

# Why Asa was not Deemed Good Enough A Decolonial Reading of 2 Chronicles 14–16<sup>1</sup>

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## A. Introduction

Who were the real and intended audiences of the Book of Chronicles? The literary picture drawn in Chronicles and Ezra/Nehemiah suggests an “empty” land to which the people returned from exile.<sup>2</sup> The Chronicler ends his story (2 Chr. 36:20–21) by suggesting that the king of the Chaldeans, after destroying Jerusalem completely,

took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfil the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had made up for its sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.

Yet after the return, Ezra/Nehemiah saw it as necessary to separate the people of Israel from the people of the land who were associated with those groups that Israel had had to separate themselves from during the conquest: the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites. Their presence and the returnees’ intermarriages were acts of defilement from which the people of Israel needed to cleanse themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> At the conference where this essay was first read as a paper, questions were raised regarding the relationship between the imperial Persian context suggested as a possible world of text production and the real readers of Chronicles. These questions led to a separate article. See Snyman, “The Ethics of Reading”, 804–821.

<sup>2</sup> The idea of an empty land after the exile is contested by various scholars (see next footnote). The version of the deportation in the Book of Kings rejects such a notion, but it seems the Chronicler creates a literary picture of an empty land. 2 Kgs. 25:12 suggests some people remained behind as vinedressers and tillers of the soil. They are portrayed as the “poorest of the land” (2 Kgs. 24:14). With Zedekiah as caretaker they were nevertheless significant enough to withstand a siege for a few days. Even after Zedekiah, a significant group remained in the land.

Was the *intended* audience the voiceless in this “empty land,” the inferiorly constituted people of the land who did not seem to have a say and whose women and children were driven away by Ezra and Nehemiah? And was the *real* audience those in whose midst Chronicles was produced as part of a public transcript that sought support for a ruling elite with close ties to the Persian administration?<sup>3</sup> Chronicles (36:22–23) ends with Cyrus’ proclamation that resulted in the return of those people in exile with a mandate to rebuild the temple, a mandate repeated in Ezra and related to the picture drawn of Cyrus in the Cyrus Cylinder. Deutero-Isaiah portrays a positive picture of Cyrus, a victor from the east, of whom Yahweh is thought to say: “He is my shepherd, and he shall carry out all my purpose” (Isa. 44:28). In fact, Cyrus as God’s anointed receives a direct commission from Yahweh (Isa. 45:1–8) for the sake of Israel. Does the book of Chronicles constitute an imperial text that coaxed the people of Israel into subordination to the imperial cause? The biblical picture of Cyrus is of a ruler of great magnanimity, whereas the kings in the Chronicler’s portrayal of the royal history fail dismally. The public transcript of the Persian royal history regarding Cyrus was so successful that it was able to penetrate the self-perception of the ruling elite in the Province of Yehud.

If this perception is true, it means that Chronicles is a colonial text and in fact shows an effect of Persian colonialism on those inhabiting the province of Yehud. The book represents the ideologies and socio-political location of a ruling elite who embraced Persian imperality. Whereas one can assume that the real readers would have been those associated with this cause, the book may constitute a defence for becoming Persian allies, in which case the intended readers could have been those who needed persuasion, i.e. the subaltern in Yehud. This is the question I would want to add to the current research on the Book of Chronicles: How would someone not part of the ruling elite have experienced the new story that the book of Chronicles is setting up?<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The term “public transcript” refers to the official policies and ideologies of the ruling elite in any given society. It suggests a discourse in public by which the ruling elite maintains its power and the subordinates their position of subordination. See Scott, *Domination*, 4. In an earlier study Snyman (“‘Tis a Vice to Know Him”, 99) argues that an entirely new society with a dominant elite of proven loyalty was created in Jerusalem. They were a core from outside the province of Yehud and generated an identity by adapting a history of the former inhabitants and identified with their heritage. Although it is possible that the Persian rulers simply transported populations within the empire for economic purposes (cf. Hoglund, “The Achaemenid Context,” 65), I think it is more logical to assume that this group who accepted leadership in Jerusalem had a link with this history of the former inhabitants. They were not complete strangers to Jerusalem, the religious cult practised there and the tradition.

<sup>4</sup> According to Grosfoguel (“The epistemic decolonial turn”, 211) the notion of “post-colonial” studies reflect a eurocentric critique of Eurocentrism, whereas a decolonial

Obviously, there is not much evidence, if any, for how the voiceless would have experienced the return from exile and subsequent new relations of power. Their transcript remains hidden, and without power and access to writing, written evidence will not be forthcoming!<sup>5</sup> However, the question of a hidden transcript regarding the colonised puts the experience of Persian imperialism on the table.<sup>6</sup> I am trying to suggest a parallel with what Grosfoguel argues with regard to the decolonial turn towards colonialism. He does not want to study European colonial expansion from a Eurocentric point of view, which analyses the colonial drive in terms of inter-imperial competition and capitalism. What arrived in the colonised areas “was a broader and wider entangled power structure that an economic reductionist perspective of the world-system is unable to account for”.<sup>7</sup> From the vantage point of the colonised it was a more complex system than a political-economic one, because what arrived represented “[a] European / capitalist / military / Christian / patriarchal / white / heterosexual / male”, who established a complex web of hierarchies of labour, military organisation, race and ethnicity, sexuality, religion, epistemology and language.<sup>8</sup> Whereas Grosfoguel inquires into the possibility of what the European system looked like from the point of view of the colonised, the question I am posing is what the voiceless in Yehud would have made of the Book of Chronicles.<sup>9</sup> It seems

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critique suggests a critique of Eurocentrism from the subaltern, that is, the silenced voices of the colonised.

<sup>5</sup> See Scott, *Domination*, 5. A hidden transcript is a transcript amongst the subordinates and functions away from the eyes of the dominant. It is a discourse “off-stage” and beyond direct observation by those in power. It usually reacts to the public transcript by engendering a subculture of opposition to social domination. An open expression would also be quite dangerous. A public transcript may hint at the presence of a hidden transcript, but evidence for such a transcript will then be at the behest of a public transcript that may or may not be bothered about what subordinates are saying or thinking. It remains a construction from the point of view of the ruling elite. See also footnote 9.

<sup>6</sup> Grosfoguel, “The epistemic decolonial turn”, 215.

<sup>7</sup> Grosfoguel, “The epistemic decolonial turn”, 216.

<sup>8</sup> Grosfoguel, “The epistemic decolonial turn”, 217. Anderson, *Ancient Laws*, 135–154 picks up on this when she portrays the mythical norm of biblical interpretation. See also Snyman, “‘n Etiek van Bybelles”.

<sup>9</sup> Jonker (“Cushites”, 863–881) suggests that the story of Asa implicitly offers a critique of Persian officials in Jerusalem and Samaria. In other words, if Jonker’s suggestion is true, the text provides a glimpse of another (hidden?) transcript of a section of the ruling elite that differs from the other parts of this elite. The story of the Cushites in the Asa narrative is then a subtle polemic directed at the Judean officials in the service of the Persian administration (875). Bakhtin’s concept of dialogicity (*Problems*, 192) in the guise of *skaz* can be fruitful here to explore the supposed double-voicedness in the story of Asa. *Skaz* implies the presence of a socially defined alien voice in a text, a voice that differs from the official and authorial voice in the text. Snyman (“The Religious

they were not even given a space at the margins. However, similar to Grosfoguel's disclaimer,<sup>10</sup> the current study does not wish to speak for or pretend to represent the perspective of the "empty land", those without a voice in the biblical text. The most I intend to achieve with this contribution is to shift the point of view from which the book is looked at.

This essay is informed by a decolonial critique of a notion of a (Western?) paradigm that developed in close cooperation with the colonial enterprise. It is a paradigm that enabled colonial relations of power to leave profound marks on the economy, political authority, epistemology and the understanding of being, which has led scholars to design a concept called "coloniality of being."<sup>11</sup>

## B. Coloniality of Being

Whereas colonialism denotes the economic and political relations between a minority of foreign invaders and a majority of indigenous people, coloniality "refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism" and that defined – far beyond the limits of the colonial administration mission – "culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production."<sup>12</sup> In other words, coloniality outlives colonialism.

