



# The Expulsion and Forced Conversion of the Jews of Isfahan

## A Comparison between Arak'el Davrižec'i's *Girk' patmunteanc'* and Bābā'i ben Loṭf's *Ketāb-e anūsī*

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**ABSTRACT** The article deals with the persecution and expulsion of the Jews of Isfahan that took place under Shah 'Abbās II in the years 1656–1662. The events, which occurred at Grand Vizier Moḥammad Beg's instigation, are told of in a number of contemporary sources, the most important of them being Bābā'i ben Loṭf's *Ketāb-e anūsī* (in Judeo-Persian) and Arak'el Davrižec'i's *Girk' patmunteanc'* (in Armenian). The article tries to find a rationale for the differences found between these two accounts, focusing on how the two authors report the murder of a Jewish informer to the Grand Vizier that was perpetrated by other Jews. By analysing how they fashion a different narrative drawing on the same events, the article proposes that their opposite attitudes towards the murderers come from their different intent and approach in writing their works. Bābā'i's account follows in the wake of the traditional biblical paradigm of sin and punishment, thus showing less sympathy for the plight of the Jews than one could expect, as from the author's perspective their suffering was supposedly brought on them by their own sins. On the other hand, Arak'el's more empathic representation of the Jews and their tribulations could be understood in the light of his own concern about his coreligionists being tempted to convert to Islam for material benefit or economic convenience. This is the reason why Arak'el stresses how the Jews held to their faith and were not lured by the money and gifts the Persians offered them to turn to Islam. He fashions the chapter he devoted to the history of the Jews of Isfahan as a moral tale, complete with a hero and a villain and enhanced with some Jewish flavour details, to show his fellow Armenians how they, too, should resist the allurements of conversion.

**KEYWORDS** Arak'el Davrižec'i, Bābā'i ben Loṭf, Armenians in Safavid Persia, Jews in Safavid Persia, Jewish-Muslim relations, Christian-Muslim relations, Armenian literature, Judeo-Persian literature

throughout the Safavid Empire.<sup>1</sup> Over time, the Safavids succeeded in converting most of all their subjects to Twelver Shī'ism, to the exclusion of some minorities such as Christians, Zoroastrians, Banyans and Jews, who, despite their small numbers, often had a prominent role in the economic life of the empire.<sup>2</sup> Then, starting already from the mid-1630s, and in particular in the 1640s, under Shah 'Abbās II (r. 1642–1666), as a consequence of the growing power of the ulema, the king's officials were given more latitude in their initiatives against non-Muslim minorities, and a succession of Grand Viziers began to enact measures against the *dhimmī* population.<sup>3</sup>

The most infamous of these Grand Viziers was Moḥammad Beg (in office 1654–1661), who— [2] though many Christian travellers portrayed him as “a pious and zealous man [...], who was not hostile to other faiths”—was described by the local Carmelite missionaries as “a bigoted Muhammadan and antagonistic to Christianity.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Moḥammad Beg befriended several Christian visitors while continuing to increase pressure on Iran's non-Muslim minorities (Matthee 2005, 27). His campaigns, which were conducted in the name of ritual purity and directed against symbols of moral corruption, such as the production, selling, and drinking of wine, harnessed the anxieties of the Muslim subjects with regard to the actual or perceived wealth of the targeted minorities (Matthee 2012, 186–87). Persecutions against minorities proper started around 1655. Churches were closed and bans were imposed until, in 1657, local Christians (i.e., Armenians and Syrians) were no longer allowed to stay in Isfahan and were relocated to the neighbourhood of New Julfa (Matthee 2005, 27, 2012, 187). Beginning in 1656, a wave of persecutions and forced conversions also started for the Jews, beginning with the expulsion of the Jews of Isfahan—who were forced, albeit temporarily, to leave their homes and to abandon their faith. It then spread to many other Jewish communities throughout the Safavid Empire (Moreen 2017, 1047–9). A number of western travellers and missionaries witnessed the events first-hand or were informed about them in later years.<sup>5</sup> The forced conversion of the Iranian Jewry is also mentioned by the Persian 'Abbās-nāma (*Book of 'Abbās*) by Moḥammad Ṭāher Waḥīd Qazvīnī, which covers the reign of Shah 'Abbās II up to 1663. Unsurprisingly, being an official and celebratory text, both the causes of the persecution and the suffering of the Jews are overlooked by the author, who, on the contrary, praises the success of the Shah in his conversion policy.<sup>6</sup>

