

Book Review – *A Prince Without a Kingdom: The Exilarch in the Sasanian Era*

Geoffrey Herman, Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2012. Pages 432; Price: \$111.71 ISBN 3-16-150606-5

Reviewed by Dastur Dr. Kersey Antia¹

The Exilarch as the head of the Jewish community in Iran began as an inner Jewish phenomenon but was eventually recognized by the Sasanian rulers (206 to 657 ACE.) who ruled over Iran with its capital in Ctesiphon, just south of present-day Bagdad. He served as an intermediary between the Jews and the Sasanian kings. Geoffrey Herman has provided an exhaustive and empirical study of the Sasanian Exilarchate — *A Prince Without A Kingdom: The Exilarch in the Sasanian Era*, Mohr Siebeck, Tubingen, Germany, 2012. The publication in 1879 of the section of Tabari's Annals by Theodor Noldeke as well as Noldeke's own observations about the Babylonian Jewry paved the way for very authentic views on this subject.

As pointed out by Herman and other reviewers, Professor James Darmesteter, while visiting the Parsis in India, circa late nineteenth century, discovered in an extant Pahlavi text that the Sasanian King Yazdgird I had married Sisinduxt, the daughter of the Exilarch. Herman quotes scholars who regard the Exilarch as belonging to the fourth rung of the Sasanian nobility. He has included critical reviews of the Talmudic, post-Talmudic, and other sources. "*Integration of the Exilarchate into the wider field of scholarship on the Sasanian Empire*," maintains Herman, "*has hardly entered scholarly discourse*." He attributes the reason for it to the paucity of sources on the Sasanian Empire as well as on the Babylonian Jewry.

The Jews were found in great numbers throughout the vast territory of Sasanian Iraq, especially along the great rivers of the Tigris and the Euphrates, and their innumerable canals, "the nerves of the region." Herman finds evidence that even the government administrators "of the highest rank" were not Zoroastrians and many Persian Christians also held high offices in this region. Even the clergy and the nobility often married into one another.

Herman is very critical of earlier scholars' views, led often by their "*over-reliance on the Arabic material*," that there was a bond between religion and state, which Herman regards rather as a late, or even as a post-Sasanian view, "*possibly of Muslim inspiration*," since "*the contemporary sources suggest a slightly different and complex reality*." Nevertheless, commitment to Zoroastrianism by the earlier Sasanian kings is self-evident in their extant rock inscriptions, concedes Herman, but he holds that "*it did not, however*,

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automatically imply confrontation with other religions,” since the Sasanian kings had nothing to gain from fomenting or even allowing to foment friction with the Empire’s various minorities in the fertile region of Iraq heavily populated by non- Zoroastrians.

Herman finds no evidence of any adverse action taken against non-Zoroastrian subjects by the early Sasanian rulers. He posits that *“a zealous manifestation of Zoroastrianism was not determining royal policy”* and provides copious evidence for it. Despite the Talmudic references in the late fourth century to disapproval of Jewish burial practices by Zoroastrians who regarded burial as polluting the earth and, therefore, a major sin, Herman finds *“no evidence of actual persecution.”* Rather, he describes the period of Shapur II *“undoubtedly as an era of unprecedented intellectual flourishing for Babylonian Jewry as is evident from the Bavli,”* the Jewish sacred text written in Persian Babylonia during the Sasanian times.

Claims for the persecution of the Jews are often linked to the Mar Zutra revolt during the reign of Kawad (or Kobad, the Sasanian King). *“And yet,”* maintains Herman, *“the evidence for religious persecution against the Jews in this period is problematic. In the first period of the reign of Kawad, at least, there are clear signs that he behaved with moderation, both with respect to his own religion and towards those of other faiths.”* He even commanded each faith to deliver to him a book detailing its belief-system. Herman concludes, *“It is hard to find a historical reality in which to integrate the revolt account.”* The extensive research of the University of Chicago Professor, Richard Payne not only corroborates Herman’s finding but it also heralds a new chapter in viewing the Sasanians as generally quite tolerant of their non-Zoroastrian subjects and in refuting the contrarian view of earlier scholars.

