

## **HEBREW ETHNOGENESIS AND DIFFUSION: DO WE NEED A MORE COMPREHENSIVE SCENARIO?**

by

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### **Summary**

**It is shown that the conventional scenario of Hebrew/Jewish ethnogenesis and diffusion leaves much to be desired. New research is needed in many sub-fields of the matter, and in general we will have to arrive at an updated, much more comprehensive scenario.**

THE REFLECTIONS presented here can only be highly provisional. They will, however, adhere to the rules of good scholarly procedure. The general purpose of these reflections will be to bring together observations which, though not amounting to evidence in the strict sense, nevertheless will probably tend to arouse in my readers a certain suspicion, whether the traditionally presented scenario of Hebrew ethnogenesis and Hebrew/Jewish diffusion can really be trusted.

### **Hebrews and Jews**

Like all other designations connected with the concept of "race" or other ethnic criteria, the exact meaning of the words "Hebrews" and "Jews" is of course by no means clear. We will not enter here into a discussion about what e.g. Fishberg(1), cited by Koestler (2), calls the "crucial point" with respect to the ethnic categorization of the Jews: "are they of pure race, modified more or less by environmental influences, or are they a religious sect composed of racial elements

acquired by proselytism and intermarriage during their migration in various parts of the world" Understandably Fishberg opts for a latter view.

In conformity with many other scholars, for the purposes of this article we will use the designations "Hebrews" and "Jews" more or less interchangeable, although this is strictly speaking not quite correct, but in general will use "Hebrews" more for Biblical times of the Old Testament, and "Jews" more for later times.

### **The traditional scenario**

In the traditional scenario presented by our Biblical and Ancient Oriental History scholars, and in our Bible atlases(3), the Hebrews originated in Sumerian southern Mesopotamia of the early 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC, from where they later emigrated to Canaan. There also existed later, during the 10<sup>th</sup> century BC, the Davidic-Solomonian kingdom. In Post-Solomonian times parts of the populace of the kingdoms Israel and Juda

were deported to northern Mesopotamia and Media by the Assyrians, and to southern Mesopotamia by the Babylonians. And in the end, during late Hellenistic times by the Romans, the remaining Jewish populace was dispersed in all directions, especially to other Mediterranean regions.

IN CONVENTIONAL historiography that is all that can be reported about the ethnogenesis and diffusion of the Hebrews. There do exist, however, quite different scenarios, proposed by serious scholars, which deviate from the traditional scenario to a shocking degree. We will discuss these in a moment.

#### Different geographical focuses of Hebrews/Jews

The present author suspects that the traditional scenario of Hebrew ethnogenesis and diffusion is too simplistic, that we need a much more comprehensive outlook. After all the Abraham "story" is scarcely taken seriously by responsible and competent scholars any longer these days. Deviant ancient centers of Hebrew diffusion have been proposed by serious scholars, especially deviant localizations for the Solomonian kingdom and, by inference, for the First (i.e. Salomonian) Temple, of which modern Israeli archaeologists have so far been unable to find any trace in Palestine.

Rather popular has become the thesis by Salibi (4) that, instead of Canaan, the Asir region of southwestern Arabia had been the homeland of the Hebrews before their deportation to Mesopotamia and Media by the Assyrians and the Babylonians. In view of the role certain Jewish tribes played in Arabia during the later times of Mohammed, an ancient Hebrew presence in Asir does not seem so far-fetched after all.

Touchet(5), in contradistinction to Salibi, looks to the Iberian West as the most probable original center of Hebrew diffusion.

He thinks there is enough evidence to tentatively localize (in compliance incidentally with local Moroccan legend) Solomon's kingdom on the Iberian Peninsula, and the site of the First Temple at the place where today stands the Alhambra of Granada. A similar scenario had already been proposed earlier by Milosz(6). Both these scenarios would be more or less compatible with the views of Munich Germanistics professor Vennemann(7), who thinks that the linguistic evidence points to the Greater Iberian West as the original center of diffusion of all Semitic peoples, which would of course also include the Proto-Hebrews.