However, the most informed contemporary sources on those events were penned by a Jew- [3] ish and an Armenian author respectively. The *Ketāb-e anūsī* (*Book of a Forced Convert*) is a Judeo-Persian *masnavī* that partially covers the history of the Iranian Jewry during the reigns of Shah 'Abbās I, Shah Ṣafī I, and Shah 'Abbās II between 1617 and 1662. The text, authored

1 I would like to thank Professor Daniela Meneghini from the Ca' Foscari University of Venice for her help with the Judeo-Persian text of Bābā'ī ben Loṭf's *Ketāb-e anūsī*. I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers of this paper and the guest editors of the present issue of *Entangled Religions* for their insightful comments and feedback.

2 Matthee (2012, 10). On the relations between Safavid religious and State authorities and the non-Muslim minorities in seventeenth-century Iran, see Matthee (2005, 2012, 173–95); Moreen (1981c); Savory (2003).

3 Matthee (2005, 28). In the 1640s, Shah 'Abbās II was still in his teens, and his young age and inexperience may have contributed to the rising influence of the ulema in the first decade of his reign. However, since Shah 'Abbās II's stance was still the same in the mid-1650s, when actual persecutions began, it is possible that he chose to let the ulema have their way and to turn a blind eye on their measures against non-Muslims to deflect their criticism of his own lifestyle, which some of them deemed as unholy (Matthee 2012, 191).

4 See Spicehandler (1975, 337–40). On Moḥammad Beg, see Matthee (1991, 2012, 46–52); Moreen (1981a).

5 See, for example, Chardin (1811, 6:134–135); de Thévenot (1727, 3:388–389), and, for missionary reports, Chick (2012, 1:364–365).

6 The 'Abbās-nāma is the only known Persian-Safavid source that reports such events. On it, see Moreen (1981b, 278–82, 289–90, 1987, 65–66, 68, 2010a). Its text is published in Dehqān (1951).

by the Jewish poet and historian Bābā'i ben Loṭf soon after 1662, focuses on the persecutions of 1656–1661/2, describing the expulsion of the Jews from Isfahan and their forced conversion under the mandate of Moḥammad Beg.<sup>7</sup> Being in Kāshān at the time, Bābā'i was hardly an eye-witness of the events unfolding in Isfahan; nevertheless, he must have personally experienced the persecutions, which also extended to other cities, such as Kāshān, Shīrāz, and Lār, among others.<sup>8</sup>

The *History concerning the people of the Jews, who lived in the city of Isfahan [...]*. On the reason why they converted from their faith into the religion of Muhammad is the thirty-fourth chapter of the *Girk' patmut'eanc'* (*Book of Histories*) by the Armenian historian Aṛak'el Davrižec'i (Xanlaryan 1990, 357–72). The chapter was finished on March 10, 1660, that is, about two years before the persecutions against non-Muslim minorities ended after the removal of Moḥammad Beg as Grand Vizier in 1661. It immediately succeeds Aṛak'el's chapter on the eviction of the Armenians from the centre of Isfahan and their resettlement to the suburbs of the town. An Armenian cleric, Aṛak'el travelled as ambassador of the Armenian *Catholicos*, visiting various Armenian communities in the Ottoman and the Safavid Empires during the mid-seventeenth century. In the 1650s he started working on his compilation of historical events, which he ended in 1662. His narrative covers the reigns of Shah 'Abbās I, Shah Ṣafi, and Shah 'Abbās II from 1602 to 1662, and gives information on various matters, from lists of Ottoman and Safavid emperors and Armenian *vardapets* and *Catholicoi*, to the *Celali* rebellions and the lives and martyrdoms of a number of Armenian clerics. His *Girk' patmut'eanc'* was printed in Amsterdam in 1669 by Oskan Erewanc'i, which makes Aṛak'el the first Armenian author to be published during his lifetime (Oskan Erewanc'i 1669). However, the manuscript Oskan used in preparing the edition, copied in 1665 by the priest Avetis under the supervision of Aṛak'el himself,<sup>9</sup> must have been either an inaccurate or a draft copy of the text.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Oskan himself made several alterations to Aṛak'el's work: He omitted not only single words and phrases but also entire sentences and paragraphs, sometimes even several pages, editing out unnecessary repetitions and details on prodigies and miraculous happenings.<sup>11</sup> As a result, the text he printed often varies from the one found in the other extant manuscripts of the *Girk' patmut'eanc'*.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, after 1667, some additions and expansions were added to the earliest extant manuscript by Aṛak'el himself or on his own request,<sup>13</sup> the most notable of them being a whole chapter on Šabbetay Ševi.<sup>14</sup> As a result, the second printed edition of the *Girk' patmut'eanc'*, which was based on two different manuscripts and was published in 1884 by the Holy Sinod at Ējmiacin, includes many variants as compared to Oskan's edition (Surb Sinōd Ējmiacni 1884).

