



ISRAEL III. IRANIAN STUDIES

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iii. IRANIAN STUDIES IN ISRAEL

A department of Iranian Studies was only formally established in Israel in 1970, but scholars working in Israel have been interested in aspects of Iranian history and culture since long before that date. The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the first university in Israel, was established in 1926, with two institutes of research and teaching relevant to our topic, one for Jewish Studies and another for Oriental Studies (the latter was later renamed Asian and African Studies). Scholars of ancient Judaism, in disciplines such as Bible studies, Talmudic literature, Gnosticism and early Christianity, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and similar fields, investigated the possible connections between Jewish religious history and the Iranian world. For the medieval period, the poetry composed and transmitted in Persian-speaking lands in Hebrew as well as in Judeo-Persian (q.v.) attracted interest. Historians of the modern world felt the need to understand the role of Iran in the Middle East, and the existence of a sizeable population in Israel whose personal and cultural roots were in Iran was a further incentive for developing the study of Persian language, literature, and history.

The teaching of Iranian languages, with special emphasis on Old and Middle Iranian, was begun at the Hebrew University in 1965 with the appointment of Shaul Shaked, who had obtained a Ph.D. in Iranian philology from the University of London. In 1970 a Department of Iranian and Armenian Studies,



afterwards enlarged to include Indian Studies, was established. Shaked and Amnon Netzer (the latter holds a Ph.D. from Columbia University) taught Old and Middle Iranian as well as Persian language, literature, and history. Some time later, Michael Zand (originally from Moscow) and Soroud Soroudi (with a Ph.D. from UCLA) were appointed to teach Persian language and literature. Armenian was taught by M. E. Stone, and Sanskrit and other Indian languages and literatures by David Shulman.

The later books of the Bible deal with historical and conceptual developments in Jewish society in the Achaemenid period. These include the latter half of the Book of Isaiah, composed after the exile to Babylonia and reflects awareness of the newly established Persian kingdom. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah, Esther and Daniel also belong to the period after the creation of the Achaemenid kingdom. Among scholars who have worked on this period in Jewish history and literature are M. L. Segal (Hebrew University), Israel Grintz (Tel Aviv University), S. Shaked (Hebrew University), and Ran Zadok (Tel Aviv). The archaeology of the Achaemenid period in the Land of Israel was studied by Ephraim Stern (Hebrew University) in his book *Ha-tarbut ha-homrit shel Yisrael ba-tequfa ha-parsit (538-332)* (Jerusalem, 1968; tr. as *Material Culture of the Land of the Bible in the Persian Period 538-332. B.C.*, Warminster, UK, 1982). Issues relating to the art and archaeology of the Parthian period were discussed by Michael Avi-Yonah (Hebrew University) in his monograph *Oriental Art in Roman Palestine* (Rome, 1961).

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the late 1940s caused a whole new branch of studies to be created. The existence of a strong dualism and a developed doctrine of spirits and other elements reminiscent of Zoroastrianism suggested the possibility of Persian influence on certain Jewish groups of the period. Among Israeli scholars discussing these issues mention may be made of David Flusser, S. Shaked (both of Hebrew University), and J. Licht (Tel Aviv University). The Dead Sea Scrolls could not be separated from the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament, on which Flusser wrote extensively. The notion of the Sefirot or the emanations of the Divine Presence, a central idea in the Kabbalah, is derived, it was suggested by G. G. Stroumsa (Hebrew University), from the Iranian theme of the Aməša Spəntas (q.v.). The same scholar also studied several aspects of Manicheism, a topic discussed in depth by J. C. Polotsky (1905-91; Hebrew University), who edited some of the Coptic Manichean texts and wrote the masterly exposition on Manicheism in the *Realenzyklopädie für Altertumskunde* (Pauly-Wissowa; see



Bibliography).

Much important work was done by Ran Zadok (Tel Aviv University) on the onomastics of the Achaemenid Empire and on the ethnic composition of the people mentioned in the ancient documents.

The field of Aramaic, with special awareness of the Iranian impact on Aramaic, enjoyed considerable expansion by E. Y. Kutscher (Hebrew University). He studied, in particular, the passive or ergative construction in Aramaic in comparison with Old Persian. J. C. Greenfield made important contributions to the study of Aramaic formulae and lexical items. Shaked has mostly written on lexical connections between Aramaic and Iranian. B. Porten and A. Yardeni have checked the readings of the Aramaic documents of the Achaemenid period; Greenfield and Porten edited the Aramaic version of the Bisotun (q.v.) inscription.