In connection with the Touchet-Milosz scenario of an Iberian origin of the Hebrews, it has to be noted that the Hebrew text of the Old Testament does not know any "Hebrews", but only "Ibri(m)".

#### The Iberian Peninsula: "Motherland" of the Sephardim?

MY READERS will probably know that the two most well-known sub-groups of the Hebrew-Jewish population on our planet are designated by the terms "Ashkenasim" (literally Hebrew "the Germans", or the German-Yiddish speaking ones) for the Eastern European Jews, and "Sephardim" (from Hebrew "Sefarad" for the Iberian Peninsula) for the Jews of Iberian/Mediterranean origin. Of the Ashkenasim we will speak in a moment.

Touchet speaks of the tradition among Sephardi Jews of Spain, e.g. in Catalan Girona, to the effect that they had always lived on the Iberian Peninsula, and that their forefathers had definitely not been immigrants from Canaan-Palestine.

Such a tradition among an obviously intelligent and literate Jewish populace can in my opinion not be dismissed in an offhand manner, as if it were irrelevant. Quite to the contrary the importance, which Spain had

had in certain Hebrew-Jewish respects, e.g. for the transmission of the Cabbalistic tradition, must automatically lead us to speculations (quite legitimate in scholarly matters) if not indeed the Iberian Peninsula might have been a very ancient focus or center of Hebrew-Jewish presence. If such a view could be verified by additional research, it could possibly also lead to a better understanding of the Hebrew-Jewish role with respect to the diffusion of Arab-Muslim science and general culture to the Christian Occident. This role may have been much underestimated(8).

#### **The Khazar empire and the Ashkenazi Jews**

Koestler(9) has very ably proposed an intelligent scenario, according to which the Eastern European or Ashkenazi Hebrews or Jews have to be seen as the diaspora of the Khazar empire of the Middle Ages, north of the Black Sea and the Caucasus. The Khazars, to foster their Third-Power status vis-à-vis the Christian Byzantine Empire and the Muslim caliphate, had obviously adopted the Judaic religion. Later, when their realm was destroyed by other war-like, semi-nomadic peoples from Inner-Asia, this Jewish population became dispersed to Poland-Lithuania, Germany and Hungary. Somehow, in a matter which as yet nobody has been able to find out, these Eastern European Jews had adopted a very ancient German dialect, i.e. when they were still living in the Khazar realm. This is important to keep in mind: the German Yiddish had not been adopted by certain Sephardic Jews migrating through German lands from the West to Eastern Europe, but the Khazar Jews had brought their very ancient German Yiddish dialect already with them when they came, from the East, to Poland-Lithuania, Germany, or Hungary.

SINCE THE VERY ancient Bavarian dialect of Germany is very similar to Yiddish (although as a written language the latter is

most often written in Hebrew letters), the present author has proposed that the so far still rather enigmatic Bavarian ethnogenesis is somehow related to the ethnogenesis of these Khazar Jews(10). It is hoped that this potentially extremely fruitful field of research will soon find the interest of competent scholars.

IN THE KOESTLER scenario just described, the (probably multiethnic and multi religious) populace of the Khazar empire would then have been, so to speak, transmuted to "Hebrews" or Jews by the simple expedient of a resolve, on their part, to adopt Judaism and find Jewish missionaries willing to do the proselytizing work. There does, however, exist the at least theoretical possibility that remnants of those Hebrews deported to Media or still farther to the east by the Assyrians, may have reached Afghanistan or certain parts of Inner Asia like Bucharra or Turkestan, and may later have become part of some Proto-Khazar, multi-ethnic amalgam. I think I had once in my hands a provisionally edited, posthumous manuscript by Velikovsky (well-known for many other "heretic" works), where he tried, not too convincingly, to deal with the problem. Anyway there may already have been some Hebrews or Jews among the multi-ethnic Khazars, when they established their realm north of the Pontus and Caucasus.

#### **Other ancient centers of Hebrew/Jewish culture**

So far (in this article we disregard the Hebrew/Jewish worldwide diffusion of modern times) we have already had three ancient centers of Hebrew/Jewish culture: the Near East, the Iberian Peninsula, and Khazaria. But there are other centers, witness to impressive cultural diffusion, as well.

