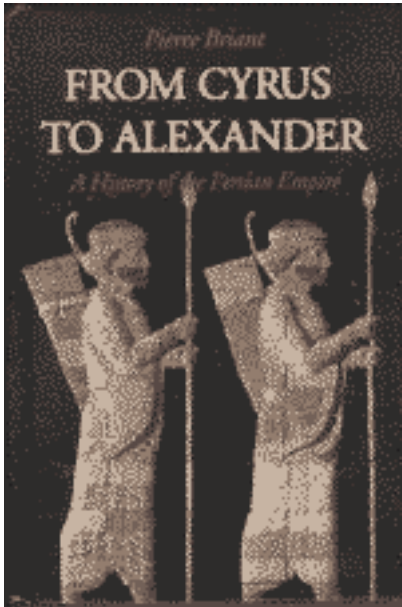


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**Briant, Pierre**

*From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*

Translated by Peter T. Daniels

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The French edition of Briant's tome appeared in 1996. The plan was to update the manuscript when producing the English translation. In the end, this did not prove feasible, and the English text is essentially that of the original French. Although this might seem disappointing at first, it is actually difficult to update a text that is not very old. Otherwise, any revisions will tend to be cosmetic rather than substantial.

One of the banes of works on Persian history by biblical scholars is the continued dependence on Olmstead's *History of the Persian Empire* (1948). The persistent reliance on long-outdated secondary sources by many biblical scholars has had a deleterious effect on the standard histories of the Jews during the Persian period. There have in fact been more recent histories of the Persian Empire. Cook (1983) gave a very useful general survey. Frye (1984) attempted a much more lengthy survey, from prehistory to the Sassanian Period, but included an important chapter on the Achaemenid Empire. Yamauchi's study (1990) turned out to be a rather unbalanced treatment, too often dominated by one of his main source (Herodotus), so that a great deal of unnecessary detail is given where Herodotus has it, even when it has little to do with "the Bible and Persia." This superfluous detail in parts of the book was then matched by significant omissions in other parts; for example, the Persian kings after Artaxerxes I are mentioned only in passing with no systematic treatment of their reigns (see further Grabbe 1991).

The work on political history by Dandamaev (1989) proved to be disappointingly uncritical (see Briant 1993).

A major reliable treatment of the Achaemenid Empire was thus very much needed, and Briant's history now happily fills this major gap. In length, conceptualization, depth, and critical scrutiny of the sources it could not be more different from previous histories. At well over a thousand pages, it devotes detailed attention to all aspects of the two centuries of Persian rule. The traditional political history is not neglected, but it is given in the *longue durée* of Persian history as a holistic entity with a thorough study of the social, economic, administrative, cultural, and religious aspects of the period. No facet of Persian history seems to be neglected.

The book is organized in a rough chronological sequence, according to the order of Persian kings. Socioeconomic, ideological, cultural, religious, and administrative aspects of Persian rule are then introduced at the appropriate point in the narrative. This means that some subjects are split up and treated in more than one place, but this arrangement has the advantage of letting the reader see how matters developed. For example, the organization and administration of the empire altered as time went on, or at least there is more information at some times than at others. It is essential that the dynamic nature of the evidence be recognized and taken account of.

Briant puts the emphasis very much on the critical use of the primary sources. A skeptical judgment is exercised with a sharpness that may come as a surprise to some. Much that is taken for granted in other studies is subjected to close scrutiny here, sometimes with a critical approach that calls into question some standard assumptions. On the whole, Briant shows a good deal of skepticism toward the Greek sources. For example, he shows that the so-called "Peace of Callias" of 448 is not as secure as the standard texts make it (579–82); in the end, he seems to accept that such an event took place but was quite different from the way it is depicted by the Greek authors of the fourth century. However, Briant is no "minimalist." He makes use of all sources available. For example, the second-century C.E. Greek writer Athenaeus collected anecdotes on all sorts of subjects in his *Deipnosophista*, including those relating to events and figures in the Persian Empire. Not surprisingly, some of these anecdotes are of dubious historicity; however, Briant does not necessarily reject them out of hand. He sees that even when the details are unlikely to be historical, they may still convey an important truth about some aspect of life under Persian rule.

On the other hand, Briant not infrequently notes that some story or episode does not "belong to History" but is the expression of an ideology, legend, myth, or something similar (e.g., the statements of the book of Isaiah on Cyrus [46]). Yet he also points out

more than once that “historians cannot choose their sources”; that is, they have to make do with what they have, not what they would like. Wrestling with recalcitrant sources is one of the occupational hazards of historians.

Rather than footnotes or references in the text, Briant has chosen to include a separate discussion of sources at the end of the book, in a section of “Research Notes” (this section formed a separate volume in the French edition). It is an extension part of the text (about 175 pages) and discusses the sources for each section of the history, along with any problems and differences of opinion. This form of giving references is somewhat at variance from what most of us are used to, yet in most cases it is not difficult to find out the specific references to both original sources and secondary studies at any given point in the text. This section is in fact a valuable discussion of how different sources have been weighed and compared with one another. Accompanying this is a lengthy bibliography of secondary sources that is also a rich repository of studies for researchers. With the extensive indexes of citations, ancient words discussed, personal, divine, and geographical names, and general topics, this will be an important reference for a long time to come.

In one important shift in view, Briant notes in the introduction that he no longer accepts that the Gadatas Inscription is genuine, in an article in press. The question of its authenticity has long been debated (Grabbe 1992: 59), but in the French and English editions of his book Briant made use of Gadatas to help establish Persian policy at various points. He has now produced a study that argues that the inscription is an ancient forgery of the Roman period and cannot be quoted as Achaemenid evidence. He also argues that the so-called Daiva Inscription, which has occasioned a good deal of discussion, is not a reference to a specific occasion but a generic statement, of which there are several sorts among the royal inscriptions, to establish the king’s piety and desire for justice (550–53).

Naturally, in any study of this sort there will be differences of opinion and interpretation. Despite working in a bewildering range of languages and texts, Briant can seldom be caught out, though differences of interpretation are bound to arise among specialists. A rare mistake occurs on page 417, where the statement is made that the Aramaic ܩܘܪܝܢܐ in *AP* 16 means to hold only on a temporary basis, because the land plots in this document were not private property. The interpretation of the document is no doubt correct, but the Aramaic word can refer to private ownership (e.g., in the Wadi Daliyah papyri [WDSP 2:9; 3:4; 7:9; 15:8]). Another minor slip is found on page 47, where it is stated that Sheshbazzar is called ܫܫܒܝܙܐܪ, when in fact he is referred to as ܫܫܝܐ (Ezra 1:8); Nehemiah is called ܢܫܝܐ (Neh 8:9; 10:2).

In conclusion, this is a magnificent history of the Persian Empire. In my opinion, it is a model of history writing. Briant wrestles with all the problems we have in trying to write a history of the times, does not reject sources out of hand but handles everything critically, and makes clear the basis of his own opinions. If I can do half as well in my own history of Persian-period Judah, I would be well satisfied.

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