



Fresco showing Khosrau and Heraclius fighting for Jerusalem. According to Christian legend, Khosrau carried the cross on which Jesus was crucified from Jerusalem to his capital, Ctesiphon. From Piero della Francesca's famous True Cross series, Basilica of San Francesco, Arezzo, Italy, 1452–6

When Iran Ruled Jerusalem

Few are aware that in 614 Jews briefly regained control of Jerusalem. Who allowed them to renew the Temple sacrifices, and why were these Jews' high hopes suddenly dashed? A forgotten chapter of Jewish history

// Meir Loewenberg

Although the threat of a nuclear Iran is currently Israel's most pressing security issue, there was a time when the Jews of Jerusalem welcomed the invading Persian army as their savior.

The story begins at a turning point in the history of Jerusalem – the first half of the seventh century ce. Jerusalem was still part of the Byzantine Empire, and only Christians were allowed to live in the city. Forty years later, it became part of an Arab empire; Jerusalem's military governor was a Muslim, but he presided over a mixed population including both Jews and Christians. But between these two points in time, the city was part of the Persian Empire, and for three years it was ruled by a Jewish governor. A spectacular gold hoard recently discovered just beyond the Temple Mount dates from this period, and may well reveal the untold story of Jewish Jerusalem during its fourteen years of Persian occupation.

In the fifth and sixth centuries, the lot of the Jews remaining in Palaestina Prima – the name given to the province by Emperor Hadrian four hundred years earlier to wipe rebellious Judea off the map – was unbearable. Barred from Jerusalem, they could visit only once a year – on the ninth of

The Sassanid Empire expanded and contracted. This map shows all the territories it ever controlled, albeit never simultaneously



So many Jews served in the Persian army that commanders even halted fighting for Jewish holidays

Av, the day commemorating the destruction of the Temple. Their property was frequently confiscated. Forced conversions to Christianity were commonplace. Increasingly harsh decrees, aimed at suppressing Judaism altogether, were promulgated throughout the Byzantine Empire in the early seventh century. The persecution reached new heights under Byzantine emperor Heraclius (575–641), who was determined to root out any vestiges of Judaism.

Persian Paradise?

Just then, King Khosrau II (591–628) became the Sassanid king of Persia. Unlike the downtrodden Byzantine Jews, the Persian Jewish community played an important role in Khosrau’s kingdom. Jewish merchants were crucial to its international trade, and Jewish soldiers were such a mainstay of the Persian army that commanders even halted fighting for Jewish holidays. In several provinces, Jews were the majority. This elite Jewish community produced the Babylonian Talmud and great Jewish spiritual and political leaders, from Rav Ashi to Sa’adia Gaon.

Early in his reign, King Khosrau launched a military campaign to reestablish the ancient

Achaemenid Empire, which had stretched from India to Ethiopia. For centuries the Persian Sassanids had battled the Romans for control of the vast area between the Euphrates and the Mediterranean, and now the conflict came to a head. In 602 Khosrau attacked Constantinople. Next his armies invaded and plundered Syria and Asia Minor; by 608 they’d reached Chalcedon (nowadays a neighborhood of Istanbul). Soon afterward his armies besieged and captured Damascus.

As the heavily Jewish Persian army approached Jerusalem, the local Jews expected a miracle. Their sympathy for the Persians was based not only on their hatred and fear of the Byzantine rulers, but also on their knowledge of the Persian Empire in recent times. Four decades earlier, in 575, Persian forces had helped the Jews of South Arabia (Himyar – now Yemen) defeat an Abyssinian Christian army that had occupied their land and forcibly converted all non-Christians. Jews everywhere viewed King Khosrau as a latter-day Cyrus the Great. Just as Cyrus (576–530 bce) had permitted the Jews to return from Babylonian exile and ordered the building of the Second Temple, this Persian king would release them from Byzantine oppression and help them build the Third. No wonder they eagerly provided whatever aid they could to the oncoming Persian army – even fighting at its side. Wealthy Benjamin of Tiberias sent Jewish soldiers to swell the Persian ranks. From Nazareth and

the mountain cities of Galilee, Jews joined the invading soldiers as they marched on Jerusalem.

The Persians had a special interest in Palaestina Prima, with Jerusalem its capital, because the province offered direct access to the Mediterranean. To ensure the success of his military venture, King Khosrau had made a treaty with the reish galuta, the exilarch of Babylonian Jewry. The Jews were to provide twenty thousand soldiers for the Persian army, while King Khosrau appointed Nehemiah ben Hushiel, the exilarch's son, as the symbolic leader of the troops. Khosrau knew the mystical Nehemiah would not interfere in military affairs. Although many historians question the existence of such a formal agreement, even rumors of it would have secured local Jewish support for the Persians.

