

Zvi Yehuda, *The New Babylonian Diaspora. The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Community in Iraq, 16th-20th Centuries C.E.*, (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2017), pp. xvi+310.

by Esther Meir-Glitzenstein

The narrative establishing the antiquity of the Babylonian Jewish community is central to Iraqi Jews' sense of identity. The narrative posits an uninterrupted Jewish presence in the Babylon of once, beginning more than 2,500 years ago, from the time of the destruction of the First Temple and the Judean exile in the 6th century BCE until the mass Jewish emigration from Iraq in the mid-20th century. It suggests that Iraqi Jews are the descendants of the Jews of ancient Babylon, making the legacy of the great Jewish community of ancient times – the seat of the prosperous cultural center that helmed Jewish cultural growth for hundreds of years – an indelible part of the history of modern Iraqi Jewry.

This narrative acquired unique significance following the establishment of the independent state of Iraq in the 1920s. The narrative's chronology provided a basis for the Jews' demand that as an integral element of the country's indigenous population, they needed to be granted equal civil rights and the opportunity to be actively involved in all state concerns including the new state's economic, social, and cultural life. Heads of the Iraqi Jewish community and its intellectual elite upheld this traditional account of the origins of Iraqi Jewry; the narrative was accepted by both Moslems and Jews in Iraq. It also gave the Jews a sense of pride in being heirs to a native population who preceded Islam in Iraq, having arrived in the region a thousand years prior to the beginning of Moslem rule.

The continuity of Jewish life in Babylon forms the core of *The New Babylonian Diaspora: The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Community in Iraq, 16th-20th Centuries C.E.*, an innovative, fascinating new study by Dr. Zvi Yehuda. The subject is approached from two directions: the first part of the book traces the history of the Jewish community in what was once Mesopotamia over the last 500 years, while the second focuses on four formative developments in this period.

As its title suggests, the work begins by detailing the unraveling of the prosperous Jewish community in the period of the Geonim, a process paralleling the political and economic disintegration of the Abbasid Caliphate, and goes on to the destruction of Baghdad, the Abbasid capital, by Mongol invaders in the 14th century. Two hundred years later, Babylonian Jewry began to revive, a gradual

reemergence which continued for the next several hundred years, reaching a peak in the 20th century.

While the Talmudic and Gaonic periods have been the subject of outstanding studies by established scholars from Israel and abroad, little has been written on the region's Jews after the decline of the Babylonian cultural center and the physical destruction of the communities which it directed. This paucity in research reflects both limited interest and the dearth of primary sources pertaining to events in the region after it had ceased functioning as a focal center for world Jewry as a whole.

Dr. Yehuda grapples with these lacunae. Based on a broad scholarly literature to date, his book, unprecedented in scope, is a detailed examination of an extensive collection of sources that include previously unstudied documents in Hebrew, Arabic, English, and French. This forms the first in-depth study of the renewal of Babylonian Jewry. Most importantly, it sheds light on the 15th-century “black hole” in the history of the region's Jews; no information has previously been made available on Babylonian Jewry during this period. Albeit lack of knowledge cannot form a solid grounding for inference the author's data about the breakdown of infrastructure in the region, the drastic drop in population, and the political and economic decline of the city of Baghdad and Mesopotamia as a whole, provides an understanding of destruction whose impact clearly reached far beyond the Jewish community. The 1000s saw the beginning of the unraveling of the Babylonian Jewish center, ultimately followed by a general regional collapse in the wake of the sack of Baghdad by the Mongols. A miniscule part of the native population remained in the region; many Jews immigrated to neighboring countries: Persia, Syria, and Lebanon. Others ventured further, moving to Egypt, North Africa, Spain, and countries of Christian Europe.

A new Babylonian diaspora began to take shape in the 16th century, when Jews from Persia, Kurdistan, Syria, and other lands, migrated to Iraq. It seems that few members of the then Baghdadi community were directly descended from Babylonian Jews. These findings raise important questions about the languages spoken by the new Jewish arrivals and the religious and cultural traditions of the emergent community. These issues are not touched upon in Dr. Yehuda's book; they await research to be done in the future.

The second part of the book considers four 18-20th century incidents which took place in Baghdad and Basra and which had far reaching repercussions for the

relations among Jews, Christians, and Moslems. The four incidents were prompted by the workings of the system of colonial rule and its economic and political impact in the region; Jewish activists and organizations in Constantinople, Paris, and London seeking to help their brethren in the East, contributed their share to the unfolding of events. The episodes showcase the political and cultural network functioning as a major source of support for the Jews of Babylon-Iraq.

The first three of the four incidents took place under Ottoman rule. The earliest, a confrontation between Jews and Christians in Basra, was prompted in 1791 by claims that Christians had killed a Jew for religious sacrifice; the second involved the struggle of Babylonian Jews in 1860 to retain control over Ezekiel's grave; and the third, the dispute over the gravesite of Joshua the High Priest in the vicinity of Baghdad, took place in connection with the burial of Rabbi Abdallah Somekh in 1889. Jews were the ones to initiate the conflict in all three cases, the key difference being that while they challenged Christians in the first, the two episodes from the 1800s involved Baghdadi Moslems. The dispute over the grave of Ezekiel ended in a Jewish triumph, but the other two conflicts, particularly the last, spelled out a loss for the Jews, leading to the imprisonment of a number of Baghdad's Jewish community leaders.

The colonial Jewish and Ottoman Jewish networks were asked to intervene in each of these cases. All of their records indicate an improvement in the economic status of Jews and a rise in Jewish population, level of modern education, and contact with the European Jewish world as well as, through this, with the European powers.

Fourth and last on Dr. Yehuda's itemized list are the Baghdad anti-Jewish "Farhud" pogrom. This took place in 1941 in sovereign Iraq. The violence left some 180 Jews dead and hundreds more wounded, amid extensive damage and looting of Jewish homes and property. Much has been written about the disturbances, with special attention focused on their political aspects and chronology. The innovativeness offered by Dr. Yehuda's chapter on the *Farhud* is in its near-exclusive focus on the unmediated voices of members of the Jewish community, and its being structured around testimonials that enable a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the trauma the pogrom entailed. The author details the unfolding of the pogrom events, which are considered a watershed in Iraqi Jewish history and the beginning of a marked decline in Jewish life in Iraq. The birth of the State of Israel further undermined the status of Iraqi Jews. 1950-1951 saw the *en*

masse exodus of most of them to Israel; those remaining departed for England and North America in subsequent years. The end of the second Babylonian diaspora had become a reality.

It is clear that the new work by Dr. Yehuda forms a unique contribution to the study of the Iraqi Jewish community in the modern era. The book will undoubtedly serve as a foundation for further research, which will shed new light on the religious, social, and cultural characteristics of Jewish life in Iraq.

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