



KAIFENG

KAIFENG, city (lat 34°47'28" N, long 114°20'54" E) and district of modern Henan Province in eastern China, south of the Yellow River; medieval capital of the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127) and home of a Judeo-Persian community. Ever since the Jesuit missionaries (Matteo Ricci in 1605; Nicolas Longobardi, 1619; Jean-Paul Gozani, 1704-1712; Jean Domenge, 1715-1722; Antoine Gaubil, 1723-1725) made contact with the Jewish community in Kaifeng, there has been a debate about its origin. Did they come overland from Persia, through Afghanistan or perhaps Bukhara, or by sea from India or Yemen? Most scholars now agree that they came from Persia in the 12th century, during the reign of the Song dynasty in China, though the actual itinerary is still a matter of dispute. There are two reasons for this: First, the Jesuits frequently mention Persia (and Samarkand); and the Jewish community spoke Persian (Dehergne and Leslie, pp. 162, 188, 211, Simon, pp. 53, 58, 81, 113-4, 515). Secondly, their extant Hebrew writings (mostly held in Hebrew Union College [HUC], Cincinnati) include loan-words and passages in Judeo-Persian.

The most striking evidence comes from a letter by Jean-Paul Gozani, kept in the Jesuit archives in Rome, dated 30 June 1705 (in Jap-Sin 150, folio 267v, see Dehergne and Leslie, p. 73). He wrote that the synagogue leader wrote the first sentence of Genesis (In Hebrew "*Bereshith bara Elohim eth hashamayim ve-eth haaretz*") as "*Beresith, bolo [bara], Elohim, Osuman, Zemim.*" The use of the Persian words, *āsmān* and *zamin*, instead of the Hebrew words for heaven and earth is of great significance here.



The only Persian word found in their steles in Chinese is *Wu-si-da* (*Wu-ssu-ta*), i.e. *ostād*, religious leader or master. The 1489 stele writes that they came from *Tianzhu* (*T'ien-chu*), India, the 1512 stele from *Tianzhu xiyu* (*T'ien-chu hsi-yü*), the Western regions of India, but the Jesuits write mainly *Siyu* (*Xiyu, Hsi-yu*), the West or Western regions. We should note that Chinese Mongol texts use the term *Zhuhu* (*Chuhu*), from Persian *Johud*, for Jew, but the Jews themselves never used this expression (Leslie, 1972, p. 12).

A few rubrics in their prayer books (in HUC, Cincinnati) are in Judaeo-Persian. Their *Haggadah*, kept in Cincinnati, and published by B. D. Drenger and Cecil Roth, also includes a couple of liturgical poems in Judaeo-Persian. There are also short codices to section-books of the *Torah* in Judaeo-Persian (most held in HUC, Cincinnati, but see also Leslie, 1968-1969, pp. 1-35, with a list of Persian words found in these codices on pp. 22-23; 1984, pp. 238-53; 1998, pp. 32-33).

The *nusach* (formula, version) of their prayers resembles closely the Yemenite *nusach* and also that of Maimonides (Leslie, 1984, *passim*). Donald Daniel Leslie (1982, pp. 106, 111) and R. J. Zwi Werblowsky (1994, p. 496), suggest that this *nusach* was originally Babylonian (i.e. Iraq under Persian rule). One should note that Jean Domenge wrote “leur Bible pourroit bien être la Bible orientale de Jacob Ben Naphtali, qui ouvrit des écoles dans la terre de Babylone” (Dehergne and Leslie, p. 141; Leslie, 1982, p. 111).

The *nikud* (the vowel system) of their prayers is most unusual, still awaiting detailed analysis, and Leslie (1982) has detected some hints of a Persian influence. Elkan Adler (1898, pp. 624-25) suggested that they spoke in the Bukharan dialect. Norollah (1896, pp. 167-69) proposed “an origin in the small towns of Gulpaigan and Khonsar, or from the province of Khorassan,” based on their pronunciation of Persian.

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