Like Wild Beasts

On May 5, 614 ce, after a twenty-one day siege, Jerusalem fell to the Persian army. This was the first time since the sixth century bce that Persian forces had entered the province. Archaeological and literary evidence suggests that the Persians breached the city walls near today's Damascus Gate. Jewish sources stress the role of the Jewish soldiers in the capture of Jerusalem, but other modern scholars are dubious.

War was as cruel fourteen centuries ago as it is today. The massacre of the civilian population of conquered cities was standard practice in antiquity and in the Middle Ages. The Persian army was known for its violence and destruction, and it made no exception in Jerusalem. As Jews were barred from the vicinity under Byzantine law, the casualties were all Christian. Chronicon Paschale, written in the early seventh century by a Greek Christian historian, describes the Persian conquest of Jerusalem:

In this year [614] . . . we suffered a calamity which deserves unceasing lamentations. For, together with many cities of the east, Jerusalem too was captured by the Persians and in it were slain many thousands of clerics, monks, and virgin nuns. (Chronicon Paschale, trans. Michael and Mary Whitby [Liverpool University Press], p. 156)

Only the slaughter of church personnel concerned the anonymous author of Chronicon Paschale; the many other civilians who lost their lives were inconsequential. Antiochus Strategos paints a different picture however. A seventh-century monk who lived in the Mar Saba monastery (east of Bethlehem), Strategos either witnessed these events or received firsthand reports. Hence his much more graphic account, with Christian casualties numbering 66,509:

... the evil foemen entered the city in great fury, like infuriated wild beasts and irritated serpents. The men however who defended the city wall fled, and hid themselves in caverns, fosses, and cisterns in order to save themselves; and the people in crowds fled into churches and altars; and there they destroyed them. For the enemy entered in mighty wrath, gnashing their teeth in violent fury; like evil beasts they roared, bellowed like lions, hissed like ferocious serpents, and slew all whom they found. Like mad dogs they tore with their teeth the flesh of the faithful, and respected none at all, neither male nor female, neither young nor old, neither child nor baby, neither priest nor monk, neither virgin nor widow. . . . (Frederick C. Conybeare, "Antiochus Strategos' Account of the Sack of Jerusalem in a.d. 614," *The English Historical Review*, July 1910, pp. 506–7)

Jerusalem's fall reverberated throughout the



Gold medallion showing a ram's horn and palm branch, two classic Jewish symbols. Recently found near the Temple Mount, the medallion dates roughly to the Persian Sassanid conquest of Jerusalem

Photo: Flash 90

If the Jews were responsible for the slaughter of Jerusalem's Christian community, why was there no counter-pogrom when the Christians regained control?

Christian world. The patriarch of Alexandria reportedly "sat down and made lament just as though he had been an inhabitant of the city" (Robert Louis Wilken, "When Jerusalem Wept," *Christian History* 97 [2008]).

Contemporary Christian accounts differ on the number massacred. Figures range from Chronicon's "many thousands" to a high of ninety thousand. Sebeos, a seventh-century Armenian bishop, recorded 57,000 Christian dead, but noted that 35,000 survived. Thousands of bones from hundreds of human skeletons were retrieved by archaeologists from a cave outside the Old City's Jaffa Gate early in the 1990s. The inscriptions at the site prove that these remains are from the mass burial of victims of the Persian onslaught.

Whose Atrocities?

Who was responsible for this bloodbath? Christian historians throughout the ages have blamed the Jews. Yet several of the earliest reports, written at the time of the Persian occupation of Jerusalem, mention no Jewish involvement. Association of the Jews with the massacre increases in almost direct proportion to the years separating the accounts from the events.

Strategos was the first to point the finger. His report seems to reflect Byzantine prejudice against Jews. In one section, for example, he alleges that the Jews offered to ransom captured Christians who were willing to "become Jews and deny Christ" (*ibid.*, p. 508). His account praises the Christian captives for refusing to exchange their faith for freedom, while condemning the Jews who, he claims, purchased these Christians from the Persians only to "slay them like sheep" (*ibid.*).

