

Reconstructing Jerusalem: Persian Period Prophetic Perspectives



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In rare agreement, successive Greek, Jewish and Roman writers, Hecataeus of Abdera, Aristeeas, Philo, Josephus, and Pliny, extol Jerusalem as one of the great cities of the eastern Mediterranean world. Of the Herodian period, Martin Goodman has argued in a seminal article (recently reprinted in his 2007 collected essays) that Jerusalem developed a significant tourism economy, consistently drawing in pilgrims from the Diaspora in numbers many times its own population. The city, however, rose to these heights from a state of near total destruction and collapse. In 587 BCE, the Babylonians laid the last of at least two devastating sieges, capturing and destroying the city. The conquest of Jerusalem resulted in the exile and dispersion of inhabitants of the city and the surrounding countryside. Recent estimates, supported by a literary repertoire attesting to the devastation, suggest a dramatic decline in the population of Jerusalem and its environs, perhaps with an overall reduction as high as 90%.

The destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE and the challenges of its reconstruction were especially acute and far-reaching because of complex socio-political processes of centralization and individuation affecting the kingdom of Judah in the late eighth and seventh centuries. The collapse of the kingdom of Judah brought into question these processes and their ideological and theological foundations. The transition, therefore, from post-destruction Jerusalem to Herodian Jerusalem was not straightforward. My doctoral dissertation entitled “Reconstructing Jerusalem: Persian Period Prophetic Perspectives” identifies and examines the earliest layers of archaeological and textual evidence concerning the restoration of Jerusalem. It consists of seven chapters: an introduction, an archaeological analysis, four chapters devoted to exegesis of relevant prophetic texts, and a conclusion. In my archaeological analysis, I synthesize data from over a hundred years of archaeological excavations in Jerusalem. In the four exegetical chapters, I provide historical, literary, and phenomenological interpretations of select prophetic texts as the earliest literary sources on the period. My dissertation makes two key arguments:

1. Settlement activity in Persian period Jerusalem concentrated on the south-central eastern ridge and expanded slowly to encompass the whole hill only by the third century BCE. This limited and slow growth is, nevertheless, complemented by fortifications as well as epigraphic and survey data pointing to the emergence of a polity in Jerusalem around the late fifth and early fourth centuries BCE.
2. The early prophetic texts were instrumental in reconstructing Jerusalem by employing native and imperial cultural traditions, and critiquing religious practice, so as to reaffirm, promote, and even mandate Jerusalem as the sacred center of Judean life and religion, especially vis-à-vis the promulgation of the Torah that did not explicitly identify Jerusalem as this sacred center.

My dissertation, therefore, concentrates on the physical and ideological foundations for the re-emergence of Jerusalem laid in the early Persian period. Residence at the Albright Institute has been essential to completing this project. I have been able to consult with historians and archaeologists knowledgeable about Persian period Jerusalem, including Hillel Geva, Shimon Gibson, and Oded Lipschits. I have also benefited from the exceptional archaeological, biblical, and historical resources at the Albright Institute and the École biblique. I was even able to share my research by giving a lecture for a graduate seminar at the University of the Holy Land. I would like to extend special thanks to Carol and Eric Meyers for establishing and funding the fellowship that has supported my research at the Albright as well as to Sy Gitin and Joan Branham for their extraordinary commitment to the Institute and its Fellows. Indeed, I am grateful to all the Albright staff, trustees, and fellows, who all contribute in varied ways to an incredibly positive and supportive research experience.

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