In present-day terms, coloniality of power appears to have outlasted Eurocentred colonialism. The demise of colonialism and the trumpeted advent of the postcolonial ignored one important factor, namely that political independence did not bring independence of power. The destruction of colonialism as a political order did not remove coloniality as the most general form of domination in the current world order. A colonial matrix of power is still evident in the following spheres of influence:

control of economy (land appropriation, exploitation of labor, control of natural resources); control of authority (institutions, army); control of gender and sexuality

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Performer", 355) states that dialogicity focuses on power and the public sphere, and is intent on unseating the power of the official voice that is, in turn, bent on keeping the unofficial voice (and hidden transcript) away from the public sphere.

<sup>10</sup> Grosfoguel, "The epistemic decolonial turn", 216.

<sup>11</sup> The term was initially coined by Walter D. Mignolo in a Spanish article and subsequently taken further by Nelson Maldonado-Torres. My own understanding is based on Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being", 240–270 and Mignolo, "Introduction," 155–167. Maldonado-Torres (242) describes coloniality of being (lived experience of colonisation) as part of a triad with coloniality of power (interrelation among modern forms of exploitation and domination) and coloniality of knowledge (impact of colonisation on knowledge production).

<sup>12</sup> Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being", 243.

(family, education) and control of subjectivity and knowledge (epistemology, education and formation of subjectivity).<sup>13</sup>

These spheres are evident in the Persian period. The formation of the Province of Yehud and the subsequent establishment of an administration can be led back to the need to procure taxes. The Persian administration needed resources to fund its various campaigns that could solidify its power. To keep and maintain authority, certain measures were taken to prevent local inhabitants from rebelling. One was to leave the local religion and structure of governance intact. I am not sure how far the Persian administration would have interfered with family life in Yehud, but Ezra/Nehemiah thought it legitimate to uproot families in sending away the foreign women and their children. The production of literature that shows the beneficent nature of Persian rule reveals a particular control of subjectivity. The Deuteronomistic history of the kings of Judah is no longer to be trusted as the appearance of the kings in these stories may undermine Persian authority.<sup>14</sup>

Colonialism is not merely the subordination of one group to another group which ends once the external relation of subordination is broken. Colonialism is not only a systematic repression of those things deemed useless to the coloniser (while extracting what is useful for the imperium), but,

[t]he repression fell, above all, over the modes of knowing, of producing knowledge, of producing perspectives, images and systems of images, symbols, modes of

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<sup>13</sup> Mignolo, "Introduction", 156.

<sup>14</sup> Although Jonker may be correct in assuming a secondary audience amongst the Persian ruling elite for the reference to Cush in the Asa narrative, in the light of what may happen when Persian authority is undermined, I would prefer more evidence to substantiate such a view. The reference to Cush at best *alludes* to a possible conflict in the context of text production. If Cush refers to Nubia/Lybia, the two Persian expeditions against Egypt in 385–383 and 373 BCE become possible referents (cf. Secunda, "The Might of the Persian Empire", 83). If one takes Cyrus' position of tolerance regarding the local cult and worship and his incorporation into the royal history of the kings of Judah by the Chronicler into consideration, a polemic on socio-political and socio-religious level does not seem to me very real. Jonker ("Cushites", 874) very cautiously asks if one cannot "perhaps imagine that the classical Greek traditions about the relationship between Persia and Nubia/Lybia were also *in the back of the Chronicler's mind* when he adapted the narrative about Asa's reign" (my italics – GS). In my opinion, Jonker's formulation here inadvertently opens the door to William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley's "intentional fallacy", which is a reaction against a popular belief whereby a critic is forced to assume the role of cultural historian or that of a psychologist who must determine a writer's vision in terms of his mental and physical state at the time of writing. Cf. Wimsatt and Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy", 468–488. In terms of reception theory, it is not a question of the Chronicler's intention, but rather Jonker as reader filling in the gaps left by the text.

signification, over the resources, patterns, and instruments of formalized and objectivised expression, intellectual or visual.<sup>15</sup>

The colonial masters then imposed their own ways of doing and saying, their own pattern of producing knowledge and meaning.<sup>16</sup> The mystification of the latter process made the dominating culture seductive in its invitation to access power so that people aspired to the dominating culture.<sup>17</sup> How well this has been achieved could be seen in the recent uproar in the Anglican community regarding the issue of homosexuality when the African churches chose for a literal reading of Scripture in this regard.<sup>18</sup>

Literal reading was the way the church taught its members to read the text as Europe started to colonise the Americas and Africa. Such a reading went hand in hand with a particular paradigm of rational knowledge, namely knowledge as the product of a subject-object relation.<sup>19</sup> In Western thinking the subject is thought to speak as a non-situated subject, or one who is always hidden, concealed or even erased from discourse. The epistemic location of the subject is dislocated from the subject.<sup>20</sup> This myth of the non-situated “Ego”<sup>21</sup> enabled a belief over the past 500 years in truthful universal knowledge that is neutral and objective, concealing geo-political and body-political epistemic locations within the structures of power in which the subject is acting. But the same is true for the subaltern, so that one can say that knowledge is epistemically located in either the dominant or subaltern side of the power relations. If this is true, neutrality and objectivity give way to the geo- and body-politics of knowledge.<sup>22</sup>

In this regard Mignolo refers to a coloniality of knowledge that silences or relegates other epistemologies to the margin – for example, a primitive past –

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<sup>15</sup> Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality”, 169.

<sup>16</sup> Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality”, 169.

<sup>17</sup> Quijano (“Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality”, 170) refers to Western history the past 500 years that saw high cultures turn into illiterate peasant subcultures: “Through the political, military and technological power of its foremost societies, European or Western culture imposed its paradigmatic image and its principal cognitive elements as the norm of orientation on all cultural development, particularly the intellectual and the artistic.”

<sup>18</sup> Grosfuguel (“The epistemic decolonial turn”, 213) succinctly states: “The fact that one is socially located in the oppressed side of power relations does not automatically mean that he/she is epistemically thinking from a subaltern epistemic location.”

<sup>19</sup> Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality”, 172.


<sup>20</sup> Grosfuguel, “The epistemic decolonial turn”, 213.

<sup>21</sup> A term coined by Grosfuguel (“The epistemic decolonial turn”, 213) and which expresses the idea that knowledge is impartial. However, this is a myth, because knowledge is always partial. No one is able to escape “the class, sexual, gender, spiritual, linguistic, geographical, and racial hierarchies of the ‘modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system’.”

<sup>22</sup> Grosfuguel, “The epistemic decolonial turn”, 214.

while presenting its own as the god's-eye view.<sup>23</sup> The latter hides its local and particular perspective under a cloak of universalism.<sup>24</sup> This epistemology went hand-in-hand in the 16<sup>th</sup> century with a theology that acknowledged the eyes of God as the ultimate warranty of knowing.<sup>25</sup> The degodding process<sup>26</sup> of secular society did not change the nature of the zero-point-of-observation: "God is everywhere and Reason is immaterial, doesn't have color, sex, gender and it is beyond any singular memory."<sup>27</sup> The effect of the subject hiding his geographical and body location enabled European colonial expansion to "construct a hierarchy of superior and inferior knowledge and, thus, of superior and inferior people around the world."<sup>28</sup>

Quijano makes the following remark on the validity and rationality of the European model of rationality:

Nothing is less rational, finally, than the pretension that the specific cosmic vision of a particular ethnics should be taken as universal rationality, even if such an ethnics is called Western Europe because this **is actually pretend to impose a provincialism universalism.**<sup>29</sup> 

Is the same process not visible in Yehud, when Cyrus is drawn into its religious experience as if he is the new anointed one after David? The concept 'coloniality of being' wants to bring into the open any effect a subordinate experiences as an impact of colonialism and the coloniality of power. The concept constitutes a response to the need to put into words "the effects of coloniality in lived experience".<sup>30</sup> And this lived experience is defined in terms of the perspective of the wretched of the earth,<sup>31</sup> who remain invisible and exist in a mode of non-being.<sup>32</sup> They are condemned to poverty and a life near to death – a life of misery, non-recognition, lynching and imprisonment.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Mignolo, "Introduction", 162.

