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Resistance to Greco-Roman culture in the Ancient Middle East

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Abstract

The present article is essentially a defense of the Aviva Butt's forthcoming book, *The Tradition of the First Temple: with a new translation of the Book of Daniel, the Book of Nahum, and the Song of Songs*. In some measure, the article also defends Soran Hamarash's book in 2022. *The Lost and Untold History of the Kurds: Rediscovering the Beginning of the Western Civilisation and the Origin of the Indo-European Languages ca.10000 BCE-1300 CE: Slemany, 1st Edition*. The former is by the well-known translator of Salim Barakat's poems and narrative *Sages of Darkness*. The latter is by a dedicated Kurdish scholar, a linguist and historian who sees his research as being to access primary sources, leaving interpretation to others. As he himself comes from Slemany (Arabic: Sulaymaniyah), a city rich in history in the Kurdistan Region of today's Iraq, his book is more-or-less a Primary Source in itself. Likewise, the ancient historian Josephus, author of *Antiquities*, who sometimes records events he may have witnessed. Aviva Butt brings into focus the Adiabenes (roughly speaking, proto-Kurds) and Judeans who eventually entered a formal alliance. The manner of the alliance is documented in the Hebrew Bible's Book of Daniel.

Keywords: Adiabene, Book of Daniel, Kurdish history, Greco-Roman culture, conversion, translation, Judaism, Middle East

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Introduction

The period of the fall of the Second Temple in Urshalem (70 CE) was a time of incessant warring that saw the emergence of Greco-Roman and other political agendas.

Anthony Rabin's dissertation of 2017 presents the mainstream view of the Adiabene episode occurring in the above mentioned first century CE as being the conversion of a "satellite kingdom of Parthia" to "Judaism."² To do this scholar credit, he does note some discrepancies in the account of the Roman historian Josephus, mentioning for example the genre:

The genre and form of the Adiabene episode conform to no single type of literature. At one level, Josephus clearly means his readers to view the narrative as history, in line with the rest of the *Antiquities*. However, it is obvious to even the most casual of readers that it is more than simple historical narrative, displaying at different points of the story, the form of biography, historical (folklore) novel or romance and biblical allegory (2.5).

Soran Hamarash, Kurdish historian and linguist sees a specific geopolitical agenda in the Adiabene desire for a formal conversion. According to Hamarash, when the Second Temple was just barely established and Mesopotamian civilization needed to protect itself from the sophistication of the Greek conqueror and the barbarism of the ancient Romans, a united Kurdish-Jewish kingdom arose:

The alliance with the Jews was a significant geopolitical move for the Adiabene Kurds. The Kurds sought to establish a large kingdom from Adiabene (Kurdistan) to Israel with the formal religion of Judaism. The Adiabene royal family's participation in the Jewish war against the Romans aimed to repel them from the region and strengthen the kingdom they aspired towards. The event was significant for the Kurds, so much so, that during the 10th century, after exactly ten centuries after their reign, the Kurds still recalled this event. They claimed that the king of the Jews, Talut (Saul), was a Kurd who helped the Israelis.³ Therefore, the evidence suggests that the united Kurdish-Jewish kingdom occurred during the 1st century CE.⁴

² See "The Adiabene narrative in the *Jewish Antiquities of Josephus*," Anthony Rabin, Wolfson College, D. Phil. in Oriental Studies, Trinity Term 2017.

³ When Hamarash says "Israelis," he means the descendants of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham, known as "Israel."

⁴ Soran Hamarash (2022). *The Lost and Untold History of the Kurds: Rediscovering the Beginning of the Western Civilisation and the Origin of the Indo-European Languages ca.10000 BCE-1300 CE*: Slemany, 1st Edition: 277.

Hamarash identifies these proto-Kurds as “Kurdish,” omitting to say that they were most likely a mixture of Assyrian, Aramaean, Iranian, and local tribal groups. What Hamarash wants to say is that the Kurdish agenda was “to establish a large kingdom from Adiabene (Kurdistan) to Israel with the formal religion of Judaism.”

However, as both Jewish communities and Adiabenes existed side by side in the Adiabene / Nisibis region since the Assyrian exile of 722 BCE, the relevant question is as to why the formal conversion and unification was not until the 1st century CE. For this, let us turn to Jacob Neusner.

