

JEWISH ZOROASTRIAN RELATIONS IN THE SASANIAN PERIOD

Dr. Kersey Antia, Jan 16, 2020

Robert Brody describes how well the Jewish seminaries flourished during the Sasanian period (*Irano-Judaica II*, Jerusalem, 1990) and concludes: “It seems that with the exception of an occasional zealot, the Zoroastrian authorities were content to leave the Jews of the Sasanian Empire in peace, to practice within religion as they saw fit. From time to time decrees or individual actions, whether or not officially sanctioned, were directed against Jewish practices which offended Zoroastrian religious sensibilities; but although we have not detailed information on the scope of such interference, its impact on the Jewish community appears to have been quite marginal, and most likely these were only sporadic episodes. Taken as a whole, both Jewish and non-Jewish sources for the Sasanian period present a picture of a Jewish community which enjoyed several centuries of security and tranquility, a situation which must have contributed in no small measure to the development of the Babylonian Talmud and of Talmudic Judaism. In fact, Babylonian authors of the Geonic period were fond of explaining the alleged superiority of Babylonian over Palestinian tradition, on the grounds that the Jews of Babylonia had not been subject to persecution as had those of Palestine. Of course these polemically motivated statements contain some degree of exaggeration, but it is still significant that Babylonian Jews of this period would claim that the Babylonian academies had known neither persecution nor interference since 12 years before the construction of the first Temple, when God had established a safe haven for the leading scholars of Israel in order to safeguard the continuity of the Oral Torah.” Such a unique development would not have been possible without allowing the Jews the freedom and security they needed not just for their academies but for all their endeavors for self-preservation and communal progress. What Brody adds here in a footnote bears this out. “And compare Neusner's summation (note 1 above, p. 923): “The single most important event in the history of the Jews and of Judaism was the formation of the Babylonian Talmud upon the foundations of Babylonian Jewish political, cultural and religious life. In a less cosmopolitan and accommodating civilization, that document probably could not have emerged.”

In the following article in *Irano-Judaica II*, Jerusalem, (1990), Isaiah M. Gafni highlights the rise of local patriotism among the Sasanian Jews as well as fully supports Brody's thesis of Sasanian

tolerance towards the Jews.

“In conclusion, we have briefly noted various types of 'local patriotism' or attachment. Not only Babylonia versus Palestine, but within Babylonia itself, and expressed in a variety of ways. What is striking, however, is the adversarial relationship most stressed in Babylonia – in contradistinction to Palestine. If in Palestine the adversary certainly by the Byzantine period but even earlier – was primarily the other, whether the pagan Greek or Roman or the growing Christian community, that type of tension is not paralleled in the Babylonian Talmud, i.e., between Jew and Persian, Jew and gentile. If, indeed, the gentile was not the issue, this would seem to dovetail with the conclusions of Dr. Brody at this conference, regarding the lack of a perceived persecution of Jews at the hands of the Zoroastrian clergy and Sasanian government. Beyond that, one wonders whether the phenomenon of local-patriotism does not go a long way towards reflecting the relative security felt by Jews in Sasanian Persia. While certainly not isolated from the outside world – and the numerous Iranian influences certainly prove this – there is concomitantly no immediate perception of being threatened by the outside world. The super-patriotism expressed by Pirkoi ben Baba in Geonic times, while clearly reflecting political struggles with Palestine and over-stressing the 'tradition of persecution' possessed by that community (while at the same time idealizing the history of Torah in Babylonia) nevertheless does not seem all that removed from the sociological conclusions that may be inferred from the various phenomena of local-patriotism that issued from the Babylonian Jewish literature of the Sasanian period.”