Herman locates the seat of the Exilarchate (the institution) in Neharde at first, and later in Mehoza in easy proximity to the center of the government of the Sasanian empire and adds: *“Its importance as the capital city of the empire also emerges from the Talmud.”* Mehoza, the famous round city, was situated close to the Selucid capital, Seleucia and had Jewish settlements surrounding it. Also, in Ctesiphon, the Sasanian capital, which lay across the bridge from Mehoza, there was a Jewish community. Mehoza was established by the founder of the Sasanian dynasty, King Ardashir I.

Herman finds no evidence for the Exilarch’s involvement in either collecting taxes for the Sasanian rulers or in imposing direct or indirect taxes on the Jews. However, he received money from the Jews serving under his authority and from appointing local judges. He also received money for providing additional services such as issuing documents, tax on ritual slaughter, etc., through the judges appointed by him. Though Herman finds no *“supportive evidence”* to prove these assumptions, I have come across conflicting evidence in this regard as noted in my forthcoming book, *Jews and*

Zoroastrians in History.

Even though Herman states, “*the Exilarchate possessed considerable judicial powers,*” he finds it quite unlikely that the Jewish judicial system as a whole was subordinate to the Exilarchate. He even cites a story in Bavli that mentions that Rav Shela “*acquired the right to serve as a judge directly from the King of Persia.*” While the Zoroastrian clerics criticized Catholicos (the Christian counterpart of the Exilarch) Mar Abba for using the Christian rather than the Persian judicial system, the Exilarch expressly stated “*the law of the kingdom is the law,*” giving no reason to the Magi to complain in this regard.

While Herman finds little evidence to substantiate the claim of Davidic descent for the Exilarch, which would have significantly promoted his status among the Jews, he asserts “*it was the Exilarchate’s Persian connection (which he explores at length in pages 215- 217) that accounted for any tangible power it might have possessed.*” The Bavli highlights the fact of the Exilarchate’s affinity to Persian culture in so many areas. Herman cites just two aspects where it was quite evident, the Persian language and the expression of his nobility in the form of the privilege of being carried in a golden sedan chair.

Out of over 300 Persian loan words in the entire Bavli, 20 pertain to Exilarchal traditions, which Herman finds as “disproportionately large.” The Bavli identifies with the Exilarchate a quintessential symbol of Persian nobility, transportation on a sedan chair, made (or covered) in gold. “*This and other distinguishing signs of the Exilarchs described in the sources,*” observes Herman, “*are readily recognized in the Sasanian culture as marking the privileged classes. Furthermore, wearing a special crown, the right to use a golden bed/couch, and wearing a special belt, all mentioned for the exilarchate, served as distinctive emblems for nobles even in the Parthian era. Armed with these visible symbols of authority, the Exilarchs would appear well equipped to exercise their authority over the Jews of Babylonia.*”

The Exilarch, observes Herman, represents “a Philo-Persian trend.” He concludes: “*Addressing a concern that Persian finesse might override rabbinic, it is noteworthy that in this source, as with many others that we have seen, the Exilarch is firmly aligned with the Persians.*” Later legends even speak of Exilarch Bustanay marrying the daughter of Khusrow II or Yazdgird III.

What Herman observes in his concluding remarks speaks for itself, leaving no reason for me to add anything to it: “*The ambiance in the Exilarchal house is familiar from the typical depictions of the wealthy. Similarly, a number of sources hint that horses were kept at the Exilarchal residence, such as would be fitting for a freeman (āzād), and this might even allude to some military component in his standing. Furthermore, there are various allusions to status symbols, such as the qamara, and the crown. “It seems that the main position*

of the Exilarch was as the leadership of a religious community by the crown. Lazarus and others had dubbed the Exilarch 'a king without a kingdom, a prince without a people'.” It would seem more precise to understand the Exilarch as a leader on behalf of the kingdom, by virtue of the kingdom – the Sasanian kingdom, for he owed his standing to the crown.

“With the demise of the Sasanian Empire the historical chapter in the relationship between the Exilarchate and the Sasanian kingdom was closed,” and, I may add, history never again witnessed such a sublime symbiosis between the Jews and their rulers during their entire dynasty.

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Dastur Dr Kersey Antia is the High Priest of the Zoroastrian Association of Chicago. He is a practicing psychologist.