Koestler(11) mentions e.g. the dark-skinned Falasha Jews of Ethiopia, "the Chinese Jews of Kai-Feng who look like Chinese, the Yemenite Jews with their dark olive

complexion, the Jewish Berber tribes of the Sahara who look like Tuaregs". He ascribes these Hebrew/Jewish offshoots to "the proselytizing zeal of the Jews of earlier times". With this, he is most probably right. But lingering doubts remain. Are such ancient centers of Hebrew/Jewish culture really in every case the product of proselytizing activities, or might not perhaps some of them rather indicate protohistoric Hebrew migration routes, by land or sea, of which no longer any remembrance exists? Ethiopia and the Yemen might be such cases.

#### **Binyamín of Tudela and the distribution of Hebrews/Jews**

Rabbi Benjamín of Tudela (in northern Spain, with important Moorish and Jewish communities), a scholar and geographer, during the years 1160-1173 travelled to many countries to visit Hebrew communities. Spedicato(12) has extracted from Benjamín's travel report ("Sefer Massa'ot") most interesting information about the distribution of Hebrew's in European and Oriental countries. The list looks as follows:

|                      |                  |
|----------------------|------------------|
| Spain, France, Italy | 4.370 or 0,4%    |
| Greece               | 8.840 or 0,9%    |
| Syria, Palestine     | 15.190 or 1,6%   |
| Mesopotamia          | 111.220 or 11,4% |
| Arabia, Yemen        | 465.000 or 47,7% |
| Greater Persia       | 252.000 or 25,8% |
| India                | 104.000 or 10,7% |
| North Africa, Sicily | 15.000 or 1,5%   |

SPEDICATO(13) comments on these numbers and percentage relationships with remarks which make worthwhile reading. As will be noted, Binjamín gives no numbers for the Ashkenazi Jews, nor for Germany, and strangely enough omits Andalusia. But although we do not know whether the numbers refer to the whole population (some passages suggest that only the male adults were considered), nor how many Hebrews lived in cities or regions not touched by Binyamín, Spedicato's judgment is most

probably right that "despite the certain inaccuracy in total numbers, it is likely that the ratios of Hebrews in different geographical areas are quite correct, since such ratios are independent of the multiplying factors, which are presumably similar for the different regions".

THE PERCENTAGE relationships by region in the above list are indeed rather spectacular. Nearly half of the Hebrew/Jewish population listed by Binyamín lived then on the Arabian Peninsula, and of those 465.000 the great majority, namely 300.000, lived in Yemen (also called "Saba" by him), i.e. in Southern Arabia near Ethiopia, where the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea meet.

Astoundingly, in Benyamín's list, India is the region (after the Arabian Peninsula, Greater Persia and Mesopotamia) with the fourth largest Hebrew/Jewish population, and nearly all of them are living in Southern India, in what today called Kerala, around the city of Quilon.

#### **Hebrew/Jews in India**

The Malabar coast, especially Kerala, has been an ancient center of Indian seafaring and international overseas trade. The Imperium Romanum had well-known trade contacts with this region. If I remember correctly, many more Roman coins have been found there in hoards or caches than anywhere in the Occident. In Binyamín's time the region belonged to the realm of the Chola dynasty which became the dominant commercial power on the Malabar coast. Quilon profited from the presence of Arabian, Christian, Jewish, and Chinese merchants. The Cholas became also the dominant military power of Southeast Asia: they subdued Ceylon and the Maldives, wrested control of the commercial sea lanes of the Indian Ocean from the Arabs, sent successful attack fleets to Burma and Indonesia, and even sent expeditions to China, then under the Southern Song.

With circa 100.000 Hebrews/Jews in the Quilon region around Benyamín's time, I feel that we have immediately to ask the very legitimate question, whether this does not amount to at least tentative evidence that we will have to reckon with a very ancient Hebrew/Jewish presence in Southern India. If it had only been a matter of (even numerous) Hebrew/Jewish merchant houses and merchant banks interested in overseas trade in many commodities with distant countries like China, in which the Cholas were especially interested, we would have to reckon with at most 1.000 Hebrews/Jews in the Quilon region, but not with such a really large Hebrew/Jewish population (100.000).