Theophanes the Confessor (c. 758–817), a monk living almost two centuries after the fact, more or less repeats Strategos' account

while exaggerating the massacre purportedly perpetrated by the Jews:

In this year [614] the Persians took Jordan, Palestine, and its holy city in battle. At the hands of the Jews they killed many people in it; as some say, ninety thousand. The Jews, according to their means, bought Christians and then killed them. (*The Chronicle of Theophanes: An English Translation of anni mundi 6095–6305 [a.d. 602–813]*, trans. Harry Turtledove [Philadelphia, 1982], p. 11)

Theophanes' "testimony" became the "official" version of the events in Jerusalem, still cited in many modern accounts.

Serving in the Persian army, Jews presumably took part in the sack of Jerusalem and were therefore party to the killing of Christian civilians. But there is no evidence of Jews' initiating the massacre. Christian

martyrology abounds in hyperbolic descriptions of bloodthirsty barbarians – Persian, Jewish, Mongol, or Muslim – glorying in the slaughter of the faithful. Yet if, as Strategos and subsequent historians claim, the Jews were responsible for the carnage, why was there no pogrom immediately after the

Christians regained control of the city three years later? Why did Emperor Heraclius wait until 629, fifteen years afterward, to force the Jews of Jerusalem to choose between death and conversion, putting thousands of them to flight?

A Thriving Community

Strategos depicts unprecedented looting and sacrilege shortly after the Persian army entered Jerusalem:

Holy churches were burned with fire, others were demolished, majestic altars fell prone, sacred crosses were trampled underfoot, life-giving icons were spat upon by the unclean.... When ... the Jews were left in Jerusalem, they began with their own hands to demolish and burn such of the holy churches as were left standing. ("*Strategos' Account*," pp. 507–8).

Chronicon Pascale adds how Jerusalem was



Khosrau II surrenders to Heraclius. Enamel plaque from a French gilded copper cross, circa 1160



robbed of its Christian relics:

The Lord's tomb was burnt ... and ... all the precious things destroyed. The venerated wood of the cross, together with the holy vessels, ... was taken by the Persians, and the Patriarch Zacharias also became a prisoner.... (p. 156)

This cross, alleged by tradition to be the very one used in Jesus' crucifixion, was captured and transferred to Ctesiphon, capital of the Persian Empire, as Christians throughout the world mourned.

According to most contemporary sources, all the city's churches, including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, were either destroyed or badly

damaged. Archaeologists, however, have found no evidence of either phenomenon. On the contrary, excavations of Jerusalem churches and monasteries show clear continuity.

Contrary to Christian accounts, Jerusalem's Christian community existed throughout the Persian period, and in fact remained the largest and most active sector of the city's population. Although the Persian conquerors initially favored the Jews for supporting them during the siege of Jerusalem, within three years they were backing the Christians. The Jewish governor was replaced by a Christian, and the Persian authorities actively aided the newly appointed patriarch Modestus in renovating damaged holy sites. In most captured cities and provinces, the Persians endorsed the

Khosrau II seized the moment and attacked a weakened Byzantine Empire, even though Emperor Maurice had helped install him on the throne. Rare gold coin of Khosrau II

Courtesy of Classical Numismatic Group, Inc.



Medieval comics. Defeated by Heraclius, Khosrau never recovered. His son Kavadh II conspired against him, sending an assassin to dispose of him. Illustration reputedly by Indian Mogul artist Abdul-Samad, circa 1535

Monophysite Christian hierarchy, since its opponents, the Chalcedonians, were recognized by the Byzantine enemy. In Jerusalem, however, they supported the Chalcedonian clergy as the predominant Christian sect in the city.

Throughout the fourteen years of Persian occupation, Jerusalem churches remained

active, monasteries that had been abandoned when the monks fled in panic were reopened, and pilgrimages continued, even to remote Mount Sinai. To fund all these projects, Modestus traveled throughout the area soliciting wealthy Christians. Far from being wiped out, Christian life in Persian-occupied

Jerusalem was vibrant and resilient.

All Too Brief

The Jews had seen the Persian capture of Jerusalem as heralding an new era of messianic proportion. For centuries Byzantine emperors had persecuted them and prohibited them from living in Jerusalem. Suddenly all legal restrictions were cancelled, and they were free to return to the Holy City. Soon after the conquest, having originally accepted their new rulers, the local Christians rebelled. Once again the Jews loyally assisted the Persian troops, this time in putting down the revolt. The Persian retaliation may have taken the form of the massacres described in Christian texts.

Nehemiah ben Hushiel was appointed governor of Persian-occupied Jerusalem. Very little is known about him or his achievements. Many suspect that this name was not his real one, but rather a symbolic sobriquet reminiscent of the biblical Nehemiah, who governed Persian Jerusalem in the fifth century bce.

