



BIBLE VI. JUDEO-PERSIAN TRANSLATIONS

BIBLE

vi. Judeo-Persian Translations of the Bible

Judeo-Persian or Jewish-Persian is the common designation for, Persian written with Hebrew characters. Among the earliest and most important Judeo-Persian texts are the Bible translations, which at the same time count among the earliest monuments of New Persian. The oldest known documents are: three inscriptions from Tang-i Azao in central Afghanistan (see Henning, 1957, p. 338, where the date a.d. 752-53 is suggested; a younger dating [a.d. 1300] by E. L. Rapp, *East and West* 17, 1967, pp. 51-58) and a Jewish merchant's private letter from Dandān Uiliq in Central Asia from the eighth century a.d. (latest edition by B. Utas, *Orientalia Suecana* 17, 1968, pp. 123-36). Long before this time, however, Middle Persian and other Middle Iranian (e.g., Sogdian) translations of the Bible were in circulation, and it can be taken for granted that already at the time of the Sasanians, when both Jews and Christians were persecuted by the Mazdayasnian state church, a strong need was felt for Iranian versions of Biblical texts to support and guide them.

Interest in Judeo-Persian Bible translations in the West awoke in the 17th century. A Judeo-Persian Pentateuch version had been prepared in 1546 by Jacob ben Joseph Tavus for the Constantinople Polyglot Bible, and in 1657 this



version was transcribed by Thomas Hyde and translated into Latin for the London Polyglot edited by Bryan Walton (vol. 4). The Persian lexical material from this text was included in Edmundus Castellus's *Lexicon Heptaglotton* (London, 1669) and was used by Vullers in his *Lexicon Persico-Latinum* (2 vols., Bonn, 1855, 1864). Alexander Kohut made the Tavus text the object of a detailed analysis, but his work did not receive the recognition it justly deserved (*Kritische Beleuchtung der persischen Pentateuch-Uebersetzung des Jacob ben Joseph Tavus unter stetiger Rücksichtnahme auf die aeltesten Bibelversionen. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Bibel-Exegese*, Leipzig and Heidelberg, 1871; rev. by A. Geiger, in *Jüdische Zeitschrift für Wissenschaft und Leben* 10, Breslau, 1872, pp. 103-11).

It was not till much later, however, that one came to realize that Tavus's translation was not something new, on the contrary, as W. J. Fischel (1960, p. 1159) rightly remarks, this version only represents the culmination of an activity that had been going on for centuries and which continued into the 20th century (see also Asmussen and Paper, 1977, p. 6). Among the 19th-century pioneers in the scholarly exploration of Jewish-Persian Bible texts were K. D. Hassler ("Nachricht von einer bisher noch unbekannten unmittelbaren persischen Uebersetzung der Salomonischen Schriften," *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* 2/3, Hamburg, 1829, pp. 469-80). S. Munk ("Notice sur Rabbi Saadia Gaon et sa version arabe d'Isaïe, et sur une version persane manuscrite de la Bibliothèque Royale," in *La Bible*, ed. S. Cahen, IX, Paris, 1838), Paul de Lagarde (see below), and such outstanding Iranian scholars as Th. Nöldeke, C. Salemann, and P. Horn. Horn made extensive use of the published material for his *Neupersische Elymologie* (1893; see Asmussen and Paper, pp. 6-7, with references).

The earliest extant Judeo-Persian Bible versions are known from fragments (partly in a very bad state of preservation) of manuscripts brought to libraries in Europe and in the USA from the Cairo Geniza. Most of these fragments have not yet been published. The fragments discovered so far belong to six different manuscripts, each of different character and structure. The fragments are currently being prepared for publication; the following general details—number of extant pages and contents—can be given at this stage:

Tafsīr 1 (54 pages) is a literal, verse-by-verse translation of portions of the Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, with alternating Hebrew and Judeo-Persian text. *Tafsīr 2* (28 pages) is of Karaite origin. It contains portions of Ruth, the Song of Songs, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Daniel, and Nehemiah. It does not



contain a complete translation of the biblical text, merely selecting passages which require a particular comment, especially with regard to linguistic difficulties. A small part of it was published by Shaul Shaked (in *Irano-Judaica*, ed. S. Shaked, Jerusalem, 1982, pp. 304ff.). *Tafsīr 3* (8 pages) is an expanded commentary on Genesis 32-37 in the style of a *midrash*. *Tafsīr 4* (12 pages) is also Karaite. It contains a commentary on difficult words and some historical matters in Isaiah, Daniel, and Esther. Part of it was published by Shaked (op. cit., pp. 310ff.). *Tafsīr 5* (4 pages) contains a commentary on selected verses in the book of Ruth. *Tafsīr 6* (4 pages) is a detailed verse by verse translation and commentary on the book of Ezekiel and forms a variant to the important early Judeo-Persian Ezekiel commentary preserved in Leningrad, Firkowicz II 1682 (an edition of which is being prepared).

All this material probably belongs to the pre-Mongol period and contains valuable linguistic information. It also gives an idea of literary production of the Jews of Iran in that period.