<sup>24</sup> Grosfuguel, "The epistemic decolonial turn", 214.

<sup>25</sup> Mignolo, "Introduction", 162.

<sup>26</sup> Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality", 17.

<sup>27</sup> Mignolo, "Introduction", 162.

<sup>28</sup> Grosfuguel, "The epistemic decolonial turn", 214. This inferiority created a hierarchy of European / non-European. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century inferior people were thought to be people without writing, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century they were people without history, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century they were people without development and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century they became people without democracy.

<sup>29</sup> Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality", 177.

<sup>30</sup> Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being", 242. Coloniality of being alludes to what can be called the marks of reading when the Bible is read by someone in power on behalf of a subordinated other.

<sup>31</sup> With reference to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*.

<sup>32</sup> Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being", 257.

<sup>33</sup> Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being", 259.

Maldonado-Torres refers to a decolonial<sup>34</sup> turn, which he describes as

making visible the invisible and about analysing the mechanisms that produce such invisibility or distorted visibility in light of a large stock of ideas that must necessarily include the critical reflections of the “invisible” people themselves.<sup>35</sup>

However, how does one make visible the invisible? It is the decolonial turn that prompted the phrasing of the research question on the Book of Chronicles: namely, who were the readers of the book and where were they located in terms of intent and reality? My assumption is that the real readers would have been part of the colonial structures, whereas the intended readers, those readers against whom the text was constructed, were the invisible inhabitants of Yehud who bore the consequences of imperialism. In laying bare the colonial structures and strictures of the Persian Empire, I hope to construct an awareness of the voiceless in Yehud.

## C. Aspects of Persian Power and the Province of Yehud

### *I. Cyrus the king and the nature of his kingship*

Cyrus (II), son of Cambyses, is regarded as the founder of the Persian Empire.<sup>36</sup> Within twenty years he subjected an area more or less equivalent to the present-day Middle East to his rule. In 539 he started to attack Babylon, making an example of the city of Opis, which resisted him. The inhabitants were brutally killed and the city was plundered. The effect was that King Nabonidus and Babylon surrendered without much resistance. The Cyrus Cylinder portrays Cyrus’ triumphant victory and entrance into the city.<sup>37</sup> He is depicted as the new favourite of the Marduk, the city god, and he is depicted as a great and mighty king.

Scholarship has praised these imperial achievements:

This was a phenomenal and outstanding achievement for a single ruler, whose charisma and military skill allowed him to command a vast, multi-ethnic army, and

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<sup>34</sup> I am not sure whether the term ‘postcolonial’ fits my approach at the moment. The term implies we are beyond the phase of colonialism, whereas “decolonial” rather suggests we are not past the colonial period in the sense that we still bear the consequences of the colonialism of the past, which is currently transformed into a more refined form of colonialism with the centre still in the West, i.e. Europe and North America. Colonialism is not an obsolete system, but remains a mechanism of domination. The focus on the decolonial suggests that the back of colonialism can only be broken by the colonised, those who bear the marks of colonialism, i.e. live the experience of coloniality of being.

<sup>35</sup> Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being”, 262.

<sup>36</sup> Brosius, *The Persians*, 8.

<sup>37</sup> Brosius, *The Persians*, 12. The Cyrus Cylinder will be discussed in the next section.



who enforced a political organisation of empire which remained an effective tool of imperial government for over 200 years.<sup>38</sup>

And even from a perspective that recognises the dark side of his imperium, his accomplishments are described as spectacular:

in less than thirty years, he brought a vast territory under the control of a kingdom which, at the beginning of his reign, had been tiny. He was a brilliant tactician and strategist, able to move rapidly across numerous distances, to strike his opponents by surprise, and make calculated use of brutal and placatory gestures.<sup>39</sup>

What was the ideology of the kingship that allowed the empire to exist for 200 years? From the palace reliefs one gathers that one of the virtues of the king was that he was a peaceful sovereign, spreading a *pax persica* throughout the empire.<sup>40</sup> Yet the impression is that this peace was backed by a military capability that stopped at nothing. In fact, one of the king's other virtues was his soldiering capabilities and prowess as a fighter.<sup>41</sup>

The king stood at the centre, but he had divine support from the deity, Ahuramazda, who gave various territories to Persian supremacy, so that all may benefit from the maintenance of good order. In fact, the deity and the king were complementary and worked for the same ends.<sup>42</sup> Those people who were conquered were thought to be "united in service to the king, whose mastery they uphold and whose law they obey".<sup>43</sup> Everything, even creation,

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<sup>38</sup> Brosius, *The Persians*, 8. Brosius is intrigued by the Persians' ability to have lasted that long as an empire. She ascribes this to their all-inclusive policy, which was one of acceptance of diversity and a refusal to impose the Persian language and religion on other people (1). Brosius looks at the Persians through the eyes of imperial power and in a way the texts describing their power play with the public transcript of the Persians as they saw themselves – benign rulers. In terms of a decolonial perspective, her evaluation of the Persians becomes quite Eurocentric in as much as the focus remains imperial, with no reflection on the effects the empire had on the subjugated people, i.e. their coloniality of being.

<sup>39</sup> Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East*, 661. From a decolonial perspective it seems her focus too is on the imperium, although she recognises the brutal nature of conquest and the nature of the kind of information we have of Cyrus, namely his own testimony about himself. But I am not sure that she takes into account the effect of the imperium on the subjugated people. In 1995 the issue of the postcolonial condition only started emerging in discussions and the decolonial turn had not even been conceived. My observation should then not be interpreted as a reproach, but rather as an indication that these kinds of studies, despite their worth, are limited in terms of their geo-political knowledge. What we have are resources that provide us with a public transcript of Persian power, which could very well be the self-representations of the rulers as they wished to have been seen themselves. After all, writing and power are closely related.

<sup>40</sup> Brosius, *The Persians*, 35.

<sup>41</sup> Brosius, *The Persians*, 60.

<sup>42</sup> Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East*, 676.

<sup>43</sup> Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East*, 677.

serves the needs of Persia. And its wellbeing is of great concern to the king: "If Persia and its people are kept safe, by the continued adherence of its subjects to the Persian imperial order, then happiness will reign supreme."<sup>44</sup> The king descended from Persians and the empire is Persian-centred, so that the bureaucracy at the centre of the empire is Persian: courtiers, officials and soldiers. Rebellion against the king is regarded as rebellion against the deity and the worshipping of false gods.<sup>45</sup> The king was an absolute monarch, but he did not exercise his power in an arbitrary manner. Since he was the embodiment of positive values, he had to uphold the moral-political fabric and his actions were governed by appropriately high principles.<sup>46</sup> He is a just ruler equipped

with insight and ability to distinguish right from wrong, which makes him a guarantor of justice and maintainer of social order; he can do this because he does not react unthinkingly and is able to control his temper; as a result, the king metes out reward and punishment absolutely fairly, and only after due consideration of a case; he judges services rendered according to the potential of the individual, and is ready to reward loyalty.<sup>47</sup>

But the king kept the subordinates at arm's length, especially the Persian nobility. Despite the impression of a *pax persica*, reliefs depict audiences with the king approached by gift-bearing subjects of the empire, yet kept at bay by Persian nobility.<sup>48</sup> Even access by Persian nobility was curtailed in some instances, for example, a peer-group may be demoted to the status of servants who depend on the king for their status and position. To be related to the king was prestigious, but it did not give one special rights in relation to the king.<sup>49</sup> Royal favour was more important than noble birth.

From Cyrus' self-representation one gathers he sought to ingratiate himself with the subjected people. He safeguarded temples against looting and he presented himself as liberator and benefactor.<sup>50</sup> But he did not change the nature of the imperial involvement of the Babylonians on the periphery of the

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<sup>44</sup> Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East*, 678.

<sup>45</sup> Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East*, 678.

<sup>46</sup> Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East*, 679.

<sup>47</sup> Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East*, 682.

<sup>48</sup> Brosius, *The Persians*, 37. Brosius argues that the king's approachability was felt through his presence at various residences throughout the kingdom. The trek to these residences provided a spectacle of royal display demonstrating the king's presence in the empire.

