority. Thus we conclude the Hebrew text of Esther can be trusted to give non-Hebrew names accurately, unless we have clear proof to the contrary; occasionally its vocalization may be less acceptable than its consonants. If the forms it gives are otherwise unknown, they are not thereby improbable, and may actually serve to extend the known Persian onomasticon.[17]

III. *Foreign Names in the OT*

To identify the originals of the Persian names in Esther is not to prove the historicity of the story; it serves to illustrate the care and accuracy of the

[13] M. Mayrhofer, *Onomastica Persepolitana* no. 8.1717; the Hebrew meaning is an old suggestion, accepted by BDB.

[14] M. Mayrhofer, *Onomastica Persepolitana* no. 8.771.

[15] M. Mayrhofer, *Onomastica Persepolitana* no. 8.785, cf. 11.1.8.7.6; H. S. Gehman, "Notes on the Persian Words," 324; R. Zadok, "On Five Iranian Names in the Old Testament," *VT* 26 (1976) 246.

[16] R. A. Bowman, *Aramaic Ritual Texts*, 64–65.

[17] This result undermines J. Duchesne-Guillemin's attempt to prove that the list of Esth 1:14 duplicates that of 1:10 in reverse order, and his explanations of the names obtained by extensive emendation; see his "Les noms des eunuques d'Assuérus," *Le Muséon* 66 (1953) 105–8.

Jewish copyists when faced with foreign terms. Their faithfulness is demonstrated in their treatment of many other foreign names, too. Now Moore has claimed:

> In the Old Testament, when the Hebrew spelling of a non-Jewish name differs from the Greek spelling in either its consonants or vocalization, scholars can not automatically assume, as they once did, that the Hebrew has preserved more accurately the non-Jewish name. From their studies of Babylonian, Assyrian, and Egyptian inscriptions, scholars know for an incontestable fact that sometimes the rendering of the non-Hebrew name has been more accurately preserved in the Greek version—the Septuagint—than in the Massoretic Text.[18]

Despite his "sometimes," there appear to be very few cases where Moore's claim can be proved incontestably. A complete survey is unnecessary here, but samples can be given from each language he has mentioned.

(a) Egyptian Names in the OT

Few of these enter the OT text. Some are by no means certainly identified, and so neither MT nor LXX can be held correct. This applies to Zaphenath-paaneah in the Joseph story (Gen 41:45) which has been disputed by Egyptologists for a century,[19] although Potiphar and Asenath fall into known categories and are satisfactorily rendered by both Hebrew and Greek. With the royal name Shishaq the LXX may preserve a superior vowel in the first syllable, *Sousakeim,* agreeing with the Kětîb at 1 Kgs 14:25 *(Šûšaq),* but adds an otiose final syllable.[20] In *Tirhaqâ* a metathesis occurred, the Egyptian apparently being *Tharaqa,* but LXX moves further with *Thara* (B) and *Tharaka* (A) at 2 Kgs 19:9, and *Tharaka*(B) and *Tharatha* (A) at Isa 37:9. Again, it is possible that LXX preserves preferable vowels, but this may be accidental.[21]

(b) Assyrian Names in the OT

A significant body of texts is ready to hand for examining transcriptions of Assyrian and Babylonian names in the bible. This comprises Aramaic writing on stone, clay tablets, papyri, leather documents, metal objects, and seals

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[18]"Archaeology and the Book of Esther," 77.

[19]See J. Vergote, *Joseph en Egypte* (Orientalia et Biblica Lovaniensia, 3; Louvain: Publications Universitaires, 1959) 141–52; and the review by K. A. Kitchen, *JEA* 47 (1961) 160–61. A. R. Schulman ("On the Egyptian Name of Joseph: A New Approach," *Studien zur alt-ägyptischen Kultur* 2 [1975] 235–43) suggests some LXX forms in the Joseph story may reflect current Egyptian names (Dr. Kitchen kindly supplied this reference).

[20]See K. A. Kitchen, *The Third Intermediate Period in Egypt (1100–650 B.C.)* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1972) 73 n. 356.