In 1964, Neusner wrote a short but in-depth article entitled “The Conversion of Adiabene to Judaism: A New Perspective.” Leaning heavily on Josephus whom he respects as being a most likely eyewitness, he concludes his article as follows:

This is not, of course, to suggest that the conversion of Helene and Izates was only an act of political significance. It is, however, relevant to an understanding of the political consequences of their religious action to take note of the promising situation which they confronted as a result of being converted to Judaism.⁵

As ever turning to the sources that are the basis of our Middle Eastern civilization, the present writer refers to the Hebrew Bible, the *Book of Daniel* for clarification.⁶ Chapter Eleven of Daniel’s book presents a brief account of events that joined the Adiabenean royal family in an alliance uniting remnants of forces from the former territories under the King of Kings Shlomo:⁷

*And after [many] years, the daughter of the King of the Negev formed an alliance
With the King of the North and she came to make an equitable arrangement.⁸
And she did not resist the power of sex
And he did not withhold his seed, and she was inclined
And he caused her to be with child, and brought her courage in [those] times [6]*

On Soran Hamarash and his book, see a Washington Post Interview with him:

<https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?q=Soren+Hamarash&mid=69B532E4C5D82D4DFCE2&FORM=VIRE>

⁵ Jacob Neusner (1964). “The Conversion of Adiabene to Judaism: A New Perspective” in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* 83:1. The Society of Biblical Literature: 60-66.

⁶ *The Book of Daniel* is in the third section, the “Writings” of the Hebrew Bible. The translation is my own—AB

⁷ Shlomo: English, Solomon; Arabic, *Suleiman*

⁸ *Equitable arrangement*: See BDB: *North*, i.e., north country, north of Judah and the sanctified city of Jerusalem (UrShalem).

*And of her descendants his progeny remained in his cradle [as his successor].⁹
 And he joined the forces, and he went to the fortress of the King of the North
 And dealt with them, and stood fast [7]*

Daniel too had an agenda, which was for the Tribes of Israel to return to the Land of Israel to the tradition of the First Temple and re-unify the Land. See the below summary of my forthcoming book, *The Tradition of the First Temple: with a new translation of the Book of Daniel, the Book of Nahum, and the Song of Songs*:

SUMMARY

Verse 7 of the short concluding chapter of the *Book of Daniel* reads:

*And I heard the man dressed in [linen] cloth,
 He was above the water in the watercourse
 As he raised his right [hand] and his left towards the skies,
 He took an oath by the Life of the World, [the Most High].
 Indeed at the appointed time, two appointed times and a half.
 And when they have brought to an end the shattering of the might of the Holy Nation,
 All else will come to an End [7]*

The above verse describing Daniel's vision of Sraosha stresses the importance of the Israeli nation. I here use the word "Israeli" in the meaning that Soran Hamarash uses it as (1) the tribes unified by Saul (Talut, in the Qur'an) and (2) today's State of Israel struggling to re-establish its borders. To return to Verse 7. Sraosha is a proto-angel, an angel with no wings who delivers the utterance of the Almighty. According to Verse 7, the Israelis once having returned to the Land of Israel, need to be both righteous and strong—for the sake of the created world. This is in accord with the Covenant between the Holy Nation and the "Life of the World." Israel as announced by the messenger of the State of Israel is now in its third generation, a time of change.

The *Book of Daniel* is very ancient, preceding the canonization of the Hebrew Bible. It does not deal with Good and Evil as presented in the Hebrew Bible with the story of Adam and Eve. Daniel wishes for a return to the tradition of the First Temple—the times of tradition per se—tradition in our times should accordingly again supplant the need for religion, largely

⁹ *In his place / as his successor*: This is assuming that stands for, and that which means "nest" could also be understood as "cradle" in its figurative meaning.

commemoration of events. That is what is happening in the State of Israel now. That is what Ya‘akov Cohen, an Israeli angel—the messenger that stood at my Aviva Butt’s door on Purim Eve in 2025 said. The translations of the three books of the Hebrew Bible, in my book (the *Book of Nahum*, *Song of Songs*, and the *Book of Daniel*) help to reveal the antiquity and identity of proto-Kurds.¹⁰

The Roman Agenda

The aftermath of 70 CE (the Fall of the Second Temple in UrShalem) clarified the Roman agenda and defined the new provincial territories under Roman control as being from Gaza. Gaza was home to the Philistines, the ancient enemy of the king Saul (Talut). The Romans would name the conquered territories by utilizing the consonantal text of the word "Philistine"—yielding the word **Palestine**, thus signifying that the Judeans were enemies of the territory and Greco-Roman civilization.