Although a number of studies have already been published comparing Aṛak'el's account

7 On Bābā'i ben Loṭf and the *Ketāb-e anūsī*, see Bacher (1903, 1906a, 1906b, 1906c); Fallāḫīān (2021, 17–32); Moreen (1981b, 1986, 1987, 1990, 2010b, 308–9, 2010c, 166–68); Netzer (1980, 1988/2011); Pirnazar (2021, 22–23); Seligsohn (1902).

8 Moreen (1981b, 289–90, 1987, 63–64); see also Matthee (2012, 185).

9 Ms. 137 of the Vienna Mekhitarist Library; see Tašean (1895, 430–33); see also the colophon by the scribe, Avetis, 427v–428r.

10 See Bournoutian (2005–2006, 2:563).

11 On Oskan's editing work on Aṛak'el's text, see Xanlaryan (1990, 46–49).

12 Mss. 1772, 1773, 5025, 5959, 7296 of the Matenadaran of Erevan. Four of them were copied before Aṛakel's death in 1670; see Eganean (2009, 1155–66); Eganyan et al. (1970, 18, 221–22, 502). The copyist of ms. 1772 was the same Avetis who copied ms. 137 of the Vienna Mekhitarist Library.

13 Ms. 1773 of the Matenadaran of Erevan, copied in 1663 by a certain At'anas.

14 On which see Lucca (2010).

of the expulsion and forced conversion of the Jews of Isfahan with Bābā'ī's work,<sup>15</sup> as far as I know they all rely on the French translation by Marie-Félicité Brosset, which was based on the 1669 Amsterdam edition of Arak'el's work (Brosset 1874, 267–608). In this paper, I will discuss some passages from the thirty-fourth chapter of the *Girk' patmut'eanc'* that, to my knowledge, have not been considered so far because they were omitted in its first edition and thus were not translated into French by Brosset. Their analysis will allow a better understanding of Arak'el's narrative skills and what his reason was in writing this chapter.

Before addressing Arak'el's account, this is how Bābā'ī reports the events that led to the mass conversion of the Jews in Isfahan. In his opinion, the persecution originated from a dagger that the Shah had lost while spending the night in a garden of Isfahan named Bāgh-i kāmē.<sup>16</sup> A gardener found the dagger and was planning to keep it, but his helper stole it from him and removed the diamonds that adorned its golden hilt, which he later sold to two Jews. Bābā'ī describes the incident in chapters 22–23 of the *Ketāb-e anūsī*.<sup>17</sup> When the two Jews were found, the Shah ordered that they should be put to death. Eventually, urged by his courtiers, he agreed to spare their lives if they would convert to Islam. When someone objected that not a single Jew of those that had been converted by Shah 'Abbās I had remained loyal to Islam, the Grand Vizier (i.e. Moḥammad Beg) spoke out:

[The Jews] have bad blood in their veins; they are evil and lost. Every man and woman of this community is impure. One must devise a different policy in their regard. With your permission, I will exile all of them beyond the city. I will assign a place to them in which they might dwell; they shall no longer run about among us. If you wish me to convert them to Islam, I shall do so easily, without resort to chains and ropes. I shall chase them from their home. And by clever ruses, I will convert them. Not only this entire community, but I shall convert to Islam all who dwell within the boundaries of the kingdom.<sup>18</sup>

The king acquiesced, and the Grand Vizier ordered the expulsion of the Jews from the centre of Isfahan. Clearly, even in Bābā'ī, the role of Moḥammad Beg is crucial, as it is he who brings up the issue of the impurity of the Jews, first to the Shah and eventually to the Jews themselves, as the reason for having them leave the city:

You are unclean and impure as far as our faith is concerned yet your bodies come in constant contact with our own. You touch everything. [...] The order of the Shah [...] is that you leave the city this very day!<sup>19</sup>

The impurity of the Jews is also quoted as a chief reason for their removal from Isfahan in Waḥīd's *'Abbās-nāma* (see Moreen 1981b, 282–83) and in Arak'el's *Girk' patmut'eanc'*.<sup>20</sup> Yet,

15 See in particular Moreen (1981b, 1987); Spicehandler (1975).

16 On the name of the garden and its possible identification with the one named Bāgh-i komek and mentioned by the German naturalist Engelbert Kaempfer in 1712, see Seligsohn (1902, 94, fn. 5).