[21]K. A. Kitchen, *Third Intermediate Period,* 453 n. 136. On the case of Tahpenes, I Kgs 11:19, LXX *thekemeina,* see D. Barthélemy, "A Reexamination of the Texual Problems in 2 Sam 11:2–1 Kings 2:11 in the Light of Certain Criticisms of *Les Devanciers d'Aquila*," in R. A. Kraft, ed., *1972 Proceedings* (SBLSCS 2; Missoula: Scholars Press for SBL, 1972) 56–58, who favors "Lucianic" *thechemeinas* over MT on the basis of a putative Egyptian original. K. A. Kitchen

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from the eighth century B.C. onwards. Analysis has revealed the usage of the scribes in transcribing Akkadian names, certain developments over the time covered, and more or less regular equations that kept the dialects of Assyria and Babylonia distinct.[22] From that material it is possible to argue for a high degree of accuracy in the preservation of Assyrian royal names in the MT. Tiglath-pileser, for example, appears in this long-accepted form in Hebrew and in the Aramaic stelae of Bar-Rakib of Zinjirli, c. 730 B.C. In Babylonia it was written Tiklath-pileser, with the shift k:g, a known dialect difference between the two regions. Similarly, Sargon (Isa 20:1) is the Assyrian form as exhibited on an Aramaic seal impression from the king's new palace at Dur-Sharruken, Khorsabad that reads *pn²sr mr srsy srgn pn²sr,* "Pān-Ashur, chief of Sargon's eunuchs, Pān-Ashur."[23] The Ashur Ostracon, a letter in Aramaic probably sent from Uruk in southern Babylonia about 650 B.C. shows the Babylonian spelling *šrkn.*[24]

For Tiglath-pileser the LXX manuscripts offer many readings, ranging from the careful *Thaglathphellasar* of 2 Chr 28:20 to the *Thagnaphamasar* of 1 Chr 5:26, MS B. Sargon is reduced by them to *Arna,* 'Lucian' improving slightly with *Sarna.*

(c) Babylonian Names in the OT

This matter has been discussed in detail by P.-R. Berger in an important recent study taking its rise in the names in Daniel. The Hebrew forms have clearly remained close to their Babylonian originals, and have been elucidated by Berger's work.[25] In some the LXX may retain a small advantage lost in MT; in many, however, it displays the same signs of degeneration already seen, e.g. *Marodach huios tou Laadan* for Merodach-baladan in Isa 39:1.

IV. Hebrew Transcriptions of Foreign Names

From our survey of the Hebrew scribes' attempts to transmit foreign names to their fellows we can deduce that they worked with care, and their successors, copying the texts over the centuries, preserved what they found in their exemplars with remarkable accuracy. If there are a few cases where slight changes have crept in, those do not detract from the overall picture. Where no originals are available to compare with the Hebrew, we can rely confidently upon the Hebrew forms, and not treat them with unjustified scepticism simply because the versions differ. It was the Greek scribes who distorted the names

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(*Third Intermediate Period,* 274 n. 183) offers another Egyptian original closer to MT, so clearly neither form can be called superior.

[22]A. R. Millard, "Assyrian Royal Names in the Old Testament," *JSS* 21 (1976) 1–14.

[23]M. Sprengling, "An Aramaic Seal Impression from Khorsbad," *AJSL* 49 (1932) 54.

[24]M. Lidzbarski, *Altaramäische Urkunden aus Assur* (Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichung der Deutschen Orientgesellschaft, 38; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1921); J. C. L. Gibson, *A Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975) 2.no.20.

[25]P.-R. Berger, "Der Kyros-Kylinder mit dem Zusatzfragment BIN II Nr. 32 die akkadischen Personennamen im Danielbuch," *ZA* 64 (1975) 219–34.

as they copied them over the generations, and perhaps as they made their first renderings from the Hebrew; their bizarre results cannot be held superior to the MT without very strong evidence indeed. In the question of foreign names, as in so many other matters, the OT text has often been disparaged, yet when the evidence of its own contemporary world is evaluated beside it, it is seen to be as reliable a source as any newly excavated inscription.[26]

[26]Dr. A. D. H. Bivar and Dr. D. W. Gooding read a draft of this essay and commented upon the Persian and LXX material respectively. I am grateful to them for their readily given advice.