

Thesis submitted to the Senate of the Hebrew University  
by Moti Zaken on "Tribal Chieftains and their Jewish Subjects in Kurdistan:  
A Comparative Study in Survival;

Thesis directed by Dr. Moshe Sharon, Professor of Islamic history at the Hebrew  
University.

*Report on Moti Zaken's PhD Thesis submitted by Joyce Blau, Professor Emerita,  
Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales, Paris*

Moti Zaken's thesis on the "Tribal Chieftains and their Jewish Subjects in  
Kurdistan: A Comparative Study in Survival" is highly original and makes  
a significant contribution to the general history of the Jewish diaspora.

Mr. Zaken's project was to write the recent history of a number of Jewish  
communities who had long dwelt in Kurdistan, a large country without well defined  
borders in the middle of Upper Mesopotamia. At the end of World War I this territory  
was divided among the Turkish Republic, the Persian Empire, the Kingdom of Iraq,  
and the Republic of Syria. The Jewish communities, dispersed across the Kurdish  
territory, shared the fate which history dealt their Kurdish neighbors.

The origin of the Jewish communities in that distant and long isolated region is still a  
mystery. Legend and myth trace their roots in that land of high mountains and  
beautiful valleys to the 8th century BCE. One explanation for the endurance of the  
Jewish communities in that area is the stability and long history of the Kurdish people  
themselves in the region.

The aim of the author of the thesis was exhaustively to describe the relations between  
the Kurdish chiefs and their Jewish subjects during the first part of the 20th century in  
northwestern Iraqi Kurdistan. Iraqi Kurdistan was then part of a country newly  
created by the British powers and composed of three "vilayet" or provinces which had  
been part of the defeated Ottoman Empire; the province of Mosul, with a Kurdish  
territory; the province of Baghdad, with a Sunni Arab majority; and the province of  
Basrah or Bassorah, with a Shi'ite Arab majority. Great Britain, to which the League  
of Nations had given a mandate over the new state, entrusted the governance of the  
new Iraqi state to Sunni Arab princes. The Kurds and their Jewish, Christians and  
Turcoman neighbors in the Kurdish province of Mosul found themselves, willy-nilly,  
citizens of an Arab country.

Mr. Zaken has undertaken the study of precisely this recent history of a few Jewish  
communities which lived in the former, prestigious principality of Bahdinan, in  
northwestern Iraqi Kurdistan. He did this remarkably well. His documentation is  
based on firsthand information, and is of the highest value.

Mr. Zaken collected his data from men and women from various areas of Bahdinan,  
where they had lived either in cities or villages, and most of whom had immigrated to  
Israel in the 1950s. He interviewed more than 50 people, many more than once. These  
discussions, which add up to hundreds of hours of interviews, most of which were  
taped, were then analyzed and classified. The task of gathering and ordering all this

fieldwork was immense, and the candidate is to be congratulated on the methodology that he chose. This part of Mr. Zaken's thesis, concerning Jewish life in Bahdinan, well complements the Impressive *work* of the pioneer ethnologist Erich Brauer.<sup>1[1]</sup>

Chapter II, which deals with the Jews, Kurds and Arabs between 1941 and 1952 is important because it raises the issue of the emerging conflict between the Zionist movement and the incipient national movements in the Arab countries. This problem, which was aggravated by the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, was profoundly to affect the situation of the Jews in the Arab countries. However, in Iraqi Kurdistan the Kurdish chiefs, who were concerned by the conflict only indirectly, were not willing to break ties forged with the Jewish communities over the course of thousand of years of co—existence, which on the whole were useful to them, particularly when the Jews, in contrast to the Christians, as we see later in Mr. Zaken's thesis, could not be suspected of harboring sympathy for the "European enemy". Many agha and Kurdish chiefs regretted the massive departure of the Jews for Israel in the early 1950s. Note, in particular, the ties which united the Barzani dynasty to the Jewish people, which Mr. Zaken describes at length and so well in several chapters of his thesis. These were not one-way ties, for even today, in spite of the departure of nearly the whole Jewish population of Kurdistan for Israel, the links have not been definitively broken, and there are many Kurds who recognize their debt to the Jews. In order to defame the Kurds in the eyes of *the* Islamicist-milieus, a thesis is now circulating in Turkey which 'proves the Jewish origin of the Barzani family'<sup>2[2]</sup> Questioned about this, an eminent member of the family, not in the least upset, told me; 'So much the better. I am convinced of our Jewish origins'

Chapters III to VI describe in detail the daily lives of the Jewish communities of Bahdinan during the first half of the 20th century. The candidate has brought out the fact that what differentiated the Jews of Kurdistan from their European co—religionists are the ties that connected the Jewish communities to the land and its fruits. Many communities were involved in agriculture, often sharing their work with their Moslem and Christian neighbors in villages that were half Jewish and half Christian, or half Jewish and half Moslem. The inhabitants of those villages cultivated and inherited their lands, which they bought and sold freely.

