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Michael E. Stone and Aram Topchyan, *Jews in Ancient and Medieval Armenia: First Century BCE to Fourteenth Century CE*, Oxford University Press, 2022

In this pioneering book, Michael Stone, a world-renowned Armenologist and expert in Second Temple literature, and Aram Topchyan, an authority on Armenian historiography, undertake the first comprehensive exploration of the history of Jews in Armenia spanning from Antiquity to the Middle Ages. Through skillful integration of an extensive array of diverse sources – including historical records, inscriptions, colophons, biblical commentaries, and more – authored in multiple languages such as Armenian, Arabic, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, their collaborative effort delivers a rich and detailed study, which not only illuminates the presence of Jews in Armenia but also elucidates the intricate interactions between Jews and Armenians more generally.

The book is comprised of four chapters: 1. “Ararat” and Armenia in the Bible and Associated Traditions; 2. Jews in Armenia in the Ancient Period (First Century BCE to Fifth Century CE); 3. The Middle Ages; 4. Other Armenian-Jewish Connections.

As the authors note, Stone is responsible for chapter 1; chapter 2, sections 2.1 and 2.14–15 (linguistic issues); chapter 3, sections 3.4–5 (The cemetery in Eġegis) and chapter 4, while Topchyan wrote most of chapter 2 (sections 2.2–2.13 and 2.16); chapter 3, sections 3.1–3 (Jews in Dvin and Kapan), and 3.6 (The Inscription of the Church Spitakawor Astuatsatsin).

In the following, I will only have the opportunity to highlight a selection of the intriguing discussions presented within this book.

In the first chapter, Stone traces the different references to Armenia in the early Jewish traditions, focusing mainly on the various translations and interpretations of the “Mountains of Ararat” in Genesis 8:4, many of which expose some knowledge of Armenia. In Jewish Hellenistic sources, the Mountains of Ararat were identified with Armenia. However, in most of the Aramaic translations as well as in rabbinic literature the mountains of Ararat were identified with the mountains of Qardo, i.e., Gordyene,

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modern Kurdistan. Interestingly, the Palestinian Targum combines both traditions and identifies one of the mountains of Ararat as Qardo and the other as Armenia.

Stone also offers an ingenious solution to a crux in 4 Ezra: the enigmatic toponym “Arzareth” designating a land in northern Mesopotamia. He suggests that this toponym goes back to a transliteration of the Hebrew ארץ אררט “the land of Ararat”. Stone corroborates this syncopated orthography by referring to a 13th century Hebrew inscription found in the Jewish cemetery of Elegis (discussed in chapter 3), which contains the words בארץ ארת, and which has been interpreted by David Amit as an orthographic variant of בארץ אר[ר]ט (“in the Land of Ararat”).

The second and most extensive chapter deals with the presence of Jews in Armenia spanning from the 1st century BCE to the 5th century CE. Central to this exploration is the account found in the *History of Armenia* (4.55) attributed to P’awstos Buzand (5th century). This narrative recounts the invasion led by Shapur II into Armenia in 368/9, during which seven Armenian cities – Artashat, Valarshapat, Eruandashat, Zarehawan, Zarishat, Van, and Naxchawan, inhabited exclusively by Armenians and Jews – were conquered and sacked. P’awstos claims that 95,000 Jewish families, along with tens of thousands of Armenian families, were captured and deported to the Sasanian Empire. Topchyan, through a meticulous examination of the historical context, contends that while the numbers are undoubtedly inflated, the report remains historically credible. Furthermore, potential corroboration may be found in Ammianus Marcellinus’ account of the invasion and sack of Artashat, despite his omission of any mention of Jews. Topchyan adds that “if there were not considerable numbers of Jews in Armenia at the time of the Persian expedition of 368/9, P’awstos would not have mentioned them at all” (p. 26). He also suggests that the term “Jew”, used by P’awstos, should be understood to refer both to Jews and Judaizers.

One could also add further evidence for the reliability of P’awstos’ account. According to him, the destination of the deportees was Asoristan and Khuzestan, where they were to be settled. This accords with what we know of the regions to which Shapur II deported captives from various conquered lands, as documented in Syriac and Arabic sources. The credibility of P’awstos’ narrative holds significant implications for scholars studying Sasanian Jews, necessitating an examination of the potential repercussions of the substantial influx of Jews into the Sasanian Empire on local Jewish communities and their traditions.