There are manuscripts of Jewish-Persian translations of all Bible texts, most of them in the Ben-Zvi Institute (Jerusalem; cf. Netzer, 1985), in the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York (E. N. Adler, *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 10, 1899, pp. 584-625), in the Klau Library of the Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, Ohio (E. Spicandler, *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore* 8, 1968, pp. 114-36), in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris (H. Zotenberg, *Catalogue des manuscrits hébreux et samaritains de la Bibliothèque Impériale*, Paris, 1866, pp. 7ff.), in the British Library (J. Rosenwasser, in G. M. Meredith-Owens, *Handlist of Persian Manuscripts 1895-1966*, London, 1968, pp. 38-44), and in the Royal Library of Copenhagen. Quotations from the Bible are found in many manuscripts (e.g., from Joshua in the very old manuscript Or. 8659—10th century or earlier; D. N. MacKenzie, *BSOAS* 31/2, 1968, pp. 249ff.), most often in commentaries (see Asmussen, 1965, pp. 9ff.; Asmussen and Paper, 1977, p. 7, n. 19).

New Judeo-Persian (or rather Judeo-Tajik) translations were made by the learned Bukharan scholar Shimon Ḥakham and his circle in Jerusalem. Shimon Ḥakham (cf. Avraham Yaari, *Sifre yehude Bukhara*, Jerusalem, 1942) edited the Pentateuch, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and the Song of Songs. The British and Foreign Bible Society, from 1900 onwards, published the Persian Bible translation (Old and New Testament) of Dr. Bruce, transcribed into Hebrew letters by Mīrzā Nūr-Allāh and Mīrzā Kōdādād.



Following is a complete listing of editions of Jewish-Persian Bible manuscripts to date:

Of the numerous manuscripts of the Pentateuch, the Vatican manuscript acquired by Giambattista Vecchietti (cf. Fischel, 1952, pp. 7ff.) was edited by H. H. Paper in *AO*, 1965-68. The British Library manuscript Or. 5446 (1319 a.d., the oldest dated translation; see Asmussen, *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung* 74, 1979, cols. 70-76) was edited by Paper, Jerusalem, 1972. The Vatican and British Library manuscripts were reedited by Paper together with the Jewish Theological Seminar manuscript, the Hebrew Union College ms. 2193, and the Ben Zvi Institute ms. 1028 in his *Biblia Judaeo-Persica: Editio Variorum*, 1973 (for further references see Asmussen and Paper, 1977, pp. 7ff.).

Editions of other books: *Ruth* by E. Mainz in *JA* 264, 1976, pp. 9ff.; *Samuel* by W. Bacher in *ZDMG* 51, 1897, pp. 392-425; *Esther* by E. Mainz in *JA* 258, 1970, pp. 95ff.; *Job* by H. H. Paper in *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 5/12, Jerusalem, 1976, pp. 313-65; for the *Psalms* see Asmussen and Paper, 1977, p. 9; the *Proverbs* by E. Mainz in *JA* 268, 1980, pp. 71-106, and H. H. Paper in *Irano-Judaica*, ed. S. Shaked, Jerusalem, 1992, pp. 122-47; *Ecclesiastes* by H. H. Paper in *Orientalia* 42, 1973, pp. 328ff., and E. Mainz, *Studia Iranica* 3, 1974, pp. 221ff.; the *Song of Songs* by E. Mainz in *JA* 264, 1976, pp. 22ff., and Asmussen and Paper, 1977; *Isaiah* by P. de Lagarde, "Persische Studien," *Abh. der Kgl. Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen* 31, 1884 (Bib. Nat. text), and H. H. Paper in *Monumentum H. S. Nyberg II*, *Acta Iranica* 5, Tehran and Liège, 1975, pp. 145-61 (chaps. 1 and 2); *Jeremiah* by P. de Lagarde, op. cit.; *Lamentations* by E. Mainz in *Studia Iranica* 2, 1973, pp. 193-202; *Ezekiel I-X* by P. de Lagarde, op. cit.; *Daniel* by E. Mainz, in *Irano-Judaica*, ed. S. Shaked, Jerusalem, 1982, pp. 148-79; *Hosea* by J. P. Asmussen in *Monumentum H. S. Nyberg I*, *Acta Iranica* 4, Tehran and Liège, 1975, pp. 15-18 (only a few passages); *Amos* by B. H. Carlsen in *Orientalia J. Duchesne-Guillemin Emerito Oblata*, *Acta Iranica* 23, Leiden, 1984, pp. 73-112; *Obadiah* by J. P. Asmussen in *Acta Antiqua* 25, 1977, pp. 255-63; *Jonah* by B. H. Carlsen in *Varia* 1976, *Acta Iranica* 12, Tehran and Liège, pp. 133-26.

Biblical Judeo-Persian does not seem to represent a living language, and the Jewish-Persian Bible texts were clearly not meant to be read for themselves, rather they served as a help for understanding and memorizing the Hebrew text (see Lazard, 1978, p. 49). Their greatest importance lies in their linguistic conservatism, both in grammar and vocabulary, and their evidence for non-standard early Persian (see further [judeo-persian](#)). One of the most striking



conservatisms is the passive formation in *-ih-* (e.g. *gūyihad* “is said”), still found in many dialects but lost at an early time in New Persian, in the Ezekiel commentary (cf. Asmussen and Paper, 1977, p. 7, n. 19). On published lists of words see Asmussen and Paper, 1977, p. 110, and E. Mainz, *Studia Iranica* 6, 1977, pp. 75-95. On the dialectology of Judeo-Persian see G. Lazard, *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore* 8, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1968, pp. 77ff.

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