

## **“Be Joyful and Listen to the Voice of God”: Did Sasanians Know the Bible?**

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In the fifteenth year of the Sasanian King Shapur I (c. 255/6 or 257/8), the Persian-speaking scribe Yazdan-Tahm-Farrbay visited the Dura-Europos synagogue, leaving a brief note on one of its many fresco panels depicting Biblical scenes. The scribe's annotation gave his name (along with a boast of his manliness), the date of his visit and the statement that “he liked this picture.” Appropriately, the fresco that caught Yazdan-Tahm-Farrbay's fancy (Panel WC2), was one that featured Persians like himself; specifically, an illustration of two scenes from the *Book of Esther* detailing Esther's intervention with her Persian husband, King Ahasuerus, to save her people, the Jews.

But what did the Magian (Zoroastrian) Sasanians and other Iranian nobles actually know of the stories of the Bible? Was the tale of Esther simply a story told by local rabbis to appeal to Persian tourists? Were stories such as those illustrated in the Dura synagogue part of a familiar store of Near Eastern folk-myth? Or, more provocatively, did Iranian kings and nobles actively understand and exploit the sacred literature of their subject peoples? Drawing on a broad spectrum of Rabbinic, Christian, Magian, and Manichaean literature of the Sasanian and post-Sasanian era, I address these questions, examining the evidence for the dissemination of Biblical literature among the Magian aristocracies of the Sasanian world.

I argue that the Magian elites, although officially hostile to “foreign” faiths, were aware of the stories of the Bible through a variety of channels of transmission. Indeed, knowledge of the Bible played a vital role in defining the parameters of Magian, Jewish and Christian interaction in the Sasanian world. Rabbis and priests understood the political realities of Sasanian rule through the positive and negative *exempla* of Biblical history (especially tales of exile and redemption such as those of Daniel and Esther). Moreover, they sought to use stories from the Bible to “educate” their rulers (and co-religionists) about the proper and righteous use of royal power. For their part, Sasanian rulers came to accept the value of Biblical models as a means to articulate their kingship in terms comfortable to their non-Magian subjects. If Sasanian rulers would not be Jews or Christians, they could at least adopt the mien of a sympathetic outsider, such as the Biblical Ahasuerus, patron and savior of the “chosen people.” By publicly taking on the role of an Ahasuerus, a figure admired by Jew, Christian and Persian alike, Sasanian kings might reasonably claim to have taken to heart the utopian exhortation of another scribe, also written on the walls of the Dura synagogue: “Be joyful and listen to the voice of God. Then well-being (will be) upon us.”