WE WILL RETURN to this problem in a moment. It seems unavoidable that we will have to pose for these Hebrews/Jews of Southern India the very same question which Touchet (discussed above) has posed for the Hebrews/Jews of the Iberian Peninsula: does there really exist a connection, via ancient dispersion, with the Holy Land of Canaan/Palestine, or at least with the deported Hebrews/Jews in Babylonia, did their forefathers arrive as immigrants from there at all? That remains to be seen.

#### **Problem of Hebrew/Jewish role in Muslim civilization**

There have been published some doubts recently that as yet we may not have fully appreciated the Hebrew/Jewish role in the development of the Islamic as well as European civilization. Kaltenstadler(14) e.g., when discussing the works of Davidson(15), states: "I am in accord with Davidson, to wit that some modern scholars tend to overestimate the role of Arab culture for the development of Europe..., and to undervalue the contribution of the Jews".

The present author can only recommend to his readers the relevant chapter in the Davidson-Luhmann opus(16), because here we have no room to discuss details, let alone

their most challenging overall scenario, which postulates among other things e.g. also a great Ashkenazi-Jewish influence on the development of German culture. With respect to the true nature or character of the Muslim civilization of the Middle Ages it seems, however, worthwhile to cite (translated by the present author) Kaltenstadler's comments on the problem:

"... during the early centuries we hear scarcely anything of Arabs. Even as late as the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries we almost never hear of Arabs or Muslims, but only of the 'Saracens'. The civilization of the Hohenstaufen in Sicily during the 13<sup>th</sup> century, too, knows only Saracens". And after some tentative speculation about the Saracens having possibly been a conglomerate or amalgam with a strong Jewish/Aramaic element, Kaltenstadler continues:

"And then Davidson ventures a bold proposal which, though not sufficiently verifiable by documents, nevertheless may have a certain worth. He criticizes the conventional view of our historians that only the permanent antagonism between the Byzantine and the Persian empires... made possible the Arabic ascendancy and expansion towards the whole Mediterranean region. Davidson thinks that an earlier cultural expansion by an Aramaic, Proto-Jewish civilization would seem much more likely"(17)."And he cites Davidson's tentative idea that "the later Aramaic-Jewish culture was then militarized and feudalized, and was understood as an Arabic-Muslim civilization only since the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries.

IT IS TO BE hoped that these most meritorious lines of research will be followed up by comprehensive in-depth studies by future generations of scholars. There can be no doubt that, from the beginning of Islam, there has always been – in spite of occasional, local fits of xenophobia and genocide – a remarkable symbiosis between (Oriental) Jews and Muslims. It is well

known e.g. that already in Mohammed's immediate neighbourhood and surroundings Hebrews/Jews played a great role. Noth(18) writes in this respect: "In addition, as a more ancient (how ancient?) ethnic substrate, clans/tribes of Jewish religion gave Yatrib/Medina a special character: above all we must mention three groups, to wit the Qaynuqa, the Nadir, and the Qurayza. Other Jewish tribes lived in oases at some distance from Yatrib".

### **The Persian connection**

WE HAVE SEEN that, in Binyamin's of Tudela time, Greater Persia had been the region containing the second largest Hebrew/Jewish population. It may be that ancient Persia has played a greater role in Hebrew/Jewish ethnogenesis and in the diffusion of religious ideas than we imagine today.

There is general agreement that the ancient Persians have been somehow related to ancient India. Ancient Persian is a cousin of Sanskrit. Usually Indo-European scholars believe in a scenario, in which an Indo-European migration from somewhere in the West arrived first in Persia, and at last in India. We have, however, to understand that this is, strictly speaking, as yet not more than a thesis. The migratory movement may as well have been from India to Persia, with the ancient Persians becoming, so to speak, renegades from the point of view of the Vedic religion of India. Das(19) has proposed this view of events already in 1921. Instead of "Bharata Dharma", the religion of India, the Persians adopted Zoroastrism as their new religion (named after Zarathustra or Zoroaster, circa 628 – 551 BC).