<sup>49</sup> Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East*, 687: "There was considerable ranking according to birth and privilege within the Persian élite. It was only the élite who underwent the Persian education system, part of which consisted in replicating the social *status quo* and Persian aristocratic ideals, so that all knew their place in the system and how to behave to those above and below them."

<sup>50</sup> Grabbe, *History of the Jews*, 266–267. In my view Grabbe is less taken up with Cyrus and does not take the texts on Cyrus' self-representation at face value.

kingdom. The territories still paid tribute in those imperial structures developed by the Babylonian empire. Leaving these systems intact

encouraged Cyrus to expand territorially through military conquest while almost ignoring the potential for social transformation, administrative change, and economic intensification in the imperial colonies.<sup>51</sup>

However, some changes did take place. For the purposes of the discussion, an important change was moving subordinate groups to the periphery of the empire. And apparently the most likely candidates were the groups that had recently been brought to Babylon, for example, the group of Jewish exiles.<sup>52</sup> They were regarded as still mobile, but they were not forced, although the option was made very attractive. This was a low-level increase in population and his reason for moving them was to build strength at the boundaries of the empire in order to annex new territory. Moreover, a strong border can assist a travelling army and thus expand the borders of the empire. It is in this light that one should evaluate Cyrus' return of the population to Yehud along with their religious artefacts.<sup>53</sup> It was not a widespread return in terms of numbers and there was no real administrative support. The return may also be regarded as a way of controlling resistance, but more importantly the restoration of public buildings, such as the temple in Jerusalem and the wall, was represented as part of the virtues of a Persian king: "Royal duty prescribed that the king needed to be seen to improve the city, enhance its splendour and increase its welfare."<sup>54</sup>

The ethnocentric nature of Persian rule may leave the impression that top posts were in the hands of a small group within the Persian aristocracy. This may be true for the position of the satrap,<sup>55</sup> but for the level below the satrap or governor, the administrative system needed the co-operation of the local

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<sup>51</sup> Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow*, 24. Berquist (23) acknowledges the effect of empire on the subordinates: "The movement of an army and the realignment of trade and tribute patterns mark the construction of empire, as do the imposition of law codes and their enforcement structures. The effects of such a developing empire appear not only in the political structures of the core but also in the ramifications of imperial expansion upon the periphery."

<sup>52</sup> Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow*, 25. It reminds me of the LIFO criterion for redundancy: last in, first out!

<sup>53</sup> Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow*, 25: "A more robust and secure population in these areas increased the possibilities for tribute and peace along the military supply routes. Since temples were involved in the collection of tributes and taxes as well as in the ideological grounding of the society, the periphery received a certain level of support for rebuilding its religious institutions. Cyrus intended that the support of Jerusalem and other similar areas would assist his policies of imperial expansion."

<sup>54</sup> Brosius, *The Persians*, 70.

<sup>55</sup> Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East*, 696. However, there is the example of Metiochus, a Phoenician, who became a satrap.

ruling elite. In Yehud the society was organised by the priests, whereas in neighbouring Samaria, it was the house of Sanballat.<sup>56</sup> But this did not mean that the Persians were satisfied with receiving tribute and having the local elite run the territory as it suited themselves. The local administration still had to work for Persian interests, so that a tight watch was kept on local administration.<sup>57</sup> In fact, “the Persians harnessed diverse local traditions to exercise power flexibly and ... they interacted closely with their subjects.”<sup>58</sup> Nor was Yehud simply allowed to worship the local deity. Worshipping came with a snag, namely recognition that the local deity supported the Persians. In these terms, the idea of Cyrus finding favour with Yahweh is perhaps more part of Persian ideology imposed from above than a genuine theological Yahwistic construct from below.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, the sanctuaries of rebellious people were destroyed. Any lack of loyalty even affected ordinary lives; “[s]hort of resettling the populace, an attack on people’s religious cults was regarded an appropriate measure of punishment.”<sup>60</sup>

How benign was the *pax persica*? Is arguing that “[t]he Persians had no wish to impose their language, culture and religion on their subjects, and instead allowed each ethnic group to retain its cultural identity and heritage”<sup>61</sup> for the sake of political expediency and not to appear as an oppressing power, not downplaying the dark side of imperial intrusion and a denial of coloniality of being of the subordinated in Yehud? Can one imagine an ancient empire without what we today know of empire as

a carefully planned, organized system that requires the coordinated contributions of agencies engaged in the gathering of information; the sleuthing and stalking of potential victims; abduction or capture, incarceration, torture, and murder of victims; and the disposal of corpses?<sup>62</sup>

If one takes into account that initially, in Yehud, the Persian administration was unable to establish a strong centralised governing structure that would enable the imposition of a strong imperial will, a coordinated effort would not have been possible, although the effects would still have been there, even

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<sup>56</sup> Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East*, 697.

<sup>57</sup> Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East*, 697. Brosius (*The Persians*, 47) calls it an ingenious decision to leave the existing administration of the conquered lands intact.

<sup>58</sup> Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East*, 699. For example, the Persian administration acknowledged local languages, but then used Aramaic as a lingua franca and it predominated in royal and satrapal directives.

<sup>59</sup> Brosius (*The Persians*, 33) argues that the recognition of the importance of the local gods had political value for Persian rule.

<sup>60</sup> Brosius, *The Persians*, 69.

<sup>61</sup> Brosius, *The Persians*, 50.

<sup>62</sup> Marchak, *Reigns of Terror*, 34.

when a territory (as was the case in Yehud) was ruled by “local” people with the support of the “local” inhabitants.<sup>63</sup>

## II. The reality in Yehud

But the problem was exactly this: who were the locals? The biblical record indicates that the group that went into exile was not homogenous. Ezekiel represents a rural agricultural grouping and those taken into exile in 2 Kings 25 in all likelihood represent an urban group.<sup>64</sup> The experience of these two groups would eventually mark a “significant variation in attitudes and loyalties”, creating an urban political group and a rural agriculturally orientated group. Most importantly, when they return to Jerusalem, one cannot assume social solidarity amongst the returnees, although they may have professed the same religion.<sup>65</sup>

There is a third group, those who were not taken away, representing

a conservative force; their life had continued in exile and now they experienced the same sort of administrative governmental overstructure. For these natives, there were no changes except in personnel, and so their investment with the *status quo ante* affected their laissez-faire reaction to the minor shifts of the early Persian Empire.<sup>66</sup>

Those Jews coming from the rural farming areas in Babylon would have aligned themselves with this group in as much as they desired as few changes as possible in the new imperial administration. They would have tried to escape the measures of state control in agriculture, so that one can assume they would have worked towards minimising imperial interference in life in Yehud. In contrast, those who were appointed by the Persians would have worked towards greater Persian influence and involvement in Yehudite life.<sup>67</sup>

In Cyrus’ time these three groups experienced few tensions, since Cyrus demanded little change. Moreover, despite the edict which gave permission for the reconstruction of the temple, nothing happened until Darius’ reign eighteen years later. Cyrus’ influence on Yehud should be looked for in Babylon before his conquest of Yehud. His reputation went before him and that propaganda had an impact on the Jewish exiled communities, “providing a redefinition of reality and modifying the Jewish communities’ self-definition in lasting ways.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Berquist, *Judaism in Persia’s Shadow*, 27.

<sup>64</sup> Berquist, *Judaism in Persia’s Shadow*, 27. Those connected to the royal family went to the Babylonian king’s palace, whereas merchants, members of the military and landowners were taken to farming areas in Babylonia.

<sup>65</sup> Berquist, *Judaism in Persia’s Shadow*, 28.

<sup>66</sup> Berquist, *Judaism in Persia’s Shadow*, 28.

<sup>67</sup> Berquist, *Judaism in Persia’s Shadow*, 28.

<sup>68</sup> Berquist, *Judaism in Persia’s Shadow*, 29.