17 Fallāḥiān (2021, 147–56); French translation in Seligsohn (1902, 94–99, 100–103); see also the French summary by Bacher (1906b, 78–79); for the Judeo-Persian text of chapter 23, see also Spicehandler (1975, 346–48). The chapter numbers of the *Ketāb-e anūsī* are given according to Fallāḥiān edition (2021).

18 *Ketāb-e anūsī*, chap. 23; Fallāḥiān (2021, 151–56); English translation by Spicehandler (1975, 333); see also Seligsohn (1902, 102); Bacher (1906b, 79).

19 *Ketāb-e anūsī*, chap. 24; Fallāḥiān (2021, 157–59); English translation by Moreen (1981b, 296); Judeo-Persian text edited also by Spicehandler (1975, 348–53).

20 “All of your people of the Jews must leave the center of the city [...]. This is because you do not live according to the faith of Muhammad and are an unclean people” (Xanlaryan 1990, 357, all translations from the *Girk' patmut'eanc'* are mine).

the rationale that Bābā'ī suggests for the suffering of his coreligionists is a traditional one: the misfortunes of the Jews were brought upon them by their own sins (Moreen 1987, 32). Had the two Jews chosen not to buy the Shah's stolen dagger, the persecution would not have started. At the end of the *Ketāb-e anūsī* (chap. 83), Bābā'ī goes on to list the sins that had brought on the persecution, symbolically linking any "punishment" suffered by the Jews to a reputed "sin":

If someone asks: "Tell us, how did it happen?", you shall answer: "Here is how it did happen. It is because of our sins that we have been put through this ordeal [...]. Because we neglected the five books of the *Torah*, God delivered us to Islam for five years. Because we turned away from Moses' *Torah*, we had to hear the words of the *Qur'an*. [...] We neglected the days of fasting, so God gave us a full month of fasting (i.e. the Ramadan), during which we were obliged to fast."<sup>21</sup>

[11]

The *Ketāb-e anūsī* is unique in giving the selling of the golden hilt of the Shah's dagger as the cause that prompted the persecution. We do not know whether or not this event did occur, but the harsh measures that were taken against the Persian Jews could hardly be justified solely as a retribution for such a trivial crime (Moreen 1981b, 278). Both Waḥīd and Arak'el make no mention of the theft and give as the professed reason for the expulsion of all non-Muslim minorities only the issue of ritual purity. In the thirty-third chapter of the *Girk' patmut'eanc'*, where Arak'el narrates the plight suffered by the Christians, he explicitly states that a written order was issued "that all the wine-drinking people [i.e., all non-Muslims] should leave and be separated from the Muslims and go to the edge of the city to settle separately there" (Xanlaryan 1990, 351).<sup>22</sup> Still, the story of the stolen dagger is functional in Bābā'ī's account, as it casts the narrative in the Jewish traditional (biblical) pattern of sin and punishment, followed by repentance and eventual restoration of the pristine conditions, as well as by the punishment of the persecutor(s).<sup>23</sup>

[12]

According to Bābā'ī, the Jews asked for a two-month respite (a three-day delay in the *Girk' patmut'eanc'*), which the Persians refused to grant. Both Bābā'ī and Arak'el mention that, after being expelled from the centre of the city, the Jews tried to settle in the Zoroastrian suburb of Gabrābād.<sup>24</sup> However, the Persians (the Grand Vizier himself, according to Bābā'ī, the Persian troops on his urging, according to Arak'el) instigated the Zoroastrians not to give them shelter. Bābā'ī reports that when the Jews did not find any place to settle, the Grand Vizier had their community leaders brought to him. Their names were Sa'īd, 'Ūbadyā, and Sāsūn. The Grand Vizier told Sāsūn:

[13]

21 *Ketāb-e anūsī*, chap. 83; Fallāḥiān (2021, 413–15). For the full list of sins and respective punishments, see the French summary by Bacher (1906b, 269–71); see also Moreen (1987, 32–33).