To further establish that the region was under the domination of the Roman Empire, the Greco-Roman gods were embellished with a new presentation, established over a few centuries by a newly arising Christian clergy. Gaza seemed the logical place in which to encourage the new religion. Aside from its demarcating the boundary of the new Roman conquest, as MS Copilot (AI) says: “The region enters a period of upheaval, but Gaza, a major port and trade hub, remains intact and becomes increasingly important in the Roman provincial system.”

Thus although Gaza remained predominantly pagan during the first centuries of Roman rule with Christian communities only beginning to form in the surrounding villages, Christianity would eventually spread from there to include various sites even in Urshalem. To again quote MS Copilot: “Gaza’s Christians are among the oldest continuous Christian communities in the world but are now a small, endangered minority living under Hamas”—a murderous organization originally hailing from Egypt.

The above history which for want of space cannot be described in detail, goes to show that antisemitism was built into Christianity from the start. The Israeli nation warring against Rome after the 70 CE downfall of Urshalem was fighting against a premeditated agenda.

¹⁰ See also e.g. Mehrdad R. Izady (1992). *The Kurds: A Concise Handbook*. Taylor and Francis; Khanna Omarkhali, Edited by (2014). *Religious Minorities in Kurdistan: Beyond the Mainstream*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.

Moreover, the antisemitism devised from 70 CE has persisted up until the present time. Unfortunately, antisemitism in our modern world has extended to include the world of Islam, the nations of our Middle East.

Translations Prior to the Canonization of Sacred Texts

Translation in the world of scripture has not only been important in preserving ancient texts, but also especially in the case of the Greek translation, the Septuagint (LXX), in the development of Christian theology. By introducing the world of Greco-Roman gods and goddesses and a personalized God into a Christian Bible, along with anthropomorphism, animism, and personification, Christian theologians created an engaging and understandable Bible for the gentile world. The ancient Roman world disintegrated; “Nero fiddled while Rome burned.” But Rome’s war against the Jews did not vanish. It took on various forms, such as forced conversions, Crusades, antisemitism, and so on.

In 1948 CE, with the Declaration of the State of Israel, the Rabbinic Bible of the 1st century CE, a Hebrew Bible that strives for abstraction, not personification, assumed a new and different kind of importance—a return to tradition. As a writer, eager to see the revival of tradition in the Land of Israel and peace in the Middle East, I strive like others to do the impossible—to use abstraction, not personification when speaking or writing about what is indescribable. Below by way of example, I include a chapter from my translation of the *Book of Daniel*.

Some Translation Choices In This Writer’s Forthcoming Book

The following chapter from the *Book of Daniel* is in the Hebrew Bible. It is, however, in Aramaic not Hebrew since the Babylonian king Nebūchadnezzar is the speaker. Some translations are underlined to indicate further discussion. On the whole, the translation is intended not only to convey the literal meaning, but also to do so in a compelling literary style. Moreover, the translator avoids personification, a sophistication that may be disturbing to some readers. This is all the more so since the chapter conveys a portrait of a mighty earthly king who is coping with a change in his perception of the universe and his own humanity.

Daniel: Chapter Four

I Nebūchadnezzar was at rest in my house, and was revived in my palace [1]

I beheld a dream. And it alarmed me

And the imaginings upon my couch and the visions in my mind made me panic [2]

And therefore I gave a command to bring before me all the wisemen of Babylon:

That they would make known to me the interpretation of the dream [3]

When they came, the Magians, the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the astrologers.

I said [what] the dream [was] before them,

But they did not make known to me its interpretation [4]

When at last Daniel came before me, his name was Belteshazzar like a name for my deity

In whom [are] inner dimensions of sanctified deities¹¹

And I related my dream before him [5]

O Belteshazzar, Rav of Magians, since I know of the wind of the sanctified deities within you,

I know that nothing hidden constrains you.

So I relate [the visions] in my mind that I have seen.

The interpretation is [for you] to pronounce [6]¹²

Thus the visions in my mind upon my couch:

Watching, I saw—and beheld a sapling in the midst of the Land

And its height was excessive [7]

The sapling branched, and its height reached the heavens.