One such impact can be seen on Deutero-Isaiah (Isa. 40–55), more or less 50 years after the destruction of Jerusalem and the capturing of the ruling elite in Jerusalem and the imminent destruction of the Babylonian Empire:

The new fact, hitherto unheard of, was that the new king [Cyrus] wanted to do justice to those who had been victims of his predecessor, especially in the religious field: having been restored triumphantly to their places, the gods vilified by the Chaldean king were reintegrated into their function as protectors of their respective peoples; Yahweh and his priests, too, could return to Jerusalem.<sup>69</sup>

In the past the deity was deeply connected with the king.<sup>70</sup> It was no different with Cyrus. Yahweh's relationship with the Davidic dynasty was transferred to Cyrus: "God was no longer the lord of a few ill-armed bedouins but the lord of the greatest empire in the world."<sup>71</sup> Cyrus' imperial programme receives divine blessing from Yahweh (Isa. 45:1–3): "... Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and ungird the loins of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed..."<sup>72</sup>

But who were these people in whose midst Deutero-Isaiah seemed to have operated? Are they the lamenters at the waters of Babylon (Ps. 137), who needed comfort and pardon from Yahweh (Isa. 40:1–2)? Apparently not all lamented and wept or were looking for comfort:

The members and the descendants of the royal house lived at the expense of the Babylonian court and always had a place kept for them at the royal table. Some Jews certainly worked in the offices of the rich Jewish Egibi family.... Various others studied Babylonian language, literature and culture, and assimilated them deeply, then transferred them into their works in Hebrew: this was a group whose living conditions were not so unpleasant that they were prevented from keeping, cultivating and developing the old culture, the old language and the old religious traditions.<sup>73</sup>

One can thus readily accept that those who wrote texts in early Judaism were educated and culturally literate regarding ancient Babylonian traditions. The Cyrus inscription read with the Cyrus Cylinder alludes to themes in Deutero-Isaiah, the deity who calls the king to perform justice, to liberate the oppressed and to bring back the inhabitants of the country of death to life. The

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<sup>69</sup> Garbini, *History and Ideology*, 91.

<sup>70</sup> The term "dynastic deity" comes up. Cf. Garbini, *History and Ideology*, 89. Yahweh was bound exclusively to the house of David, with the first temple attached to Solomon's palace. Criticism of the king amounted to criticism of the religion.

<sup>71</sup> Garbini, *History and Ideology*, 91.

<sup>72</sup> Towards the end of Deutero-Isaiah Cyrus loses his appeal and the prophets have Israel and Yahweh enter into a direct covenant with each other without any intermediary (Isa. 55). See Garbini, *History and Ideology*, 98.

<sup>73</sup> Garbini, *History and Ideology*, 92. Garbini shows the similarity in imagery between what Deutero-Isaiah is saying in Isa. 42:5–7 and the Babylonian text of 'The Righteous Sufferer'. The only difference is the name of the deities: Yahweh and Marduk. From this Garbini infers that Deutero-Isaiah must have had a good literary education.

Cyrus Cylinder's inscription revealed that it was a foundation text that followed the ideology of Assurbanipal of Assyria, making Cyrus follow in the footsteps of the previous rulers of Babylon:

In short, there was a Babylonian literary text which should be considered a classic, providing ideas both for Achaemenidean political literature which followed the furrows of the most classical Babylonian tradition, and for the political and religious message of an Israelite prophet.<sup>74</sup>

It is evident that one needs to think of Deutero-Isaiah as linked to the concerns of the Babylonian Jews who were related to the royal family and its entourage that found domicile in or near the Babylonian court.<sup>75</sup> The close ties with the Babylonian court are also evident in the prophet's knowledge about international events, such as Cyrus' advance towards the Babylonian centre. But the prophet was also closely linked to the Babylonian cult, as his references to idol worship reflect knowledge of Babylonian religion. Deutero-Isaiah thus presents us with a text from urban Babylonian Jews who included politicians and priests.<sup>76</sup> Its audience were Jews working in the palace and Babylonian temple system. These Jews had the intent to throw off the yoke of Babylonian oppression, and they found their redemption in the figure of Cyrus, whose propaganda weakened the empire from within. The text is pro-Persian and it suggests that the fortunes of the Babylonian Jews would be better under Persian rule. However, the text gives evidence of religious intolerance in remaining exclusively Yahwistic over against Cyrus' acceptance of other religions. The support for Cyrus is given for selfish reasons, namely taking control of Jerusalem "within the context of a wealthy, lush Persian Empire".<sup>77</sup> However, Cyrus remains the "mighty and virtuous messiah", without any flaw and receiving Yahweh's complete and unwavering support: He guarantees the success of Cyrus.

But would the Chronicler be part of that group? The theological and ideological atmosphere in which he operated was pro-Cyrus. To maintain the propaganda, he needed to be critical of the kings within the Davidic dynasty. He followed Deutero-Isaiah's theology in making Cyrus the new favourite of Yahweh. But to achieve that, the tradition's favourable evaluation of the Davidic dynasty needed to change. He would have been part of this "urban" group with close ties to power, but not necessarily the court itself. The emphasis on the priestly functions naturally places the Chronicler amongst a group of priests: "In a day when the priests and the politicians compete on somewhat equal footing for social influence, Chronicles argues radically for a

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<sup>74</sup> Garbini, *History and Ideology*, 93. In other words, the famous policy of tolerance is in fact part of the normal policy of Mesopotamian rulers aspiring to build an empire (94).

<sup>75</sup> Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow*, 30.

<sup>76</sup> Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow*, 30.

<sup>77</sup> Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow*, 31.

shift towards priestly power.”<sup>78</sup> And in Persian Yehud, priests had control over writing, enabling them to propagate their own views for the first time without any monarchic control. But this would mean that the real audience would be other priests and the text simply fulfils the role of a public transcript that provides a self-representation of the assumed priestly ruling elite in Yehud.

If one looks at the literary depictions in Chronicles and Ezra/Nehemiah, one sees an empty land. After the deportations by the Babylonians, there were no people left in the land.<sup>79</sup> The notion of an empty land “represents a theological point of view that those returning were a ‘refined, purified remnant’ of the community that sinned under the monarchy and was exiled as punishment.”<sup>80</sup> And this ideology was advocated about a century after the initial return of the descendants of those who were deported from Jerusalem. And this latter group did not constitute a multitude.<sup>81</sup> Yet their power through the texts depicts a land where those who were not taken into exile do not have a real role to play in the story.<sup>82</sup>

Ezra/Nehemiah instigate a conflict between the returnees and what they call “the people of the land”, who are identified as foreigners. If not everyone was taken into exile, it means these people were descendants of those who remained behind. But in the Book of Ezra, they were no longer regarded as family! However, if one accepts that the returnees were not a large group, they would have been absorbed into the community in Jerusalem. But why would the friction that could have existed be turned into downright antagonism?<sup>83</sup> This conflict remains a literary construction based on a particular ideology.

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<sup>78</sup> Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow*, 156.

<sup>79</sup> Grabbe, *History of the Jews*, 286. Japhet (“Periodization”, 82–84) thinks that the Chronicler suggests that Jerusalem was emptied of inhabitants whereas its environment was left intact.

<sup>80</sup> Grabbe, *History of the Jews*, 287.

<sup>81</sup> Carter, *The Emergence of Yehud*, 246–248. He estimates them at about 20,000 persons. Lipschits (“Demographic changes”, 365) argues that the return left no archaeological imprint: “The demographic figures from the Jerusalem region also attest that even at the height of the Persian Period, the city’s population was only 3,000, which is about 12% of the population of the city and its environs on the eve of the destruction.”

<sup>82</sup> Oded (“Where is the ‘Myth of the Empty Land’?”, 71) argues that Judah was in reality not empty, but the population was very small, showing a marked decline in quality and quantity. Judah was not state with a capital; there were no leaders and no organised community with significant economic, cultural or literary activities.