The candidate tried to be exhaustive: the result of his quest for oral documentation was considerable. This huge amount of information has not only been well classified, but the candidate succeeded in making it a smooth and agreeable read. This detailed study has made a major contribution to the study of the recent history of the region of Iraqi Bahdinan.

The VIIth and last chapter, titled "The Assyrians among the Kurds, Turks and Arabs: 1843- 1933" is devoted to the history of the Christian communities of Kurdistan. It

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<sup>1</sup> Erich Brauer, *The Jews of Kurdistan*, First edition 1940, revised edition 1993, completed and edited par Raphael Patai, Wayne State University Press, Detroit.

<sup>2</sup> Cevat Eroglu (2004) *Israil'in beak stratejisi ve Kürtler* (Israel's everlasting strategy and the Kurds), Sayfa, Istanbul, 244 p.

was surely not easy for the candidate to describe the complex history of these communities, among the most ancient in the world, established from the 3rd century on outside the boundaries of the Byzantine Empire — the oldest churches dating from the pre-Islamic period. The Christian preachers first converted Jews and gentiles who spoke Aramaic, a language still spoken by the Christians in Kurdistan. The increasingly bitter hostility between the Roman and Persian Empires forced the Christians living on the western border of the Persian Empire (in the current Kurdish region) to develop their own ecclesiastic organization and it was in that period that the eastern Christians adopted Nestorius heresy condemned by the Council of Ephesus in 431 (p. 348 — nb. an error in the date).

The dates proposed by the candidate - - 1843 et 1933 - are well chosen because they mark two important stages in Christian history. At the beginning of the 1840s, the famous British archaeologist Austen-Henry Layard, working together with the French consul P.E. Botta, discovered the site of *ancient* Nineveh, capital of the Assyrians. This discovery amazed the whole world, and the Christians living around Nineveh became the object of widespread curiosity. Serious people opined that the “Chaldeans and the Nestorians were the sole human survivors of Assyria and Babylonia (J.P. Fletcher). On the heels of such statements, Protestant missionaries, especially Anglo-Saxons, hurried to seek out the “lost tribes of Israel” which had just been discovered. And as Mr. Zaken says, it was from that time that the Anglo-Saxon missionaries popularized the name “Assyrian for the Nestorian peoples who were not attached to the Church, just as the Catholic Church had popularized the name “Chaldean” for the Uniate Christians. So those Christians entered history.

The date of 1933 marked the massacre of the Assyrians who, betrayed by the British who had promised to give them an autonomous territory in Iraqi Kurdistan, no longer played a political role in Kurdistan. Mr. Zaken’s advisory committee was certainly correct to suggest that he devote a chapter of his thesis to the history of these Christian communities of Kurdistan. In fact, the title of Moti Zaken's thesis might well have been broadened to include Christians as well since, as he himself says “this dissertation, concentrates on Jews and Christians who lived north of the Great Zab River and east of the Tigris Valley” (p.16) and since he does devote a major chapter of the work to the Christian communities who shared the lives of Jews and Moslems in Kurdistan. It is very useful to describe the minority communities who lived side by side, spoke the same language sang the same songs, dressed in the same way, and who, on the whole, had a common culture. But the candidate tells us little about the most interesting thing, i.e., the common history of Jews and Christians who, we have it from the Jews and Christians themselves, lived in tight symbiosis in the villages and cities of Bahdinan. That history is yet to be written.

In sum, Mr. Zaken's thesis is highly original in both subject and method. The project he undertook is a significant one, in an academic area where there is still a dearth of knowledge, and his work complements the previous research which does exist. He made excellent methodological choices both in doing an impressive number of first hand interviews, and in the careful and detailed way he treated the material he obtained; his data is highly valuable. His work is an important contribution to the study of the Jewish diaspora, to the study of the specificities of the Kurdish Jews, to the study of Jewish relations with Moslems and Christians in Iraqi Kurdistan, and to the study of

Iraqi Kurdistan itself. I highly commend this thesis, and congratulate Mr. Zaken on His work

Further, I strongly encourage the speedy publication of this thesis. With that in mind, it would be advisable to avoid a certain number of needless repetitions which have slipped in here and there. There are also few errors which could be corrected, such as the question of the origin of the Kurds (p 12). That has not yet been definitively established, and one should beware of the various names mentioned in Sumerian and Assyrian records, as well as in Xenophon's Anabasis. One should also be wary of transiting bet kardu by the "House of Kurdistan." As far as the Kurdish language goes (p 15) there are three main groups of Kurdish dialects. The northern group, generally called Kurmanji, and the central group generally called Sorani, have both developed literatures. The southern group, spoken further south in the Kermanshah province of Iran, has not yet developed a literature. *Zaza*, spoken in Turkey, and Gorani, spoken in Iran, do not belong to the Kurdish group of Iranian languages. *Az xolam az benî* (p 165) is an expression of respectful politeness commonly used in Bahdînan. It is not an expression of submission to and compliance with the Jews' aghas.

Mr. Moti Zaken shows obvious talent in historical analysis and I hope that he will find a way to continue his very promising research

Paris, June 19th, 2004  
Joyce Blau