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Judaism and the Silk Route¹

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THE ISRAELITE MONARCHY believed to have been established in Palestine by King David in the tenth century BCE was obliterated by powers from the East in two major stages, beginning in the eighth century BCE and concluding in the sixth. The Assyrians crushed the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 and forcibly relocated its inhabitants to other parts of their empire. The book of 2 Kings (18: 11) states that Ten Tribes of Israel were exiled to “Halah and Habor by the River Gozan and in the cities of the Medes.” Since the former locations have been situated in Khurasan, it has been suggested that Israelite presence in Central Asia should be considered as originating at that time.² It has accordingly been proposed that these earliest exiles may have engaged in long-distance overland trade.³ Such hypotheses are not implausible, but solid evidence is lacking. The southern kingdom of Judah managed to survive for another century and a half through diplomacy, but in 587 a new power, the Babylonians, put an end to Judean independence, destroying Jerusalem and its Temple which had been the center of the priest-dominated sacrificial religion of the Israelites since the time of King Solomon. Like the Assyrians, the Babylonians deported the Judean survivors to Mesopotamia to live as slaves.

Less than thirty years later, in 559 a Persian army under Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon and freed the various enslaved peoples there, including the Judeans. Allowed to return home to Judah, many Judeans

chose instead to stay in Babylon as free citizens of the new Persian empire, while others elected to try their luck elsewhere in the Persian-controlled lands. Many relocated eastward to Iran proper and laid the foundations for Jewish communities that have survived there to the present day, especially in the cities of Hamadan (ancient Ecbatana) and Esfahan.

As Cyrus had also made conquests to the east, as far as Bactria and Sogdiana, it is likely that some of the Babylonian Jews relocated to those provinces as well. The book of Esther states in several places (3:6, 8; 8:5, 12; and 9:20) that the Jews lived “in all the provinces” of the Persian Empire. The modern-day Jewish communities of Bukhara and Samarqand, in particular, like to trace their history back to Assyrian times, and consider themselves to be descended from the Ten Tribes.⁴ Though this origin is attested by Saadia Gaon of Fayyum in the tenth century,⁵ there is no direct evidence for Jewish presence in Central Asia earlier than the Achaemenid period as attested in the book of Esther.

Recently an attempt has been made to argue that the fabled Silk Route city of Samarqand was originally founded as a Jewish refugee colony, on the basis of some popular etymologies (e.g., Samar+qand=Samarian-city) and other evidence. While some of the examples given are intriguing, the clear fallaciousness of others undermines the argument’s credibility. For example, the author of this attempt, being ignorant of Persian, also suggests that the Persian new year, *no ruz* (“new day”), is derived from the Hebrew *navra* (“fire”).⁶ In any event it is certain that Samarqand was already an important city by the time of Alexander’s conquest; it appears in Arrian as Maracanda. Therefore the Muslim legend, according to which the city was founded by two of Alexander’s slaves, Samar and Qamar, must be discounted as well as the recent Jewish explanation.

It does nevertheless seem likely that many of the post-exilic Judean settlers in Persian lands took up commerce. It would have been consistent with later patterns for them to set up trade networks with relatives or other Judeans in other parts of the Persian empire or elsewhere. Thus, influences picked up by Judean communities in one cultural environment could easily travel to connected communities in another. It is beginning in the Persian period that a number of Iranian beliefs and concepts appear to have worked their way into the religious tradition of the Judeans, a tradition that would later evolve into Judaism.

Jewish Religion on the Ancient Silk Route

Trans-Asian trade dates at least as far back as the period of the Roman and Chinese Han dynasties some twenty-two hundred years ago, but

probably much further back than that. Despite the lack of firm evidence from the ancient period, it is not unlikely that Jewish merchants were active along the so-called Silk Route linking the Far East with the Mediterranean from the earliest times. Hebrew names appearing on pottery fragments from Marv (modern Turkmenistan) dating from the first to the third centuries CE attest to the presence of Jews living along the Silk Route by then.⁷ Because Jews were spread across a wide geographical area spanning both the Parthian and the Roman lands, they were ideally situated to participate in trade between the two empires.⁸

Naturally the Jewish merchants' religious ideas would have accompanied them on their travels, and therefore would have become familiar to peoples encountered by these merchants along the way. So we can say that in ancient times certain Israelite religious ideas may have spread geographically eastward, in the sense that the *possessors* of those ideas physically went there; this is not to say, however, that any sort of Jewish religious system "grew" or won converts. The great missionary religions had not yet entered the stage of world history.