<sup>83</sup> Grabbe, *History of the Jews*, 288: “We would be naive if we thought there was no friction between those coming to an unfamiliar land from which their ancestors had been deported, with the need to establish themselves and build a new life, and those native Jews who had now been established in their property for several generations. ... Yet a



What seems clear to me is that there is a definite group closely associated with the temple that filled a gap once left by those deported, namely the presence of literary texts that reflected the society's memory. With the deportation a break occurred, since the scribes and priests in whose midst texts came into being were sent to Babylon where some succeeded in writing other texts. Whereas there was a close relationship between religion and power, on their return their power was found to have diminished considerably: Jerusalem was part of Yehud, which became a small and distant border province in an enormous empire. With no king who used to fulfil a religious role as well, the priesthood stepped in to fill the void in leadership. Grabbe says:

It is at such times when a people is conscious of a break in its history that attempts are often made to collect, organize, and record the traditions that up to then had been the repository of the collective memory.<sup>84</sup>

But this collective memory has a geo-political location. It is not the collective memory of those lacking access to writing, but the memory of those whose power in the past and on their return from exile enabled them to have (continued?) access to writing.<sup>85</sup> They would be the priests writing to and for themselves, creating a self-representation that would serve as a public transcript in their limited dominium. Since it is a public transcript, the assumption is that it is constructed with the intention that the subordinates should buy into it. And the subordinates in this instance would be, in all probability, those who never left or who were not deported. In the case of Asa, what is heard is the following: Asa compares well with Cyrus, yet he was not as good as Cyrus. He experienced peace in his reign, completed quite a few building projects, won a war or two, just as Cyrus did, but in the end he ignored his deity, whereas Cyrus interacted with this rejected deity of Israel.<sup>86</sup>

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certain amount of friction and occasional quarrels is not the same as wholesale antagonism between the two groups."

<sup>84</sup> Grabbe, *History of the Jews*, 342.

<sup>85</sup> See Snyman, "Collective Memory", 53–83.

<sup>86</sup> It is for this reason that I am wary to read into the Asa narrative's reference to Cush a socio-religious and socio-political polemic. My reading here is also in a bit of a contrast to my reading of Asa in Snyman, "'Tis a Vice to Know Him", 103–106. There I read the Asa narrative from the point of view of Saul to illustrate a particular narrative rationality in the account. Saul served there as a paradigm to evaluate Asa's reign: lack of concern for the cult provoked YHWH's anger towards Saul similar to his anger towards Asa refusing to consult him after 35 years of rule. Whereas Saul provides a negative paradigm, the figure of Cyrus provides a positive one, the heights towards which the kings should have striven in their respective reigns. Jonker ("Revisiting the Saul Narrative", 283–305) argues that the presence of Saul in Chronicles serves to acknowledge the tribe of Benjamin's political and cultic influence, as well as curtailing any claim they might put forward in this regard. He sees it as "intragroup" negotiation

## D. The Story of Asa as Public Transcript

### *I. The Chronicler's particular emphasis*

Asa's story in 1 Kings 15 portrays him in a very positive light, whereas he becomes a more vicious person in the Chronicles version. The Kings' version is much shorter: 16 verses compared to Chronicle's 47 verses. The thrust of the story is the same: Asa ruled 41 years and removed idolatry from Judah (although he did not destroy all the places of sacrifice). He placed votive gifts in the temple. However, he was continuously at war with Israel's Baasha. At some stage he used his diplomatic skills to persuade Benhadad of Assyria to attack Israel in order to relieve the pressure on Judah. He used that occasion to fortify some of his cities. He died with an illness in his feet, but he was buried with his forefathers in the city of David.

Chronicles provides one with a more detailed account of the reign of Asa. The addition of prophetic material and the chronological references in the Chronicles account are unique to the Chronicler's version. But this material that the Chronicler added to the Asa story gives the story a different angle and renders the outcome in quite the opposite way to how it is rendered in the royal version of Kings. The Chronicler divides the history of Asa in two parts, a positive and a negative part, of which the negative one carries more weight than the account of the first positive 35 years.

The main difference between the story in the royal history presented in Kings and the story told in Chronicles is whether Asa was a good or a bad king. Both Kings and Chronicles suggest that Asa did not remove all the high places, yet he did what was right in the eyes of Yahweh. However, Chronicles then suggests that Asa eventually removed all the high places. So it seems the Chronicler contradicts himself. Furthermore, the diplomatic manoeuvre with Benhadad was not judged negatively in the royal report, but – given the extra material added to the account of this incident in Chronicles – the diplomatic manoeuvre is regarded in a bad light.

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that does not occur at the expense of the intergroup identity negotiation. Jonker talks of "hybridity" whereby two identities are being balanced: a belonging to the Persian Empire as well as being part of a particular ethnic group with its own cult and customs.

I Kgs. 15		2 Chr. 14–16	
15:9–10	Introductory synchronism with Northern Kingdom	14:1	No synchronism, peace in the first 10 years of his reign
15:11–12	Positive judgment on reign	14:2–6	Positive judgment on first part of reign: his religious reforms
		14:7	Building programme: fortification of cities
		14:8	Military strength
		14:9–15	War with Zerah, the Cushite
		15:1–15	Azariah's prophecy and Asa's ensuing covenant renewal
15:13	Removal of the queen mother, Maacah	15:16	Removal of the queen mother, Maacah
15:14	Not all the high places were removed, but Asa remains faithful	15:17	Not all the high places were removed, but Asa remains righteous
15:15	Placed father's votive gifts in temple	15:18	Votive gifts in temple
15:16	Continuous war between Asa and Baasha of Israel	15:19	No war until the 35 <sup>th</sup> year of his rule with Baasha of Israel
15:17–21	Alliance with Benhadad and the outcome of the war	16:1–6	Alliance with Benhadad and the outcome of the war
		16:7–9	Encounter with the prophet and the negative evaluation of Asa's strategy
15:22	Everyone called up to remove the fortification of Ramah and to build Geba and Mizpah	16:10	Asa becomes angry and throws prophet into jail and suppresses his own people
15:23a	The rest of Asa's acts can be read in the Books of the King's annals	16:11	Reference to the history of the Kings of Judah and Israel
15:23b	Asa's disease in his feet	16:12	Asa's disease in his feet in the 39 <sup>th</sup> year of his reign, his refusal to consult Yahweh and his reliance on medical doctors
15:24	Asa buried with ancestors	16:13	Asa dies in 41 <sup>st</sup> year of reign
		16:14	Buried in city of David in a tomb he prepared for himself, buried with spices, perfume and a fire in his honour.

From this comparison the following aspects in his favour become noticeable in the Chronicler's version:

- (i) There was peace in the first part of Asa's reign;
- (ii) He had a building programme by which the cities were fortified;
- (iii) He was able to enforce his power by military means;
- (iv) He worshipped Yahweh and renewed the covenant;
- (v) He remained righteous, although there is a question mark behind his cultic reforms, since it is unclear whether the high places have been removed;
- (vi) Real war with Israel only came after 35 years of rule;
- (vii) When he died, he was buried in a tomb he prepared for himself and a fire was lit in his honour.

The following aspects that are not in his favour can be detected in the Chronicler's version:

- (i) He became angry at some stage and threw the prophet into jail;
- (ii) He started to suppress his own people;
- (iii) He refused to consult with Yahweh and relied on the physicians of his time;
- (iv) He dies and is buried in the city of David in his own tomb, not with the ancestors.

Asa was apparently known for the cities he built and fortified. The book of Kings concludes the Asa history with a reference to the cities he built (1 Kgs. 15:23). The Chronicler seems to elaborate on that point and turns it into a *topos* in order to drive home his theological point: faithfulness to Yahweh brings prosperity and peace. Peace was important as the Persian Empire was thought of in terms of a *pax persica*. Asa is depicted as a pious and good ruler and the story initially provides the readers with very good reasons to accept this portrayal: there was peace in the land. Asa must have done something to deserve that peace, and the reason for the peace is found in his cultic reforms. One of the consequences of peace was that he was able to embark on an immense building programme (14:6–8), fortifying the cities against future hostilities with neighbouring states. This building programme as a sign of his prosperity is a reward for his faithfulness. The prosperity also covers the relationship between Asa and his people: he gains their support for the building projects through persuasion and not through command (14:7). By ensuring their welfare they, in turn, remained loyal to him and Yahweh, thus ensuring the prosperity of the land.