The period of the Babylonian Talmud (ca. 2nd-5th centuries C.E.), a period of enormous formative creativity in Judaism, corresponds to the late Parthian and the Sasanian eras in Iranian history. A knowledge of Iranian languages, culture, and history is obviously a help for understanding Talmudic literature, but awareness of this has taken long to set in. One of the earliest publications on this subject in Israel was by Samuel Krauss, who collected references to Persia and Rome in the Babylonian Talmud. It is necessary to mention J. N. Epstein (Hebrew University), one of the founders of the critical school of Talmudic philology; he also dealt with the Aramaic magic bowls and with Persian loanwords in Aramaic. Another scholar who worked in this philological domain was E. S. Rosenthal (Hebrew University), chiefly on Iranian words in the Talmud. David Rosenthal (Hebrew University), son of the latter scholar, also contributed to this field, as did some of their students (e.g., Mordechai Sabato). The religious ideas encountered in the Talmud were discussed by E. E. Urbach, with particular attention to an Iranian connection, where appropriate, in his monumental *The Sages* (1969, in Hebrew; English tr., 1975). Other scholars who contributed to this field include Moshe Beer (Bar-Ilan University), Isaiah Gafni, and Eliyahu Ahdut (the latter in an unpublished Ph.D. dissertation on Jewish marital conditions in Babylonia). The topography of Sasanian Babylonia was studied from Talmudic sources by A. Oppenheimer (Tel Aviv University).

Themes in Zoroastrian religion were the object of studies by Shaked and Dan Shapira (Bar-Ilan University). The latter dealt with the Zand writings in



Pahlavi in an unpublished Ph.D. thesis, and is preparing an edition of the *Bundahišn* (q.v.).

Questions relating to the interaction between Greeks and Persians in Asia Minor in the Achaemenid period formed the theme of a monograph by David Asheri (Hebrew University), who is also responsible for an edition and commentary of Herodotus in Italian.

Classical Persian language and literature were taught at the Hebrew University initially by scholars of Arabic and Turkish such as S. D. Goitein (1900-85) and Uriel Heyd (1913-68). With the appointment in 1970 of Amnon Netzer, and later with that of Michael Zand and Sorour Soroudi, the study of Classical and modern Persian was formally established. Soroudi studied, in particular, aspects of folk culture among Iranians, both Jews and Muslims. At Tel-Aviv University the teaching of Classical and modern Persian was assured by David Menashri, a historian of modern Iran, and David Yeroushalmi, who has contributed to the study of Judeo-Persian literature by editing and translating the work of the great Judeo-Persian poet 'Emrāni (q.v.), *Ganj-nāma*. Julia Rubanovich (Hebrew University) worked, in an unpublished thesis, on the popular epic works in Persian, in particular the *Eskandar-nāma* and the *Hamza-nāma*.

Much of the scholarly effort concentrated on Judeo-Persian. The collection of the Judeo-Persian manuscripts at the Ben-Zvi Institute in Jerusalem was described by Netzer, whose introduction to the volume constitutes the most comprehensive survey of Judeo-Persian literature. The same scholar also published a philosophical text in Judeo-Persian, *Ḥayāt al-ruḥ*, a work of the sixteenth century, as well as an anthology of Judeo-Persian poetry done in Standard Persian (1352), and numerous articles on the history and literature of the Jews of Iran written in Persian, English, and Hebrew. Early Judeo-Persian texts have become a field of research following the discovery by Shaked of a substantial number of writings dating back to the 10th-11th centuries among the treasures of the Cairo Geniza and in the Firkowicz Collection in St. Petersburg. Not all of these writings have yet been published. Ludwig Paul (Hamburg University) has worked on the grammar of these texts. Tamar E. Gindin (Hebrew University) prepared an edition of the extensive *tafšir* (translation with commentary) of Ezekiel from St. Petersburg and studied its language in a Ph.D. thesis, (2005). She earlier worked on the language of the Jewish dialect of Yazd. Dan Shapira edited the Story of Daniel (*Qeṣṣa-ye dāniyāl*), a legendary history based on the Biblical Book of Daniel,



the *Tafsir* of Hosea, and other Judeo-Persian compositions.

Other scholars who worked on Judeo-Persian literature include W. J. Fischel (1902-73, q.v.; University of California at Berkeley), who started his scholarly career at the Hebrew University, and wrote extensively on Judeo-Persian literature and in particular on Bible translations. Abraham Yaari published a bibliography of Judeo-Bukharan books printed in Jerusalem. The Ben-Zvi Institute published an early translation of the Pentateuch from a British Library manuscript edited by H. H. Paper, and the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities published a version of the Book of Job from a private collection, edited by the same scholar. A manuscript of a Judeo-Persian prayer book, preserving a tradition which is otherwise lost, was edited by Shlomo Tal.