22 According to Arak'el, the cause of the expulsion of Christians was the use of wine (Xanlaryan 1990, 354). The Shah had issued an order prohibiting wine. The expulsion order followed the complaints made by the Persians, who began to denounce the Christians saying that they defiled the water of the canal with the rejects of the wine industry and by washing the wine vessels in it (Xanlaryan 1990, 350–51). Matthee quotes two contemporary sources according to which the Christians were accused of polluting the water of the canal by washing their clothes in it (2020, 67).

23 Indeed, Bābā'ī regards the eventual fall from grace of Moḥammad Beg with the Shah as an act of God: "Such is God's way, friends—a person reaps whatever he has sown. So it was with the Grand Vizier in those days" (*Ketāb-e anūsī*, chap. 78); Fallāḥiān (2021, 387–90); English translation by Moreen (1981a, 99); for chaps. 76–78, see also Bacher (1906b, 263–65).

24 According to Bābā'ī, the Jews did this by order of the Grand Vizier, whereas in the *Girk' patmut'eanc'* it appears that they went there (and to New Julfa) on their own initiative: "Then, the Jews left the city and went to Julfa and Gabrābād" (Xanlaryan 1990, 358).



I offer you an easy solution. Take all your women by the hand and leave this realm. Leave your wealth, property, and houses behind; go thirsty until you reach a shore with water. Or else become Muslims at once, sincerely.<sup>25</sup> [14]

According to Bābā'i, Sāsūn told the Grand Vizier that he would convert to Islam only if Sa'id, being a learned man and a teacher, did it first. Then, after Sa'id became a Muslim under the threat of having his stomach cut open and being paraded on a camel, the Jews quickly embraced Islam to avoid eviction. To all converts, Safavid officials gave one or two *tumāns* as a reward. Both pieces of information are confirmed by Arak'el (the '*Abbās-nāma* also mentions the two *tumāns*; see Moreen 1981b, 288). However, if according to the *Ketāb-e anūsī* it took only one night for the Grand Vizier to convert Sa'id, whose example was promptly followed by the other Jews, who "all relinquished their faith [...] for the sake of money,"<sup>26</sup> in the *Girk' patmut'eanc'* four full days had to pass until Sa'id—whom the Armenian text calls Sayit and qualifies as a *k'ahanay* (Armenian for "priest") and a *hakam* (Hebrew for "wise, learned man")—submitted to conversion under the same threat. Moreover "the [other] Jews did not comply" until they were taken back and forth from prison "many times" (Xanlaryan 1990, 363). Furthermore, whereas Bābā'i says that the reward of two *tumāns* was granted only *after* the Jews themselves asked for compensation for their conversion,<sup>27</sup> according to Arak'el, it appears that they had no role in prompting such a recompense, and the Safavid authorities resorted to it on their own initiative. Possibly this had the purpose of encouraging the Jews who still resisted being converted, as forceful conversion was not admitted by Islam. After conferring with the *ṣadr*,<sup>28</sup> [15]

the *Ēht'imal-Dōlvat'* [Persian *I'timād al-Dawla*, "Pillar of the State", i.e., Grand Vizier Moḥammad Beg] called the Jews to himself again and told them to return to obedience and embrace the Muslim faith, "For we shall give two *tumāns* as a recompense to anyone who accepts our faith, and he shall be freed from torture and live peacefully in his own home." [16]

[...] [17]

And after the profession of faith, the Persians brought and put a new *kapay* [Persian *qabā*, a kind of close gown] on those who did the profession of faith; and they gave each man two *tumāns* from the royal treasury as a recompense and let them go back to their homes. And those who did not abjure their faith were brought back to prison again. (Xanlaryan 1990, 361, 363) [18]

Arak'el uses the episode of Sayit's forced conversion to introduce the real villain in his [19]

25 *Ketāb-e anūsī*, chap. 24; Fallāḥiān (2021, 157–59); see also Spicehandler (1975, 348–53); Seligsohn (1902, 244–48); English translation by Moreen (1981b, 296–301); French translation in Seligsohn (1902, 248–55); see also Bacher (1906b, 79–81).