Then follows an illustration of what is meant by Yahweh's benevolent retribution: in Asa's complete reliance on Yahweh in a time of crisis (war),

Yahweh protects him and his people (14:9–15). The readers are provided once more with sound reasons why Asa is such a good and exemplary king: in the face of an onslaught by more than a million soldiers of Zerah, the Cushite, Asa with his mere 580 000 men simply relies on Yahweh for victory. Their faithfulness is described in Asa's short prayer in which he claims Yahweh's exclusive protection for Judah (14:11). In the prayer he acknowledges God's rule and sovereign power to determine the outcome of the war, which results in victory for Judah. The story does not tell us how the victory came about, but only that Zerah fled and his army was pursued by Judah, clearly leaving the impression that it was an act of God. Yahweh was the warrior god; he defeated the Cushites, and although Asa took the spoils and sacked the cities, his success is attributed to Yahweh who raised fear of the Lord in these cities, paralysing them in the face of Asa's onslaught. In other words, faithfulness to Yahweh ensures long-lasting peace. When that peace is threatened, Yahweh ensures that the threat is swiftly dealt with in a way that attributes the success of the suppression to his miraculous intervention.

The historical identity of the prophets Azariah and Hanani is difficult to ascertain. It is part of the Chronicler's structure to have prophets draw the theological conclusions of the kings' actions (Shemaiah and Rehoboam – 2 Chr. 12:5–8; Jehu and Jehoshaphat – 2 Chr. 19:2; Eleazar and Jehoshaphat – 2 Chr. 20:37). The Chronicler uses other biblical citations in the prophecy of Hanani: Zechariah 4:10, 1 Samuel 13:13–14, Isaiah 31:1. The same is true for the prophecy of Azariah, which finds a parallel with parts of Hosea (3:4–5, 15 and 6:1). Both speeches stand in the service of the Chronicler's point of view: Asa's fate is determined by his response to the prophet. His reaction to Hanani is antithetical to his reaction to Azariah.<sup>87</sup>

## *II. Asa and the Cyrus Cylinder*

The concern in the text of the Cyrus Cylinder is Marduk, the god of Babylon, who is angered by Nabonidus' faithlessness and with the suffering of the inhabitants of Babylon as a result of Nabonidus' misdeeds. Marduk chooses Cyrus, who then worships him daily. Cyrus then protects the cultic centres of Babylon, releases the inhabitants from forced labour, and rebuilds, repairs and embellishes the walls.<sup>88</sup>

The story told by the Cyrus Cylinder<sup>89</sup> to a large extent reflects some of the themes mentioned in the Chronicler's version of Asa's reign, with the

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<sup>87</sup> Jonker ("Cushites", 871, fn. 26) says that although the second battle is the opposite of the first, both prove ironically that Asa's earlier reference to the fact the powerful and the weak do not differ, is absolutely true.

<sup>88</sup> Kuhrt, "The Cyrus Cylinder", 87.

<sup>89</sup> The text of the Cylinder that is used was published by Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire*, 70–74.

difference that whereas Asa is first good and then bad, the antagonist in the Cyrus Cylinder is Nabonidus, a bad king, and the protagonist is Cyrus himself, the saviour of the people.

The story starts with the way Asa's ended: a broken relationship with the deity. Nabonidus removed the worship of Marduk,<sup>90</sup> while Asa refuses to consult with Yahweh (2 Chr. 16:12) and relies on Ben-Hadad of Aram (2 Chr. 16:1–6):

he stopped the regular offerings [...] he placed in the cult centres. The worship of Marduk, king of the gods, he removed from his mind.

He suppressed his own people, who were like prisoners enclosed by darkness, whereas Asa inflicted cruelties on his own people (2 Chr. 16:10):

He repeatedly did that which was bad for his city. Daily [...] he destroyed all his [subjects] with an unending yoke.

... the inhabitants of Sumer and Akkad, who had become like corpses ...

In his anger he gathered all the divine statues in Babylon against the will of the gods, whereas in a fit of anger Asa threw the seer Hanani into jail (2 Chr. 16:10) after having sent treasures of the temple to Ben-Hadad, the king of Aram:

The gods who lived in them left their dwelling places, despite his anger (?) he brought them into Babylon.

Whereas Asa's reliance on other kings led to his being at war for the rest of his reign (2 Chr. 16:9), Nabonidus' rebelliousness caused Marduk to search for "a just ruler to suit his heart", which he found in the person of Cyrus:

Marduk, the great lord, who cares for his people, looked with pleasure at his good deeds and his righteous heart.

Asa too had the good characteristics of Cyrus. He did what was good and right in the eyes of Yahweh (2 Chr. 14:2). He had a half a million troops carrying shields and spears and drawing bows. Of Cyrus it is said:

His massive troops, whose number was immeasurable like the water of a river, marched with their arms at their side.

Cyrus then took Babylon without any resistance, whereas Asa, in the invasion of Zerah, merely pursued Zerah's army after they had been defeated by Yahweh (2 Chr. 15:12). They were broken by Yahweh and his army.

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<sup>90</sup> Nabonidus built a shrine for the moon-god at Harran. This extensive programme apparently caused the inhabitants of Babylon to accuse Nabonidus of eroding their privileges. Cyrus, in re-establishing Marduk in the city, also restored the citizens' rights. See Kuhrt, "The Cyrus Cylinder", 90.

After Cyrus have saved Babylon from Nabonidus' oppression,<sup>91</sup>

All the inhabitants of Babylon, the whole of the land of Sumer and Akkad, princes and governors knelt before him, kissed his feet, rejoiced at his kingship; their faces shone.

"The lord, who through his help has brought the dead to life, who in (a time of) disaster and oppression has benefited all" – thus they joyfully celebrated him, honoured his name.

Asa was not celebrated in this way, but in the renewal of the covenant with Yahweh with Azariah's prophecy one reads (2 Chr. 15:14–15) that the people took an oath with a loud voice and shouted and blew horns. They all rejoiced because they had sworn with their hearts. And God then gave them peace all around. Similarly, Cyrus

...set up, with acclamation and rejoicing, the seat of lordship in the palace of the ruler. Marduk, the great lord [...] me the great heart, [...] of Babylon, daily I cared for his worship.

Cyrus stressed the peaceful nature of his campaign against Nabonidus:

I, Cyrus, king of the universe ... eternal seed of kingship, whose reign was loved by Bel and Nabu and whose kingship they wanted to please their hearts – when I had entered Babylon peacefully,

My numerous troops marched peacefully through Babylon. I did not allow any troublemaker to arise in the whole land of Sumer and Akkad.

The Chronicler makes a lot of Asa's building projects. He built fortified cities with walls and towers (2 Chr. 14:6–7). The Cyrus Cylinder, which is a typical Mesopotamian building text, "placed as foundational deposits underneath or in the walls of buildings the construction or restoration of which they serve to commemorate",<sup>92</sup> refers towards the end of the inscription to the building projects of Cyrus himself:

To strengthen the wall Imgur-Enlil, the great wall of Babylon [...], I took action.

The quay-wall of brick on the bank of the moat, which an earlier king had built, without completing the work ...

[...with] asphalt and bricks I built anew and [completed the work on it(?)].

[...] with bronze bands, thresholds and *nukuse* (door-posts) [...in] their [gates]

One can assume he also restored the temples of the deities:

The city of Babylon and all its cult-centres I maintained in well-being.

... the cities on the other side of the Tigris, whose dwelling-places had [of o]ld fallen into ruin

– the gods who dwelt there I returned to their home and let them move into an eternal dwelling.

<sup>91</sup> It was standard for Mesopotamian rulers to restore the rights and privileges, as attested to by the royal inscriptions of Sargon, Essarhaddon and Assurbanipal. The oppression here is probably forced labour.

<sup>92</sup> Kuhrt, "The Cyrus Cylinder", 88.

And the gods of Sumer and Akad ... I caused them to move into a dwelling-place pleasing to their hearts in their sanctuaries...

In these building texts “the ruler is always represented as acting particularly piously in relation to the god whose building is being restored and a number of elements, such as the categories of activities listed and their stylistic form, become very standardised.”<sup>93</sup> The building in which this text would have been placed would have been a sanctuary for Marduk. Moreover, a building text like this is part of a long tradition and it probably draw on earlier models.<sup>94</sup> It is not unique and those in Babylon who resided at the court would have been encountered the genre. Building texts such as these testify to ideological manipulation of local traditions.<sup>95</sup> Just as the Cyrus Cylinder draws on similar texts in the genre, it seems that Cyrus then too followed a *modus operandi* similar to other Assyrian rulers “whereby cities occupying a key-position in troublesome areas or areas where there was likely to be international conflict had their privileges and/or exempt status reinstated and guaranteed by the central government.”<sup>96</sup>

## E. Conclusion

Has this study succeeded in shifting the point of view from which one can read the Book of Chronicles? Perhaps not as dramatically as initially announced, it has created an awareness of the wretched of the earth as possible recipients of the book, even only as (an) intended audience(s). The problem is that what one has is a text or texts, and they are inevitably associated with power. Thus, in looking at the way power functions in these texts, one can construct a picture of what happened at grassroots level.