The pseudo-epigraphic Book of Zerubbabel, dated by historian Michael Avi-Yonah to our period, reports that Nehemiah ben Hushiel was a strong and handsome young man; as governor, he adopted the trappings of royalty, and some accounts suggest he had messianic pretensions. Soon after his appointment, he reestablished the sacrificial service on the Temple Mount – which had not been performed in over five hundred years. He also began arranging the building of the Third Temple, instructing his assistants to clarify the priestly genealogies, so he could appoint a high priest when the time came.

Rabbi Eleazar Kalir (c. 570–640), one of the earliest and most prolific Jewish liturgical poets who lived in Palaestina Prima at the time, described these events:

When Assyria [Persia] came to the city ...
and pitched its tents

The holy people [Jews] were somewhat
calmed

For Assyria permitted them to reestablish the
Temple

And they built a holy altar there
And offered sacred sacrifices on it
Yet they did not manage to build the Temple
For the Messiah had not yet come.

(Ezra Fleischer, “Toward a Solution of the Question of the Time and Place of Rabbi Eleazar ben Rabbi Kalir’s Activity,” *Tarbiz* 54 (5745/1985), p. 401 [Hebrew])

Christian sources claim that all Jerusalem’s churches suffered destruction or damage, but the archaeological record shows no evidence of either

Three years after Nehemiah’s appointment, the Persians “removed” him; according to some, he was assassinated. Perhaps the Persians feared his messianic pretensions. Or perhaps they needed the support of the Christian majority more than that of the Jewish community.

Whatever the reason, the Persians appointed a Christian governor, putting a sudden end to Jewish rule in Jerusalem. Sebeos, an Armenian bishop, reports that a synagogue on the Temple Mount was also destroyed. So much for building the Third Temple.

Christian Revenge

The Persian conquest of Asia Minor had filled the Jews with pride and joy. Christians fearing for their lives supposedly converted to Judaism as hopes of a new Jewish commonwealth, complete with a Temple, rose. Then those hopes were dashed, Nehemiah was ousted, and Jewish life soon became more dire than ever.





Remnants of a fallen empire.
The Arch of Ctesiphon, "the
Wonder Arch of the East," Iraq,
circa 1932

Library of Congress Collection

Three years after appointing a Jewish governor over Jerusalem, the Persians "removed" him; some say he was assassinated

Persian control of Jerusalem did not last long. Heraclius fought bitterly to regain Syria, Egypt, and Palestine. In 628 he decimated the Persian army. The following year, Sharbaraz, the Persian general, agreed to withdraw beyond the Euphrates in return for Byzantine assistance in his attempt to seize the Persian throne.

Marching at the head of the Byzantine army, Heraclius reoccupied Jerusalem. Though he had promised amnesty to the city's Jews, the Christian clergy convinced him otherwise. At the hands of the returning Christians, the Jewish community paid dearly for its cooperation with the Persians. In theory, from a Christian point of view, the Jews' lives were forfeit just for being in the city when Heraclius arrived, automatically reactivating the Byzantine law barring them from Jerusalem on pain of death. According to Eutychius (877–940), the Greek Orthodox patriarch of Alexandria, few Jews escaped the ensuing massacre.

The Jews of Jerusalem struggled to understand these cataclysmic events. Having placed such

high hopes in the Persians, they now felt betrayed. Many concluded that Nehemiah must have been the Messiah of the House of Joseph, whose death, according to tradition, precedes the advent of the true, Davidic Messiah. As such, they must have been even more traumatized when the latter savior failed to materialize. Others saw Nehemiah as the embodiment of Elijah the Prophet, another harbinger of the Messiah. At least that was the rationale proclaimed by those Jews who embraced Muhammad and his new religion when his star began its meteoric rise just decades later.

The fourteen years of Persian rule and the attendant hopes of Jewish autonomy made a deep impression on the Jews. For centuries these memories seemed to overshadow even the subsequent Muslim conquest. But the cruelty with which those hopes were extinguished eventually wiped the whole episode almost entirely from the Jewish national consciousness.

The execution of Nehemiah ben Hushiel not only put an end to Jewish control of Jerusalem, but also dashed any remaining hopes of reestablishing Jewish rule. Optimism turned to despair, and there was no Jewish political activity in Jerusalem or anywhere else in the Holy Land for the next thirteen centuries. The entire episode seems to have been almost completely erased from the collective Jewish consciousness. ■