Chapter 4

Struggle of Iraqi Jewry for Control of Prophet Ezekiel's Tomb at Kifil (1860)

Control over the prophet Ezekiel's tomb and its adjacent courtyards was a major issue throughout the history of Iraqi Jewry in the Muslim period. The religious, political, and socioeconomic importance of such sites for the Jews of Iraq and the constant attempts by the local Muslims to take control over them made this such an important issue for the Jewish community in Iraq and for Iraqi Jews in the Holy Land and the dispersion, that students of the history of Iraqi Jewry in the Muslim period can judge the community's political and socioeconomic situation at any given time by the measure of control that it had over them.¹

The tomb of the prophet Ezekiel was one of the most important shrines on the itinerary of visitors and travelers to central and southern Iraq in the Muslim period. Nearly every such visitor who came to Kifil or passed by it mentioned the tomb in his writings and described the Jewish pilgrimage to the site. Because the tomb was important to Muslims as well, it was mentioned also by Arab chroniclers and geographers who described Iraq, and by scholars of Islam. Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century the tomb and its adjacent courtyards began to attract the attention of European archeologists who came to Iraq, in particular those with an interest in Muslim architecture.²

Many who mentioned the prophet Ezekiel's tomb also devoted space in their writings to the question of the tomb's identity and to whether the local Jews' belief that this is where Ezekiel's bones were buried is justified. In the absence of historical or archeological-architectural evidence they had to be satisfied with the local Jewish tradition to assuage their curiosity. They considered the presence of Jews in Kifil, their identification of the site as Ezekiel's grave

¹ Despite its great importance this subject has not received the scholarly attention it deserves. Prof. Noam Stillman published without comment three documents in English from the British Foreign Office archives that deal with the attempt to deprive the Jews of control of Ezekiel's tomb in 1860; Stillman, The Jews of Arab Lands, 389–92. Dr. Abraham Ben-Yaacob's extensive chapter on Jewish saints' tombs in Iraq consists mostly of passages from books and journals that were copied or translated inaccurately; Abraham Ben-Yaacob, Kvarim Kdoshim be-Bavel (Tombs of saints in Babylon), 38–98.

² These works will be mentioned below.
and their absolute belief in its sanctity as proof that it was indeed the prophet’s tomb. Therefore these writers never doubted the Jews’ right to the tomb and its courtyards and rejected Muslim claims of ownership.3

In addition to discussing Iraqi Jewry’s struggles for control over the prophet Ezekiel’s tomb and the adjacent courtyards we shall attempt to determine, with the help of archival materials, accounts by travelers, visitors and scholars, and the testimonies of local residents, whether these views are historically valid and to follow the history of the tomb and the Jewish community of Kifil in the Muslim period.

Basis for the Jewish Claim of Ownership over Ezekiel’s Tomb at Kifil

From Hilla it is Four miles to the Tower of Babel ... Thence it is three parasangs to the Synagogue of Ezekiel, the prophet of blessed memory, which is by the River Euphrates. It is fronted by sixty turrets, and between each turret there is a minor Synagogue, and in the court of the Synagogue is the ark, and at the back of the Synagogue is the sepulchre of Ezekiel. It is surmounted by a large cupola, and it is a very handsome structure. It was built of old by King Jeconiah, the king of Judah, and the 35,000 Jews who came with him, when Evil-merodach brought him forth out of prison ... This place is held sacred by Israel as a lesser sanctuary unto this day, and people come from a distance to pray there from the time of the New Year until the Day of Atonement. The Israelites have great rejoicing on these occasions. Thither also come the Head of the Captivity, and the Heads of the Academies from Baghdad ... Distinguished Mohammedans also come hither to pray, so great is their love for Ezekiel the Prophet; and they call it Bar (Dar) Melicha (the Dwelling of Beauty).4

3 See, for example, William K. Loftus, Travels and Researches in Chaldea and Susiana (London 1857), 35. Loftus writes that “There is no reason to believe that the tradition is unworthy of credence, which assigns to Keffil the honour of possessing the bones of the prophet Ezekiel. The continued residence of the Jews in the land where their forefathers were consigned in exile, and the respect with which the tomb has for so many centuries regarded, not only by the Jews themselves, but by the Mohammedans, ought to be considered a sufficient guarantee for the correctness of the tradition.”


“ומשם לחילה ... ומשם ארבע מילין למלולה שבון ור הפרסים ומשם שלשה פרסיאת למלולה.

יוחזיקאל הכהן עליל אלימלך ששלום נר פרת במדרשים חכמים ענינו משימה מדרשים ברי מדרשים

וממלך כפת, נחפרה הכמת התבטה, ואחרי הכמה קובע עליל יוחזיקאל בן ברי הכמה עליל כפת.