I think a decolonial critique can be quite instructive in this regard, although I may be accused of a creating a mountain that has only brought forth a mouse! A decolonial critique, pretentious as it might be when engaged in by someone usually associated with imperial power, nevertheless creates an awareness of the issue of power, especially imperial power in relation to knowledge production.

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<sup>93</sup> Kuhrt, “The Cyrus Cylinder”, 88.

<sup>94</sup> Significantly, these earlier models are to be sought not in Neo-Babylonian texts, but in Assyrian prototypes. Kuhrt (“The Cyrus Cylinder”, 91) found one in Esarhaddon that has a few parallels with the Cyrus Cylinder. The closest stylistic parallel is texts from Assurbanipal, whom the text in any case acknowledges as the worthy and respected predecessor of Cyrus (92).

<sup>95</sup> Kuhrt, “The Cyrus Cylinder”, 93.

<sup>96</sup> Kuhrt, “The Cyrus Cylinder”, 93.



The Book of Chronicles produces knowledge regarding the past of an ethnic group associated with Jerusalem and the temple. It is new knowledge, as the history is reinterpreted to serve the needs of people in a new context. With Cyrus as the example to aspire to (and Saul as the example of what happened in real life), the text appears to express knowledge about the past in terms of Persian imperial rule. Cyrus is the one that shines, and every king looks very dim when compared to him.<sup>97</sup>

Although Persian imperial power appears to be detached from a certain level of socio-political organisation in Yehud (the satrap was the lowest level directly manipulated by Persian authorities), a particular coloniality of knowledge needs to be recognised. Persian imperial power can be observed in the production of knowledge through texts. Its powerful impact would not have excluded the use of texts, given the proximity of the art of writing to the seat of power, albeit in a province at the outskirts of the empire. The Book of Chronicles provides a particular community with new knowledge of its past. It consists of a new history that legitimates certain claims to power within a particular structure of imperial power that ultimately favours those who make the claim to power via the text of Chronicles. The imperial power is Persian, with Cyrus as its main proponent and who is regarded as beneficent.

A decolonial reading sensitises the reader to his or her own position within the colonial-postcolonial matrix. One's position is especially revealed as soon as one starts to identify in some way or other with the main figures in Persian history and its influence on people at grassroots level in Yehud. An awareness or lack thereof regarding the effects of imperial power on ordinary people may perhaps reveal one's position in the current coloniality of power or

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<sup>97</sup> Manasseh receives a bad press in the Book of Kings (2 Kgs. 21), but the Chronicler evaluates him quite positively in the end. He comes off lightly compared to the other kings. He did what Asa did not do: return to YHWH. In fact, the depiction of his reign is the opposite to that of Asa. Whereas Asa initially enjoyed peace and recognised YHWH, and became apostate at the end of his reign, Manasseh was apostate at the beginning, and very late in his reign started to recognise YHWH. It is also then that he started to exhibit the traits associated with Cyrus: peace, building projects and care for the cult. Although he had a dramatic conversion as exile in Babylon, he is not as clean as Cyrus. Knauf ("The Glorious days", 177) is of the opinion that the Chronicler turned a bad king into a good one by exculpating Manasseh from the burden to have caused the fall of Jerusalem. In the Book of Kings he is the scapegoat. Stavrakopoulou ("The Blackballing of Manasseh", 249–253) refers to the blackballing of Manasseh that casts a long shadow in the Book of Kings. The Chronicler's version only makes sense in terms of the Kings version and an anti-Manasseh polemic in certain texts. Sweeney ("King Manasseh", 271–273) focuses attention on Manasseh's position as a loyal vassal to Assyria, which allowed him a certain freedom in the end. Is it perhaps possible to make a case for Manasseh expressing loyalty to a previous imperial power, a loyalty Cyrus had a right to in a similar but later context?

being.<sup>98</sup> However, despite being sensitised for the perspective of the “wretched of the earth”, that perspective cannot be revealed when the text remains silent in this regard. It is only something a reader can construct on the basis of circumstantial evidence. Thus it remains a construction that can change when other information is taken into consideration.

Based on the assumption of the association of writing with power, the movement of people in the Persian Empire and exiles from Jerusalem as possible candidates for such movement, and the need for a local ruling elite that can assist the satrap as an imperial appointee, the most likely candidates for a real audience in the Book of Chronicles appear to be some of those who were in exile and were sent to back Jerusalem to help the Persian administration in ordering and organising the province of Yehud. In other words, they were people associated with power from the very start, although subordinated to the Persian regime. But being in power meant they were able to subordinate those living in Yehud, those I would label subaltern,<sup>99</sup> because they lacked a voice. Those who were responsible for Chronicles were culturally literate and educated. Although the formulation above suggests a date in the proximity of the establishment of the Province of Yehud (the return from exile), this need not be the case, as a later date would suggest that the society there would still have been in need of identity configuration at a later stage in the Persian Empire, namely priests providing a representation of themselves and a legitimation of their position as the ruling elite in Yehud. They had to justify their loyalty to Cyrus. This was done by bringing in Cyrus as the new anointed of YHWH and rewriting the royal history (they could because there were no kings any longer!) in a way that justified Cyrus’ power and, by implication, their own.

There seems to be an affinity between Asa’s story in Chronicles and the stories that were woven around the figure of Cyrus. He receives quite a positive “press” in the Cyrus Cylinder as well as in the Old Testament. The picture one has of him is that of a saviour and someone who is tolerant. But in the Old Testament the issue is less one of his tolerance than of his finding favour with Yahweh. In Chronicles Asa is portrayed along the lines of a Cyrus doing the right things, but because Cyrus became the chosen one during and after the exile, Asa must be found to be corrupt. Given the presence of standard texts depicting victors and losers, the Chronicler had ample examples to choose from to make Asa appear to fail. Yet Asa receives a burial fit for a

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<sup>98</sup> The author has expressed his own position of “perpetrator” in various essays in some way or other. For the most concise and clear expression of identity, see Snyman, “Playing the role of perpetrator”, 8–20.

<sup>99</sup> The term “subaltern” is based on an essay by Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, 271–313. Subalternity is not the same as subordination. Lacking a voice is peculiar to being subaltern.

Persian king, in fact alluding to Cyrus' own funeral (2 Chr. 16:14). He was buried in a tomb he had hewn for himself in the city of David, laid on a bier filled with various spices and a fire was lit in his honour. Cyrus had a special tomb which differed from later ones and exceeded them. His tomb is in Pasargadae, the royal centre he developed and named after his tribe.<sup>100</sup> What is striking, though, is that for Asa a fire was lit in his honour, and when the Persian king dies, the sacred fires lit in his honour had to be extinguished throughout the land.<sup>101</sup>

However, for the purposes of this chapter, the following concluding remarks by Amélie Kuhrt are appropriate:

The assumption that Persian imperial control was somehow more tolerable than the Assyrian yoke is based, on the one hand, on the limited experience of one influential group of a very small community which happened to benefit by Persian policy and, on the other hand, on a piece of blatant propaganda successfully modelled on similar texts devised to extol a representative and practitioner of the earlier and much condemned Assyrian imperialism.<sup>102</sup>

The story of Asa is part of the public transcript of those in power in Yehud that ties the history of Yehud to the Persian Empire. It creates a coloniality of knowledge whereby the royal history of Judah culminates with the assumption of a benevolent Cyrus to whom is ascribed tolerance for the "Other". Moreover, Yahweh sides with power, not with the subordinated, whose transcript remains hidden because they lack power and writing.

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<sup>100</sup> Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East*, 661, 684.

<sup>101</sup> Kuhrt (*The Ancient Near East*, 684) professes that this is a practice that is obscure and of which she has no information.

<sup>102</sup> Kuhrt, "The Cyrus Cylinder", 94–95.

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