



# CONVERSION IV. OF PERSIAN JEWS TO OTHER RELIGIONS

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## CONVERSION

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In the Achaemenid, Seleucid, and Parthian periods relations between the Jews and the Persian authorities were friendly, and there is no evidence of forced or voluntary conversion of Jews to Zoroastrianism. In fact, conversion to Judaism was widespread during the Parthian period; although there is no mention of adherents of a specifically Iranian creed in this connection, the rulers of [Adiabene](#), a vassal kingdom of the Parthians in northern Mesopotamia, converted to Judaism in the 1st century c.e. (see Rabinowitz; Gafni). Under the Sasanians there were periodic persecutions of non-Zoroastrian minorities, including Jews, but whether or not they resulted in conversions is not recorded. In the time of Pērōz (459-84) the sons of Jewish martyrs at Isfahan were supposedly given as slaves to a fire temple, and perhaps they eventually became Zoroastrians (Ḥamza, p. 56; Neusner, V, p. 65). There were, however, conversions to Christianity; in fact, the Jewish communities in Adiabene and elsewhere seem to have formed the nucleus of the new Christian communities in the Parthian empire (Asmussen, pp. 924-26; Widengren, p. 125 n. 1).

The Arab conquest of Persia was followed eventually by the conversion of



most Persians to Islam. The Jews, like the Christians, were classified as “people of the book” (*ahl-e ketāb*) and were not forced to embrace Islam. According to Abū No‘aym (pp. 22-23), the Jewish population of Isfahan even celebrated the conquest of the city by the Arabs. Although conversion of Jews is mentioned in texts from the Islamic period, there is no specific reference to Jews of Persia in such a context before the Il-khanid period. Benjamin of Tudela, who visited the southern coast of Persia briefly in 562/1167, claimed that there were about 500,000 Jews living in Persia (pp. 51-63), a figure that seems exaggerated. Under the Il-khanids, however, there were forced conversions of Jews following the downfall and death of the Jewish vizier Sa‘d-al-Dawla in 690/1291 (Rašīd-al-Dīn, II, pp. 824-25). One such convert was the well-known physician and historian Rašīd-al-Dīn of Hamadān (ca. 645-718/1247-1318; Badr-al-Dīn ‘Aynī, quoted in ‘Azzāwī, p. 455), who became a Muslim, most probably at the age of thirty years, then rose to the rank of vizier. According to the 13th-century Jewish writer Ebn Kammūna (p. 102), many Jews also embraced Islam for socioeconomic reasons.

In the Safavid period (907-1135/1501-1722) Jews were severely persecuted in Persia. In one Jewish historical poem, *Ketāb-e anūsī* (Book of the forced convert, composed by Bābā’ī ben Loṭf of Kāšān, there is a reference to three waves of persecution resulting in forced conversions of Jews in major Persian cities during the reigns of Shah ‘Abbās I (996-1038/1588-1629) and Shah ‘Abbās II (1052-77/1642-66). According to his account, the first persecutions probably occurred before 1022/1613. The second wave began in 1029/1620 and apparently lasted for an entire year. Despite the intervention of influential Shī‘ite clerics like Shaikh Bahā’-al-Dīn ‘Āmeli (d. 1030/1621) and Moḥsen Fayz Kāšānī (d. 1091/1680), Jews in many cities were forced to convert to Islam (Moreen, 1987, pp. 130-32). The third wave started during the reign of Shah ‘Abbās II, in around 1066/1656, and lasted until 1072/1662. Many Jews were killed or forced to convert. Finally, after payment of large sums of money, the *jadīd al-Eslām* (new Muslims) in Persia were allowed to return to their original faith (Bacher; Levī, pp. 222-24, 300-417; Moreen, 1987, pp. 55-117; Netzer, 1980).

Bābā’ī ben Loṭf’s grandson Bābā’ī ben Farhād, in his *Ketāb-e sargodašt-e Kāšān*, described the persecution and conversion of Jews in Kāšān, Isfahan, and Shiraz in 1142/1729-30 (fols. 170-86). The main impetus was the policy of retaliation by Nāderqolī Khan (later Nāder Shah) against supporters of the Afghan conquerors of Persia, whom he was attempting to expel. These



conversions ceased after the Jewish communities made payments to Nāderqolī Khan and other authorities.

In the Qajar period there were further incidents of forced conversion. On 11 Moḥarram 1255/27 March 1839 Muslims invaded the Jewish quarter in the city of Mašhad, murdered thirty-two Jews, and injured many others. The Jews of Mašhad, who numbered probably about 2,000 souls (Delmānīān, pp. 13-14), were given the choice between death and conversion to Islam. As a result the entire community converted to Islam; members changed their Jewish names to Muslim names, began to study the Qurʾān, attended public prayer in the mosque, and made pilgrimage to Mecca and the sacred Shiʿite sites in Iraq. These people, who were designated *jadīd al-Eslām* but called themselves *anusim*, the Hebrew word for “forced converts,” continued to practice their Jewish faith in secret and avoided intermarriage with Muslims. During the Pahlavi period (1304-57 Š./1925-79), especially during and after World War II, the descendants of these converts returned to the open practice of Judaism and emigrated to Tehran, Israel, and some Western countries (Delmānīān, pp. 74ff.).

Travel accounts, documents of the [Alliance Israelite Universelle](#) in Paris, and Christian missionary reports all include descriptions of persecutions of Jews in 19th-century Persia; in Tabrīz, Marāḡa, Salmās, Mīāndoāb, Sīāhkal, Bārforūš, Shiraz, and other cities these persecutions were sometimes accompanied by forced conversions. At the beginning of the 20th century the representatives of the Alliance counted 50,000 Jews in Persia. During the Qajar period a number of Jews voluntarily converted to the [Bahai faith](#) and to Christianity. More than 5,000 Jews, mainly from Hamadān, Kāšān, Arāk, Shiraz, and Tehran seem to have converted to the Bahai faith alone (Fischel, 1932; idem, 1937a). Some Jews also willingly embraced Islam, generally as a result of intracommunal quarrels or to take advantage of the Muslim law of inheritance, which allowed the convert to inherit all the property of his Jewish relations. For example, in about 1237/1822, as the result of a quarrel with a rival, Rabbi Āqābābā converted to Islam, taking the name Moḥammad-Rezā (Levī, pp. 566-69). He announced his conversion as the result of “a revelation” and published a book called *Manqūl al-Rezā yā radd al-Yahūd* condemning the Jews as forgers of the Bible, “which had foreseen the coming of the Prophet Moḥammad” (Levī, p. 568). Some convert families attained prominence in politics and scholarship under the Pahlavi regime.

See further: [JUDEO-PERSIAN COMMUNITIES V. QAJAR PERIOD \(2\)](#)



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