26 *Ketāb-e anūsī*, chap. 25; Fallāḥiān (2021, 161–69); see also Spicehandler (1975, 354–56); Seligsohn (1902, 255–56); English translation by Moreen (1981b, 301–3); French translation in Seligsohn (1902, 257–59); see also Bacher (1906b, 81–83).

27 See Moreen (1981b, 302); Seligsohn (1902, 258).

28 The *ṣadr* was the most important religious State official in the Safavid Empire, being the chief judicial officer for the religious courts (on the function of *ṣadr*, see Floor 2000). Even though Bābā'i does not mention the *ṣadr* in his account, he nevertheless confirms that the official stance of the Persian authorities was to avoid forceful conversion: "The Shah gave him royal permission at once with the instruction: 'I wish that you make Religion flourish but you should not bring compulsion into this business in order to make them confess the Shī'i faith'" (*Ketāb-e anūsī*, chap. 25; English translation by Moreen 1981b, 303).

narrative: Awatia (Bābā'ī's 'Ūbadyā), “who was very much a creedless and impious person” and, *well before* the conversion of Sayit—in fact “before anyone else”—“went and stood in front of the *Ēht'imal-Dōlvat'* and voluntarily agreed to abjure Judaism and profess the Muslim faith” (Xanlaryan 1990, 362–63). Arak'el does not describe either him or Sāsūn (whom he mentions later on in his account as Sasun and describes as Awatia's maternal uncle) as community leaders.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, according to him, it was Awatia who, on his own initiative, advised the Safavid officials to threaten and bribe Sayit, suggesting to them that “if he converted [to Islam], all the others would be converted as well” (Xanlaryan 1990, 363). As seen above, according to Bābā'ī, 'Ūbadyā had no role in Sa'id's conversion. In fact, after mentioning him by name together with Sa'id and Sāsūn, Bābā'ī introduces him in the narrative only some chapters later as “a young man, who possessed many excellent qualities.”<sup>30</sup> He reports that, besides being one of the community leaders, 'Ūbadyā had earned a reputation for being an excellent cook. Then, when the Jews of Isfahan were forced to embrace Islam, he was appointed by the Grand Vizier as his chief spy, so that he could keep him informed if and how the Jews complied with the new faith. Therefore, he had become obnoxious to the members of his community (see Bacher 1906b, 93).

The subsequent story of how Awatia/'Ūbadyā was murdered by some of his coreligionists and the way Arak'el and Bābā'ī fashion the same material to produce two different versions and interpretations of the events is exemplary of their respective approaches. [20]

This is how the story unfolded according to Bābā'ī: [21]

It was the twenty-first night of the Ramadan, and a Jew named Pīnḥās got together with some friends to have a party with large quantities of wine and arak.<sup>31</sup> After the young men drank a lot, “until they lost their minds, like dogs”, Pīnḥās suddenly jumped from his seat and said: “In this night, which is the night when the Imam 'Alī died, 'Ūbadyā must not remain alive. Let us lay a trap for him [...] to kill him!” His companions agreed. By chance, 'Ūbadyā happened to pass by. Pīnḥās, who stood in front of the house, greeted him most cordially and lured him to the party. 'Ūbadyā entered the house, where the others forced him to drink again and again. Then they began a game that required 'Ūbadyā to be bound like a thief. At that point 'Ūbadyā was murdered under the direction of Pīnḥās: he was stoned, strangled, dismembered, and decapitated. The murderers brought the head of the dead to the *maydān* (i.e. the public square), at the entrance of the royal residence. Then they put the decapitated corpse into a bag and brought it to a bathhouse to burn it. They lied to the owner of the bathhouse and said to him: “We have slaughtered a sheep as a sacrifice, but we cannot eat it, for it is *ṭarīfā* (i.e. ritually unclean and unfit for use [Hebrew *terefah*]); so we want you to burn it.” The morning after, the owner of the bathhouse, who did not want to burn the bag, opened it and discovered the dead body, yet he did not tell anyone what happened. Worried by the vanishing of their son, the parents of 'Ūbadyā brought their complaint before the Grand Vizier and the Shah, and an investigation was carried out. Eventually, the owner of the bathhouse gave away the name of Pīnḥās, who, though he was arrested together with his father and brother, eventually managed to flee to Baghdad. The Shah was enraged at the news, especially because the murderers had defiled the Ramadan by drinking alcohol—the [22]

29 The detail of the Grand Vizier sending for the community leaders is missing in the *Girk' patmut'eanc'*.

30 *Ketāb-e anūsī*, chap. 38; Fallāḥiān (2021, 213–19); see Bacher (1906b, 93).

