Modern Jewish Settlement in Afghanistan:
Origins and Customs

Chapter 2

Theories on the Origins of Afghanistani Jewry

Reliable information about the Jews of Afghanistan before the nineteenth century is difficult to obtain. The earliest evidence of Jewish settlement in Afghanistan comes from a stone tablet in the year 752 CE.1 In 2011, scholars learned of a relatively small genizah, perhaps originally composed of several hundred documents, which was found in northern Afghanistan. It clearly demonstrates that a Jewish community was present one thousand years ago. A cache of twenty-nine documents was purchased by the National Library of Israel. Letters describe legal and economic affairs, commercial transactions, debts, travel plans, and one is even as personal as a brother denying that he was no longer an observant Jew. The most valuable discovery so far is a Judeo-Persian fragment from Saadia Gaon’s commentary on the Book of Isaiah.2

The ancient Jewish community was well known among horrified rabbis of Baghdad for its colorful heretics or freethinkers, most notably Hiwi al-Balkhi, who lived in the second half of the ninth century. Before the Mongol onslaught in the thirteenth century, Afghanistan was a crossroads for many of the world’s religions, including Sunni and Shi’a Islam, Nestorian Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and other groups.3 Vera Moreen argues that Hiwi’s “early ‘scriptural criticism’ forced Jews, Muslims and Zoroastrians into an early

1 Guy Matalon, “The ‘Other’ in ‘Afghan’ Identity.”
form of ‘interreligious discourse.’”4 Hiwi was influenced by this chorus of perspectives, and wrote a polemic work that contained two hundred criticisms of the Bible. It was refuted in rhyming Hebrew by Saadia Gaon.5 After 1220, this record becomes fragmentary. However, Jewish headstones were found in Khush-Khak near Firuzkuh-Jam that date from 1012–1249, twenty-seven years after the Mongol invasion. Another headstone comes from 1365, marking the body of Moses ben Ephraim Bezalel, an official who was executed.6 For the next five hundred years, very little is known. Clearly, the Jewish community suffered along with the rest of the populace under successive waves of wars and massacres. However, for the most part, between the reigns of Ghengis Khan and Nadir Shah, there is little if any information about the Jewish community in Afghanistan. Even data on the far larger Persian Jewish community are sparse.7

One way to obtain information about this group when no written evidence is extant is by examining religious rituals. Afghanistani Jews preserve ancient customs that have been lost among almost all other Jewish communities in the world.8 While the history of the Jewish community of Afghanistan can only be documented with some certainty from the 1740s, traces of older, unique influences were preserved in the religious rituals and oral culture of the

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