And it was visible up to the end of the whole Land [8]

¹¹ . . . *inner dimensions of sanctified deities*: This is the plain, simple sense.

For the Hebrew Text of the Book of Daniel, See: *The Book of Daniel* (with, without vowels, with Midrash): <https://www.mgketer.org/tanach/35>.

See Also: Hebrew-English Bible (7/14/23). Daniel Chapter 4 (Israel: Mechon-Mamre). <https://mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt3401.htm>

¹² . . . *wind*: inspiration.

*Its leaves were shiny and the fruit plentiful, and on it was provision for all.
Under it, wild animals found shade, and in its branches, birds [under the heavens] dwelled.
And from it all beings were provided [9]*

*Watching I saw in the visions of my mind over my couch
And beheld a wakeful and holy [being, Sraosha] descend from the heavens [10]¹³*

*[Sraosha] called out forcefully and thus said:
Fell the sapling and limb its branches. Shake off its leaves and scatter its fruit.*

Free the animals from under it and let free the birds from its branches [11]

*Only leave the stump of its roots in the land.
And enclose [it] in a constraint of copper and gold
Leave it in the wild grasslands, and let it be moistened with the dew of the heavens
Since his lot is to be with the [wild] beasts among the grasses of the land [12]¹⁴*

*His human heart will be replaced.
And the heart of an animal will be given to him.
And seven years will overtake him [13]*

*The sentence has been determined by the wakeful [Sraosha]
And the inquiry at the holy being's command.
For the sake of the living to understand
Who rules On High in the kingdom of mankind.
And to whomever He orders, [that kingdom] shall be given
And the lowest of men He shall raise up over it [14]¹⁵*

¹³ *Watching I saw in the visions of my mind over my couch:* This could be understood as meaning that King Nebūchadnezzar beheld his Second Body, which is to say the visions of his mind hovering over his couch and Sraosha approaching.

¹⁴ *Since his lot,* i.e. his predestination.

¹⁵ *The sentence has been determined by the wakeful [Sraosha] . . . For the sake of the living to understand / Who rules on High in the kingdom of mankind:* This could have been what influenced the Babylonians to later allow Daniel (assuming he was alive) and others to return to UrShalim to the Temple site.

*That is the dream, I the King Nebūchadnezzar saw
And you Belteshazzar shall declare the interpretation, for the reason that
All the wisemen of my kingdom are unable to make known its interpretation
Whereas you are able due to the wind of the sanctified deities within you [15]¹⁶*

*Then Daniel, called Belteshazzar, aghast paused. And his thoughts scared him.
The king responded and said:*

Belteshazzar, do not let the dream or the interpretation scare you.

Belteshazzar answered and said:

My lord, the dream is of [those who] hate you.

And the interpretation is of your adversaries [16]

*The sapling that you saw that grew tall and strong,
The height reaching the heavens, and visible to all the Land [17]*

*And whose leaves were shiny and the fruit plentiful, and providing for the whole Land
Under which wild animals sheltered, and in its branches, birds of the heavens dwelled,
And from it all living beings were provided [18]*

*It is you, O King. You who grew and became strong.
And your excessive height and dominion unto the skies
[Reached] to the end of the Earth [19]*

*And whereas the King saw the wakeful and holy [being] descend from the heavens
And say to fell the sapling and destroy it, leaving only the stump of its roots in the land
And with a constraint of iron and brass in the grassland of the wilderness
And with the dew of the heavens to be moistened
Nevertheless his lot will be with the wild beasts until seven years overtake him [20]¹⁷*

¹⁶ King Nebūchadnezzar trusts in Daniel, but Daniel is aghast that he must tell the king about so much hardship.

¹⁷ In Verses 17, 18, and 19, Daniel supports the King by praising him, also telling him the truth of the matter—and in Verse 20 how to ameliorate the sentence.

That is the interpretation, O King.

And the ratification is from the Most High.

It is what shall befall my lord the King [21]

Your [destiny]: Expulsion from humankind.

And your habitation shall be with the wild animals.

And like [the sacred] oxen, you shall graze on grasses

And from the dew of the heavens, you shall be irrigated.