The Persian conception of a singular Saviour, the Saoshyant (as opposed to belief in many "avatars" or divine incarnations in India) may, in view of the ancient Hebrew/Jewish presence in Persia, very well have influenced the development of the idea of the Jewish

Messiah, which in its turn later on mutated to the Christian conception of Jesus Christ as the singular Saviour of mankind.

As a sidelight we should perhaps mention the remarkable affinities between the Parsees and the Hebrews/Jews. The Parsees are adherents of a monotheistic religion of Zoroastrian origin, the practitioners of which were driven out of Persia by the Muslims in the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD. Today in India they are often wealthy merchants and entrepreneurs, in a niche reminiscent of that of the Jews in many countries.

### **The role of Proto-Phoenicians in this puzzle**

Sahai(20), referring to Das(21), has very meritoriously described a thesis according to which an Aryan class or caste of international merchants and sea-voyagers to distant lands, the "Panis", established their presence in Mesopotamia and the Semitic West during the 3<sup>rd</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC.

The name "Panis" reminds one of the course immediately of "Punic" and of the Phoenicians, and there exists indeed a tradition that the latter may have arrived in Phoenicia/Canaan from the coasts of the Indian Ocean. Touchet (whom we have mentioned above) on the contrary, however, thinks that Cádiz in the West had been the original "Tyre" of the (Proto-)Phoenicians.

IN CONVENTIONAL historiographic view the Hebrews and the Phoenicians were neighbours in Canaan/Palestine, and occasionally even allies in overseas expeditions to distant countries e.g. in Solomons time (Ophir, Punt), as reported in the Old Testament. In Touchet's view, Hebrews and Phoenicians had already, originally been neighbours on the Iberian Peninsula, from where later on both nations colonized Canaan (the Hebrews) and the Palestinian-Lebanese coasts (the

Phoenicians) which became then known as Phoenicia, with Tyre as its main port.

Eisler(22), citing Davidson, emphasizes that true relationship between the ancient Hebrews of the Old Testament and the Phoenicians is as yet far from clear, and thinks that we may perhaps even have to reckon with a quasi-identity of Hebrews and Phoenicians. I feel that such thoughts are perfectly legitimate. Especially for the time before 500 BC, in my opinion many historiographic paradigmata for the ancient civilizations have to be viewed with deep distrust. The epigraphic evidence with respect to the ancient letter alphabets (though far from clear in the evolutionary details) like ancient Aramaic, Hebrew, Phoenician – also the Iberian script! – points clearly to a quasi-identity, at least culturally. It will take, however, yet some time before the last word in these matters, which amount to a key problem of ancient history, will have been spoken, respectively published.

WHEN, IN LINE with Das's and Sahai's view on the "Panis", we see the Phoenicians not so much as a nation but more as a class or caste of sea-merchants, a kind of "Hanse" of the ancient civilizations, there would be no hindrance to tentatively form a scenario, in which a large percentage of Hebrews would have been present among the Phoenicians.

#### **The "Panis" as Proto-Phoenicians and their possible role in Hebrew ethnogenesis and diffusion**

In the Das-Sahai scenario, the "Panis" could be seen as Proto-Phoenicians. That Phoenicia on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean might then be understood perhaps not so much as a colony of ancient India, but as a kind of merchant state founded by Proto-Phoenician "Panis", who originally hailed from India. The same could be postulated incidentally, though of course only tentatively, for an earlier Phoenicia in the region around Cádiz in the Iberian West, as

postulated by Touchet (cf. his scenario described above), because if the "Panis" really were those daring overseas merchants Das and Sahai think they were, they will surely have very early found the way around the Cape of Good Hope to southwestern Europe.