In traditional societies religions, like people, are generally considered as being attached to a particular locality or region, and by extension to their own local culture. From an Iranian, Inner Asian, or Chinese point of view, whatever religion a foreign merchant of Judean origin practiced was simply the religion of the Judeans; to embrace it as one's own would be to pretend to be something one was not. Still, as Iranians, Turks, Chinese, and other Asian peoples came into contact with these merchants from the west and became familiar with their ways of thinking, subtle influences must have penetrated in both directions through everyday encounters and conversation. It is abundantly clear that from the time of the Babylonian exile at the very latest, Iranian and Israelite religious ideas were interacting with each other.

There is more evidence for Iranian influence on the formation of Jewish ideas than the reverse. The belief in a messianic savior, a bodily resurrection, and a last judgement, are just some of the notions that Judaism (and subsequently Christianity and Islam) seem to have absorbed from the Persians. The concepts of a heavenly paradise (Old Persian *paira daeza*) and a hell of punishment for the wicked (an idea later developed in Christian tradition) are also seen in ancient Iranian religion but absent from pre-exilic Israelite sources. Eventually, the evil figure of Angra Mainyu, or Ahriman, evolves into the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim devil, whose Jewish form first appears in the book of Job as *ha-satan*, "the accuser."

Like some other Indo-European peoples, Iranians believed time would end in a great apocalyptic event. The Scandinavians called this apoca-

lypse *Ragnarök*; the Iranians called it *Frasho-kereti*. In Iranian tradition this event would signal the return of a savior, the *Saoshyant*. It is surely no coincidence that the apocalyptic writings of Jewish tradition, such as those found in the books of Ezekiel and Daniel, appear in the context of the Babylonian captivity and after. Finally, it is likely that the Jewish festival of Purim was originally derived from the ancient Iranian spring-time festival of Fravardigan, which, like Purim, began on the fourteenth day of the month of Azar and included an exchange of gifts.⁹

The Later Development of Jewish Trade Networks

Jews certainly participated in the Silk Route trade networks which linked the Roman Mediterranean with Han China in Classical times. From the advent of Islam in the seventh century Jewish traders known as Radanites¹⁰ held a privileged status which allowed them to move freely between the Muslim and Christian worlds, but the origins of the Radanite system must go back several centuries at least prior to that, since it is highly developed by the time the Radanites appear in Muslim sources. Latin sources seem to indicate that already in the preceding centuries Mediterranean trade was dominated by Jews from the West and Syrians from the Byzantine East.¹¹

The original base of the Radanites was in Roman Gaul, centered in Arles and Marseilles.¹² They trafficked particularly in slaves, and controlled a large operation in Verdun for turning them into eunuchs. It was this involvement in the slave trade that brought the Jewish Radanites into contact with the Turkish Khazars of the north Caspian region, a transit point for captured Slavs (Slav < Lat. Sclav; cf. Sclaveni, Ar. *saqaliba*).

Controlling an important northern offshoot of the Silk Route, the Khazars were ideally situated to serve as middlemen between East and West. They enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with the settled Iranian peoples to the south and the East along the Silk Route, which was well-expressed in the Turkish proverb, "*Tatsiz Türk bolmas; bashsiz börk bolmas,*" or, "There is no Iranian merchant without a Turkish associate, just as there is no cap without a head". Perceiving the commercial benefits associated with the Radanites' neutral religious status, the Khazar elite eventually embraced Judaism, although the supreme ruler, the khagan, as well as the general population of his subjects retained their original shamanistic Turkic religion. The ninth-century Persian geographer Ibn Khurdadbih describes the Radanites thus:

These merchants speak Arabic, Persian, Roman (Greek), the language of the Franks, Andalusians, and Slavs. They journey from west to east, partly

on land, partly by sea. They transport from the west eunuchs, female and male slaves, silk, castor, marten and other furs, and swords.¹³