A series of conferences on the Judeo-Persian heritage and on aspects of contacts between Iran and Judaism are held in Jerusalem and elsewhere under the auspices of the Ben-Zvi Institute. The papers presented in these colloquia are published under the title *Irano-Judaica*; 5 volumes have been published since 1982. A series of volumes in Persian, under the title *Pādyāvand*, also dedicated to the themes of Jewish-Iranian contacts, have been issued since 1996 by A. Netzer.

A descriptive book on the Jews of Afghanistan was published by B. Z. Yehoshua-Raz (1992), and a history of the Jews of the Eastern Caucasus, known as Tats or Mountain Jews, was written by M. Altshuler (1990). A dictionary of Tat, compiled by Yaakov Yitshaki at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century, is being prepared for publication by M. Zand. Work on Jewish education in Iran was carried out by A. Cohen.

The Israel Museum has put up over the years a series of exhibitions displaying the art and costumes of Jews living in Persian-speaking countries. Each exhibition is accompanied by a thoroughly researched catalogue.

Several non-scholarly books in Hebrew on the history and culture of the Persian Jews, as well as some local histories (e.g., of the Jews of Yazd), have been published. Among authors of such books mention should be made of Hanina Mizrahi and Yosef Sharga. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Jerusalem was an important center for printing Judeo-Persian texts, especially in the dialect of the Jews of Bukhara. The most prominent writer and printer in that period was Shim'on Ḥakham, who, among other books, brought out the works of the poet Šāhin and his own



version of the Pentateuch in the Bukharan dialect.

Interest in Classical Persian literature has led several scholars and poets to translate monuments of Persian poetry into Hebrew. The most ambitious project of this kind is the complete translation of the *Šāh-nāma* of Ferdowsi, done by E. Cagan (1912-2000). Two volumes of this work, edited by Shaked, with the help of J. Rubanovich, have been published. Other works, mostly excerpts and anthologies, have been published over the years. The most prominent translators have been Ben-Zion Benshalom (Katz), from the *Šāh-nāma*; Shim'on Levi (1988), and Raphael Loewe (1982), from 'Omar Ḳayyām; Parviz Behruzi, two anthologies (1974, 1978) of Classical Persian poetry.

The field of Shi'ite doctrine and literature was explored by Etan Kohlberg (Hebrew University) in a series of books and articles. Early Shi'ite history was dealt with by M. Sharon, who has also worked on the Baha'i religion, and who is the first incumbent of a Chair for Baha'i Studies at the Hebrew University, the first of its kind. Meir Bar-Asher (Hebrew University) has worked on the Yazidis. Sabine Schmidtke (Freie Universität Berlin), who did part of her studies at the Hebrew University, has worked on aspects of Shi'ite doctrine.

The modern history of Iran is a major field of study by scholars in Israel. Special mention should be made of David Menashri (Tel Aviv University), who has studied the Iranian educational system. Bar-Ilan University, Haifa University and Ben-Gurion University have scholars dedicated to research of modern Iranian history. A Center for Modern Iranian history has been established in Tel Aviv University, to encourage research and teaching in this field.

As for Iranian art, it was studied and taught by L. A. Mayer (Hebrew University). A museum carrying his name, where an impressive collection of Iranian art is displayed, was established in Jerusalem with the expertise of Richard Ettinghausen. Myriam Rosen-Ayalon, Rachel Milstein and Raya Shani produced several works on aspects of Iranian art, archaeology and architecture as well as on Judeo-Iranian themes in art.

Collections of Persian and Judeo-Persian manuscripts exists in several centers. The Jewish National and University Library possesses about 250 manuscripts in Judeo-Persian in addition to their collection in New Persian. About 250 manuscripts in Judeo-Persian are held by the Ben-Zvi Institute. The Israel Museum and the L. A. Mayer Memorial Museum also have collections of



Persian and Judeo-Persian illuminated manuscripts.

Jewish-Iranian music has been collected at the Israel National Sound Archives in the Jewish National and University Library. This was done over the years by E. Gerson-Kiwi, and includes, among other things, a recording of the Persian *dastgāhs* performed by Netzer on violin in 1956-57 (a similar recording by the same performer is in the Department of Musicology at the University of Illinois in Urbana); there are also recordings of Morteżā Neydāvud (d. 1990).

The Center for the Study of Jewish Language Traditions at the Hebrew University holds recordings of Jewish-Iranian recitations of various texts.

The Archive of Jewish Folk-Stories in Haifa comprises a large collection of stories told by informants from various Jewish communities, including many from the Persian-speaking areas.

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