



ADLER, ELKAN NATHAN

ADLER, ELKAN NATHAN, avid traveler and collector of Hebrew, Judeo-Persian, and Judeo-Tajik manuscripts from the Jewish Persian and Bukharan communities (b. England, 1861; d. London, 15 September 1946; [Figure 1](#)).

Adler was born to a prominent religious family. His father, Nathan Marcus Adler, was chief rabbi of the United Kingdom; upon his passing, he was succeeded by his son, Hermann Adler. A lawyer by profession, Adler played a very active role in Jewish communal and intellectual activities throughout his life. He had a passion for what was then the relatively new and growing field of Jewish Studies as well as world travel. The religious instruction he received in his formative years complemented his secular education and enabled him to author numerous historical articles and books on Jews of Europe, North Africa, and Western Asia (Levine, p. 117; for a select bibliography, see *idem*, pp. 122-27). He traveled to these lands and was particularly interested in the less studied communities of the Jewish Diaspora, such as Egypt, Ottoman Syria, Palestine, Central Asia, Persia, India, and Yemen. *Jews in Many Lands* and *Jewish Travelers* are two of his most widely read publications.

Elkan Adler's connection to Iranian Studies comes by way of his contribution to Judeo-Persian Studies. In travels to Tehran and Bukhara, in 1896 and 1897 respectively, Adler purchased Hebrew and Judeo-Persian manuscripts and later offered a description of how he came to procure them (Adler, 1905a, pp. 109-12). He subsequently published descriptive lists of their contents and, as he himself noted, offered Western scholars insight into the intellectual, literary-cultural, and religious endeavors of the Jews of Iran. The manuscript



collection is comprised of secular and religious works on a wide range of topics, including transliterations of Persian classical poetry, collections of original poems in Hebrew and Judeo-Persian, collections of stories, folklore, charms, treatises on medicine and astrology, medical prescriptions and dictionaries, calendars, chronicles of religious persecution, Bible and apocrypha, dictionaries of biblical and Talmudic terms, prayer books, liturgical hymns, Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism), and medieval Jewish commentaries written by European religious authorities (Adler, 1898, pp. 586-601).

Philologists had already recognized the importance of Judeo-Persian to the broader study of Persian language and its development from Middle Persian to its most recent stage, New Persian. The material that Adler acquired facilitated study in this field while also making it possible for scholars to further investigate other areas of Judeo-Persian study (Bacher, pp. 135-68). Adler, himself, was one of the first European students of Iranian Jewry to recognize the community's distinct literary and liturgical significance. A case in point is his investigation into the liturgical texts that he had acquired, based on which he published the article "The Persian Jews: Their Books and their Ritual." There he noted that the prayer book in use, prior to Persian-speaking Jews' adoption of the Sephardic version, was most likely based on an early Babylonian tradition (Adler, 1898, pp. 601-2).

In 1921, personal circumstances compelled Adler to sell his manuscript and book collections to the Hebrew Union College of Cincinnati and the Jewish Theological Seminary of New York. The latter, to which Adler bequeathed his personal archives, remains one of the world's largest library archives of Judeo-Persian manuscripts.

See also [JUDEO-PERSIAN COMMUNITIES](#).

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