Ibn Khurdadbih describes four different trade routes on which the Radanites were active. The first is from Gaul across the Mediterranean and overland to the Red Sea and via the Indian Ocean to the Far East, the second is via Mesopotamia, and the third across North Africa. The fourth route mentioned by Ibn Khurdadbih went northward through the Khazar lands, from where it joined the Silk Route:

Sometimes they likewise take the route behind Rome, and, passing through the country of the Slavs, arrive at Khamlif (Etil), the capital of the Khazars. They embark upon the Jorjan Sea (the Caspian), arrive at Balkh, betake themselves from there across the Oxus, and continue their journey toward the Yourts of the Toghozghor (the Tüqqüz Oghuz Turks), and from there to China.¹⁴

Naturally the raising of Judaism to official status within the Khazar dominions would have facilitated and encouraged the northern alternative. In any event Ibn Khurdadbih's account makes it clear that Jews were active along all the world's major trade routes at that time, which implies the existence of diaspora communities of Jews living all along the various stages of those routes. The widespread extent of these diaspora communities and the fact that they remained in communication with each other is borne out by the many locations referred to in the Gaonic *responsa* literature (a form of rabbinic instruction for the laity of the Jewish diaspora) which began in the eighth century.¹⁵

Judaism in the Far East

A single stone inscription from a synagogue in Kaifeng along the lower reaches of the Yellow River offers a tantalizing suggestion regarding the earliest Jewish presence in the Far East. The inscription, which dates from 1663, reads:

The religion started in *T'ien-chu* (lit. "India," but probably just meaning the West), and was first transmitted to China during the Chou (the Chou dynasty, ca. 1000-221 BCE). A *tz'u* (ancestral hall) was built in Ta-liang (Kaifeng). Through the Han, T'ang, Sung, Ming, and up till now, it has undergone many vicissitudes.¹⁶

If we are to believe this inscription, the Jewish community of China which became extinguished only in the present century would appear to have been founded by traders from the West, who came either via the Silk

Route or by sea, prior to the end of the third century BCE. It has even been suggested that this process was already occurring in the time of King David! Supporters of this theory cite terms in the Hebrew Bible which they take to mean "silk," although detractors point out that these meanings are far from established.¹⁷ For a long time enthusiasts identified "the land of Sinim" in Deutero-Isaiah with China, a connection since disproven.¹⁸ To argue that Jews may have participated in trans-Asian trade from the earliest times of its existence is one thing, but so far the more extreme arguments regarding dating are purely speculative.

Unfortunately the Kaifeng inscription is uncorroborated by any other piece of evidence, and may just reflect the Kaifeng community's boldest claim to antiquity in its own origin myth. An earlier inscription from 1512 and a slightly later one from 1679 both date the Jews' first arrival in China to the Han period. Chinese Jewish informants told a Jesuit missionary in the early eighteenth century that according to their own oral tradition, their ancestors had first come from Persia during the reign of Ming Ti (58-75 CE).¹⁹ Some scholars believe that the Kaifeng community arrived by sea no earlier than the ninth century CE, separately and distinctly from the Jews who had come overland into Chinese territory much earlier.²⁰

That Jews were active along the overland routes to China is supported by the existence of documents, consisting of business correspondence, which have been found along the Silk Route in East Turkestan (modern Xinjiang). These date from the eighth century, and are written on paper (which was produced only in China at that time) in a Judeo-Persian dialect using Hebrew characters.²¹ There is further linguistic evidence to indicate an overland connection originating in Iran,²² but in any event it is clear that Jewish traders came to China via both land and sea routes; the unresolved question is when they did so for the first time.

The Survival of Judaism in Central Asia

Writing in the twelfth century, a Spanish Jew by the name of Benjamin of Tudela, traveled to Central Asia and described a thriving Jewish community there.²³ By the end of the fifteenth century, however, long-distance trade along the Silk Route was in decline. With the declaration of state Shi'ism in Iran in 1501, Jews living in Sunni Central Asia gradually lost much of their contact with co-religionists to the west. The religious pluralism that had characterized Silk Route communities was at an end; Iranians and Turks alike had adopted Islam; Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and other religions were no longer seen in Central Asia. Only Judaism somehow survived the otherwise complete process of Islamization there.