And seven years shall pass by:

Until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of mankind

And to whomsoever He wills, He gives [22]

And inasmuch as they said to leave the stump with the roots of the sapling,

Your existential kingdom is yours—

Inasmuch as you understand that Heaven is the ruler [23]¹⁸

Therefore, O King, let my counsel be acceptable to you

And extricate yourself from your wrongdoings by almsgiving,

And from your iniquities by gifting to the poor

Thus there could be a lengthening of your well-being [24]

All would befall Nebūchadnezzar the King [25]

At the end of twelve moons, in the palace of the kingdom of Babylon [26]

The king spoke and said:

Is not this the great Babylon that I built as the king's house,

With the might of my power and the glory of my majesty [27]

While yet words were in the mouth of the king,

A sound. It came from the heavens:

To you We speak, Nebūchadnezzar the King.¹⁹

The kingdom has departed from you [28]

¹⁸ The good news is that the King would return to “his existential kingdom. . .

*And you shall be expelled from humankind,
And your habitation shall be with the wild animals,
And like [the sacred] oxen, you shall graze on grasses
And from the dew of the heavens, you shall be irrigated.
And seven years shall pass by:*

*Until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of mankind
And to whomsoever He wills, He gives [29]*

*At that time, the matter concerning Nebūchadnezzar was concluded:
He was expelled from humankind, and like oxen fed on grasses,
And his body was made wet from the dew of the heavens
Until his hair was like the vultures' and his nails like claws [30]*

*And at the end of those days, I Nebūchadnezzar raised my eyes to the heavens
And my [faculty of] understanding returned to me, and I blessed the Most High,
And I praised and honored Him. For his dominion is everlasting
His Kingdom from generation to generation [31]*

*And all the habitat of the earth is as naught.
He does as He wishes with the power of heaven
And the inhabitants of the earth.
And none can stay His hand
None can say to Him: what have you done [32]*

*At the very time my understanding returned to me
And for the glory of my kingdom
My majesty and my splendor returned to me.
And my ministers and my lords sought me.
And I put my kingdom's affairs in order
And the greatness added to me overwhelmed [33]*

¹⁹ *To you We speak: An utterance from Heaven to King Nebūchadnezzar. . .*

*Now I Nebūchadnezzar praise and extol
 And honor the King of Heaven. For all His works are truth
 And His ways are justice
 And as for those that tread proudly
 He is able to abase them [34]*

The translator does not use the word “God / god.” When unavoidable, the word “Deity / deity” is preferred as it circumvents anthropomorphic connotations. However, the best way to translate by way of using abstraction and avoiding personification is with adjectival phrases, descriptions such as the “Most High,” as used throughout the Aramaic text of Chapter Four. Another beautiful and realistic description of the Most High used in the last chapter, Chapter 12:7 as quoted above, is the “Life of the World.”

The style of the translation does not seek to present ‘Church as separate from State’ as does, for example, the King James Version.²⁰ It is unpolitical, not obscure and not an attempt to sound holy. In fact, the translation of Chapter Four, a sample chapter from the *Book of Daniel* presents a realistic and dramatic narrative. As such, from the literary viewpoint, it could be compared to other ancient narratives, in particular Kurdish narratives, which for want of space I cannot discuss here.

The speaker in Chapter Four is King Nebūchadnezzar himself. We see and feel the suffering of this mighty king as he undergoes a major change in his outlook—predestined to be confirmed by seven years of raw experience of his animal nature.

Conclusion

The present article firstly touches on misconceptions about the Adiabene formal conversion and formal alliance at a time when both Judaism and Christianity were transitioning into formalized and eventually canonized scriptural accounts. Daniel’s ancient account is relevant not only to an understanding of the motivations of the warring parties of the period, but also to the story of the development of an interim Judaic religion, the rituals of which were to remind the Chosen People of their *Brit* (Covenant) and need to return to the Holy Land.

²⁰ See an Authorised King James Bible, *The Holy Bible* containing the Old and New Testaments. Translated out of the original tongues and with the former translations, diligently compared and revised by His Majesty’s special command. Appointed to be read in churches.

Another point dealt with in this article is the importance of translation. Three features of Christian texts important and necessary to the adherents of Christianity who would otherwise feel the lack of a panorama of Roman and Greek gods and goddesses are personification, anthropomorphism, and animism. The present translator as seen above in the translation of Chapter Four of the *Book of Daniel* tries to avoid instances of personification in favor of abstraction. In fact, personification is hard to avoid as is evidenced in existing English translations even by Rabbinic authors. One can only say that Aviva Butt's translation strives for the abstract, since abstraction which is in keeping with Judaic tradition in general resonates in the Middle East.

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