That in the Das-Sahai scenario the Panis are described as "Aryans", whereas the Hebrews are generally understood as a "Semitic" people, need not be a hindrance for such theses. Decades of pertinent studies in this field have convinced the present author that A) all "racial" categorizations are highly suspect, and B) all linguistic "evolutionary trees" and alleged "language families" are questionable concepts, judged from the viewpoint of the "science of science", especially of epistemology (the theory of knowledge and its acquisition), Wadler(23) has shown that perplexing affinities exist between Indo-European and Hamito-Semitic languages, which are unexplainable in the theoretical framework of alleged "language families" and the linguistic "evolutionary trees" of mainstream historical linguistics(24).

#### **Problem of real Hebrew "motherland"**

The ancient, advanced, metal-working civilizations on the Iberian Peninsula, which have been described by Whishaw(25) and Topper(26), could in such a scenario be seen as quasi-colonies of ancient India, established under the tutelage of the Proto-Phoenician "Panis". The "Indo-European" languages of Western Europe may then have originally been local creolized languages, i.e. amalgams of pre-Indo-European (perhaps Berber or Vasconic) dialects with the Quasi-Sanskrit of the charismatic, culturally more advanced and sophisticated foreigners. In such a scenario also Schildmann's discovery(27) would make sense, to wit that there do exist ancient inscriptions in Western Europe, which are written in a variant of the

Indus script and can be read as a kind of Sanskrit.

IF ALL THAT should indeed have been so as we have tentatively described it here, the question would arise if it is only by chance or coincidence that exactly there, where the Proto-Phoenician "Panis" had continental bases or colonies (India, Canaan/Palestine, Iberian Peninsula, and surely also Southern Arabia), we do also find an impressive Hebrew presence. But of course, as I stated in my very first sentence of this little article, as yet all such deliberations and considerations must be necessity remain more or less provisional for the time being.

IN THE END, we would then also have to face the problem: has the original home or "motherland" of the ancient Hebrews perhaps been neither Canaan (or "Ur of the Chaldees" in the Abraham "story"), nor the Iberian Peninsula, nor Southern Arabia, but ancient India? Or did even the so-called "Semitic" peoples (Akkadians, Aramaeans etc.) generally, originally hail from India? I feel that this is a quite legitimate and in no way absurd speculation. The Hebrews/Jews, in spite of great differences between the Judaic religion and Hinduism (and its offshoots like Buddhism, Jainism), even today show a certain spiritual affinity with India. It has very rightly been remarked that India might be called "the motherland of religion". India has always been fascinated by religion, more than any other people on this planet. But the

next place belongs to the Hebrews. For them all that had to do with religion, was of the highest importance, from perhaps a bit exaggerated emphasis on ritualistic aspects and Talmudic scholarship to prayer, and to the highest philosophical speculations and esoteric cabbalistic practices.

Essentially this Hebrew heritage has also been adopted, and adapted, by the offshoots of the Judaic religion, to wit Christianity and Islam, and also by certain syncretistic offshoots like Manichaeism. Even the monotheism of the Hebrews/Jews shows affinities with Indian religion because, contrary to what is often alleged, the latter – in spite of its many gods, goddesses, divine manifestations and incarnations (avatars) – in reality advocates the highest possible form of monotheism, namely pantheism, i.e. belief in the divine presence everywhere.

So the thesis does not sound so far-fetched after all that the ancient Hebrews may – somehow – originally have hailed from India. I think that I have given my readers a fair and objective report on the problem, and its sub-problems, and I hope that my article may act as a stimulus for some of them to begin serious research in this matter. The Hebrew/Jewish contribution to human culture and civilization may be more many-sided than we think today.

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**Zusammenfassung:**

**Es wird an Hand einer Reihe von Sub-Problemen gezeigt, dass unser konventionell gelehrtes Szenarium zur hebräisch-jüdischen Ethnogenese und Ausbreitung sehr zu wünschen übrig lässt. Es werden dringend neue Forschungsarbeiten zu zahlreichen Teilaspekten benötigt, ältere Ansichten wird man korrigieren und aktualisieren müssen, und generell wird unser neues Szenarium auf einer weit umfassenderen Datenbasis aufgebaut werden müssen.**

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