ON THE MARGINS OF SCROLLURE

I. The computation of the years of the reign of the Achaemenids
(Neh. 1.2; 2.1; and Thucydides, 8.58)

In his report about his mission to Jerusalem, Nehemiah begins (1:2) by speaking of the visit paid by Hanani “in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year” (of Artaxerxes I), and then relates his conversation with the king in the month of Nisan in the same year (2:1). This means that for Nehemiah, Nisan followed Chislev. However, in the Babylonian calendar which was employed both by the Persian administration and by the Jews under the Achemenids, the year began in spring, on Nisan 1, and Chislev was the ninth month of the civil year.

Embarrassed by this disagreement between Nehemiah and the calendar, the commentators seek in vain to correct the biblical text. It is more useful to ask the advice of the ancient readers, who likewise noticed this little chronological problem. For example, Rabbi Hisda (died 309) thought that “the kings (of the nations) of the world” began the years of their reigns in the month of Tishri, in the fall; but Rabbi Joseph (died in 333) objected that the order of the months in the book of Haggai (1:1 and 2:1) proves that the Persian year was inaugurated in Nisan. Thus, the ancient teachers of the law in Sassanid Babylon show us that the problem is one of computing time.

The beginning of the year is determined arbitrarily. In the middle ages, the Christian year began on January 1, on March 25, or at Christmas etc., depending on the usage adopted by one or other chancellery; the chancellery of Louis VI counted the years of his reign in four different styles. To simplify its work, the Persian administration followed the Babylonian practice and made the regal years coincide with the Babylonian years, which began on Nisan 1. The time which elapsed between the beginning of a monarch’s reign and the next Nisan 1 was not included in the calculation of the years of his reign: for

2 Talmud B., R.H. 3a–3b; cf. P., ibid. 1.1, p. 56, where the argumentation of Rabbi Joseph is attributed to Rabbi Eliezer speaking in the name of Rabbi Hanina. For the dates of these authorities, cf. Encycl. Judaica VIII, p. 531, and X, p. 229.
3 A. Giry, Manuel de diplomatique, 1894, p. 86.
the Achemenid bureaucracy, this initial period was “the beginning” of the reign. For example, an Aramaic document drawn up on January 3, 464, is dated: “the 21st year [i.e., of Xerxes], the beginning of the reign, when King Artaxerxes I ascended the throne.”

However, this chronological style is artificial and abnormal. The rule is that the years of a reign are counted from the accession: even today, the regal years of Elizabeth II of England do not coincide with the civil year. We may therefore postulate that at the court of Susa, the years of the reign of Artaxerxes I ran from the date of his accession to the throne to the return of the same calendar date in the civil year, i.e. in disaccord with the computation of the years by those employed in his bureaucracy. There is nothing surprising in this simultaneous use of different styles. For example, the regal year began on Thot 1, not on Nisan 1, in the Egyptian documents which were issued under the Achemenids. In the same way, in the third century, the Ptolemies counted their regal years from the day of accession and in accordance with the Macedonian calendar, while their years in the Egyptian calendar began on Thot 1, and the financial year coincided neither with the year of the court nor with that of the Egyptian calendar. Another example: the Seleucid year did not begin on the same date at Antioch and at Jerusalem, or in the villages of Persia.

Let us return to Nehemiah. He was not a mere bureaucrat; he was a consummate courtier, a man of great weight at the royal court, and his memorandum is addressed to his God (Neh. 1:3), not to the accounts department. Let us therefore suppose that he followed the way of computing the years which was in use at the royal court, not the calculation used by the bureaucracy. Since his king ascended the throne in the month of Abu in 465, the twentieth year of which Nehemiah speaks began in the month of Abu (July 22–August 20) in 446 B.C.E. Chisleve was the fifth and Nisan the ninth month of this regal year.

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2 The annual ritual of the renewal of the royal power was carried out on this date: J.-C. Goyon, *Confirmation du pouvoir royal au Nouvel An*, 1972, p. 42.