Topchyan proceeds to scrutinize P’awstos’ assertion regarding the arrival of Jews in Armenia through deportations orchestrated by Tigran II during his conquest of Palestine. Discrepancies between P’awstos’ narrative and Josephus’ account have led scholars to question its reliability. However, Topchyan compellingly demonstrates, by juxtaposing it with Movses Khorenats’i’s depiction of the deportations in his *History of Armenia* (5th century), that P’awstos had amalgamated two distinct events – the deportation of 70 BCE and a subsequent deportation in 40 BCE during the Parthian-Armenian invasion of Syria and Palestine. Despite these discrepancies, Topchyan argues for the underlying credibility of P’awstos’ account. He convincingly concludes that “during his military campaigns Tigran II took substantial numbers of

Jews captive and brought them to Armenia. The settlement of Armenian cities by way of *synoikismos*, that is, the practice of shifting multitudes of peoples from the conquered countries, was typical of Tigran II's policy. Information about this practice is also contained in Greco-Roman sources" (p. 36). Topchyan also posits that a portion of the Jewish population reached Armenia as a result of the deportations by Tigran II from places with sizable Jewish communities, including Adiabene, Mygdonia, Gordyene, Osroene, Iberia, and Syria.

Chapter 3 discusses the presence of Jews in Armenia during the Middle Ages. Unfortunately, once again only scant evidence has come down to us, such as an undated Armenian colophon which states that "in the city of Dvin from that earthquake 62,000 people died among the Armenians, among the Jews, and among the Persians" (p. 74). This note, referring to the earthquake of 893, informs us *en passant* about the existence of a Jewish community in Dvin, one of the capitals of medieval Armenia. Another curious nugget of information is found in a note by the anonymous continuator of the *History* by T'ovma Artsruni (9th–10th centuries), where we are told that after the assassination of Prince Grigor Derenik Artsruni in 887, his wife Sophie "prescribed rites of mourning and arranged in groups Jewish singers, and had them chant the laments of the kings of Israel" (p. 77).

The most significant and unexpected evidence concerning Jews in Armenia emerges from a Jewish cemetery discovered in the village of Eghegis, situated in the Vayots' Dzor district of the Siwnik' region. Investigated in 2000–2001 under the leadership of Michael Stone and David Amit, this cemetery yielded sixty-four tombstones, twenty of which bear inscriptions in Hebrew and Aramaic dating from 1266 to 1346 CE – a period marked by prosperity in the region under the rule of the Orbeleans. These inscriptions include biblical citations in Hebrew, along with standard Jewish funerary formulas, showcasing a remarkable familiarity with rabbinic sources that attests to a high level of Jewish education. Given the presence of Persian names and titles among certain Jews, such as "Mar Khawaja Sharaf al-Din son of the elder, Khawaja Zaki", it appears that a portion of the Jewish population may have been Persian, possibly of high rank.

In the fourth and concluding chapter, Stone explores additional instances of Armenian-Jewish interactions. First, Armenian pilgrimage to the Holy Land is discussed. Of special importance is the fact that the earliest evidence of Armenian script is found in a 5th-century graffito in Nazareth written by two Armenian pilgrims – Babgen and Anania. Interestingly, these same two individuals also inscribed their names on rocks close to the site of Mount Sinai. Next, references to Armenia in ancient Jewish literature are presented. Noteworthy is the mention of R. Jacob Armeniyya in the Palestinian Talmud, as well as a R. Armeniya mentioned both in the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds. This would likely indicate that they came from Armenia. Finally, in a 10th-century Judeo-Arabic document from the Cairo Geniza (possibly a copy of a 9th century composition), published by David Sklare, there is a list of places which the author argues could be designated as being Armeniyya. The knowledge of specific toponyms suggests the author's familiarity with Armenia and its urban

centers, indicating a probable origin in Northern Mesopotamia for both the author and the document's readership.

In sum, this comprehensive study, meticulously researched, expertly analyzed, and presented with remarkable clarity and lucidity stands to greatly enrich experts in both the fields of Armenian studies and Jewish history, and a broader audience alike.

In their introduction the authors soberly state (p. xiii):

It is, indeed, impossible at present to write a continuous history of Jewish presence in Armenia, since there is no evidence of sustained Jewish settlement in the Land of Ararat. Nonetheless, there are episodic sources existing in Armenian, Arabic, Hebrew, and other languages that attest the presence of Jews there. If we think of the history of Jews in Armenia as a dark tunnel, then the extant sources cast light upon patches of the tunnel, without illuminating it to all its length. It is to the elucidation of these patches of illumination that the present book is dedicated.

Yet this book does much more than just shed light on certain patches of the tunnel. Rather, it reveals the tunnel's contours with remarkable clarity, enabling us to gauge its length and complexity. The vivid illumination of these patches reveals, thanks to the diligent efforts of the authors, that the history of the Jews in Armenia was far richer than previously believed. Hopefully, future discoveries will allow us to cast new light on other patches of this fascinating history.