Central Asian Jews today—or Bukharan Jews, as they are commonly called—number perhaps 50,000. Of this number some 40,000 still live in Central Asia, mainly residing in the cities of Bukhara and Samarqand. Roughly 8,000 others have migrated to Israel, and some to other countries, especially the United States.²⁴ Emigration has accelerated in recent years with the demise of the Soviet Union, such that the continued survival of Jewish communities in Central Asia is now in question. Those who remain there are living testimony to the role of long-distance trade in the spread of cultures throughout world history.

Notes

1. This paper is intended as a preliminary discussion, which will be elaborated in my book *Religions of the Silk Route* (New York: St. Martin's Press, forthcoming).
2. Allen H. Godbey, "From Persia to China," in William C. White, ed., *Chinese Jews*, second edition (New York: Paragon, 1966), pp. 136-7.
3. Irene Franck, *The Silk Road* (New York, 1986), p. 63.
4. Itzhak Ben-Zvi, *The Exiled and the Redeemed* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1957), p. 67; Julius Brutzkus, "Bukhara," *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Berlin, 1929), vol. 4, col., 1126.
5. L. Rabinowitz, *Jewish Merchant Adventurers: A Study of the Radanites* (London: Goldston, 1948), p. 51.
6. David Law, *From Samaria to Samarkand* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992).
7. V.A. Livshits and Z.I. Usmanova, "New Parthian Inscriptions from Old Merv," in Shaul Shaked and Amnon Metzger, eds., *Irano-Judaica III* (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi, 1994), pp. 99-105.
8. Jacob Neusner, "Jews in Iran," in Ehsan Yarshater, ed., *Cambridge History of Iran*, v.3, *The Seleucid, Parthian, and Sasanian Periods* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 912.
9. Almut Hintze, "The Greek and Hebrew Versions of the Book of Esther and its Iranian Background," in Shaul Shaked and Amnon Metzger, eds., *Irano Judaica III* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi, 1994), pp. 34-39.
10. *Ar. al-radaniyya*; see Ibn Khurdadbih, *Kitab al-masalik wa'l-mamalik*, DeGoeje, ed. (*Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum*, Leiden, 1889), v. 6, p. 114.
11. Rabinowitz, *Jewish Merchant Adventurers*, p. 15.
12. Omeljan Pritsak, *The Origin of Rus*, vol. 1 (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 25.
13. Quoted in Rabinowitz, *Jewish Merchant Adventurers*, p. 9.
14. Rabinowitz, *Jewish Merchant Adventurers*, p. 10.
15. Rabinowitz, *Jewish Merchant Adventurers*, pp. 41-2, 86.
16. Quoted in Donald D. Leslie (*The Survival of the Chinese Jews*, Leiden: Brill, 1972), p. 3.
17. Michael Pollock, *Mandarins, Jews and Missionaries* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1980), pp. 255-6.

18. Pollock, *Mandarins*, p. 257.
19. Leslie, *Survival*, p. 4.
20. Rudolf Loewenthal, "The Jews of Bukhara," *Central Asian Collectanea*, no. 8 (Washington, D.C.), 1961, p. 6.
21. D.S. Margoliouth, "An Early Judeo-Persian Document from Khotan in the Stein Collection, With Other Early Persian Documents," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1903), 735-61; B. Utas, "The Jewish-Persian Fragment from Dandan-Uiliq," *Orientalia Suecana* 17 (1968), 123-26. Interestingly this Jewish business correspondence is the oldest known example of the so-called New Persian language, which evolved from Middle Persian after the Arab conquest of Iran.
22. Donald Leslie, "The Origin of the Kaifeng Jews," in Shaul Shaked, ed., *Irano-Judaica* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi), pp. 101-111.
23. Benjamin of Tudela, "Travels," in Manuel Kamroff, ed., *Contemporaries of Marco Polo* (New York: Dorset, 1989), p. 304, where he estimates the Jewish population of Samarqand at 50,000. Zand calls this figure "fantastic," but points out that it demonstrates the contemporary notion that the Jewish presence in Central Asia was significant (Michael Zand, "Bukharan Jews," *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1982-), p. 533.
24. Zand, "Bukharan Jews," p. 531.

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