31 This is not an incidental detail, as that night, known under the name of Laylat al-qadr, is the holiest night of Ramadan. According to classical exegesis, it was during that night that the Qur'an was revealed. On that very night, Shi'is also mourn the death of 'Alī b. Abī Tālib, whom they regard as the first imam (Marcotte 2003, 537–39). As Bābā'ī himself put it, this was “not a frivolous time” (Moreen 1987, 72); and yet, in Bābā'ī's narrative, Pīnḥās and his friends gathered to party and get drunk.

Jews having converted, at least nominally, to Islam—and he ordered to kill all the Jews of the realm. Yet, Mollā Moḥsen Fayḏ advised him to spare them and let only the guilty suffer their just punishment.<sup>32</sup> Three young men were apprehended and handed over to the victim's relatives as the murderers of 'Ūbadyā. As 'Ūbadyā's uncle Sāsūn refused to kill them, the family agreed that they would kill only one of them and release the others. However, a mob of armed people mercilessly killed the three men and burst into their houses to ransack them. Eventually, the Grand Vizier had the dead bodies of the murderers buried next to the corpse of 'Ūbadyā.<sup>33</sup>

Arak'el is much more eloquent in introducing the character of Awatia/'Ūbadyā. He calls [23] him an “impious and renegade” man, who was “very much contented with and firm in his newly acquired faith,” whereas the other Jews “did not wish to abandon the Jewish faith.” He also confirms Bābā'ī's information on him being a spy for the Persian authorities (Xanlaryan 1990, 364–65). Arak'el tells of how Awatia and “his evil associates” would mingle among the Jews as informers to inquire and discover who was still clandestinely following Judaism. Moreover, they were also responsible for the Persians taking the daughters of three Jews as their wives, which greatly aroused the Jews' anger against them.<sup>34</sup> For this reason, the Jews resolved to kill the apostates, starting with Awatia, whom they regarded as the most wicked among them (Xanlaryan 1990, 365).

Enter P'inhas (i.e., Bābā'ī's Pinḥās), whom Arak'el, in a distinctively different way than [24] Bābā'ī, describes as “an eager avenger of the Jewish faith [...], a zealous follower of his ancestors' faith; [the desire of] killing Awatia seethed in his heart and soul; [...] he found three other men from the Jewish people who were his confidants and friends to kill the execrable Awatia” (Xanlaryan 1990, 365). A biblical reference might be surmised here: Phinehas, who, in Numbers 25:13, is said by God to have been “zealous for His sake”, for he had killed an Israelite man and a Midianite woman in the context of the heresy of Peor, when Israelite men were lured to worship Baal-Peor by the Midianites and Moabites.

Then, setting the stage for the central scene, Arak'el tells of how Awatia confiscated a [25] ritual knife from a rabbi to prevent him from visiting the houses of the Jews and perform ritual slaughtering for them.

That knife was of a different kind. It was large, long, and very sharp; so that when [26] it touched the neck of the sheep it would cut its head off in just one movement, to which a second could be added, but not more. Because if it was repeated thrice, the sacrifice was not admissible. (Xanlaryan 1990, 366)

Carrying the knife on his person, Awatia went into the street and passed by the door of [27] P'inhas' house. P'inhas was leaving right at that moment, ran into him and invited him to his house. In the meanwhile, his three companions arrived, too. They set the table. They served food and wine. P'inhas asked his mother for a knife to peel some cucumbers, but she refused, because she knew he was planning to kill Awatia. He asked her twice and thrice, yet she did not bring it to him. At that point, Awatia took out the ritual knife he had confiscated from the rabbi and gave it to P'inhas. P'inhas seized the knife, grabbed Awatia by his beard, and cut his head off (Xanlaryan 1990, 366–67).<sup>35</sup> He and his friends agreed on throwing the dead

32 On Mollā Moḥsen Fayḏ, see Algar (1999).

33 *Ketāb-e anūsī*, chaps. 38–40; Fallāḥiān, (2021, 213–31); see Bacher (1906b, 93–96).

34 This information is missing from Oskan's edition of the *Girk' patmut'eanc'*.

35 This whole section is missing from Oskan's edition, which, after saying that P'inhas and his friends were planning to kill Awatia, skips directly to where the four men discuss how to dispose of his dead body.



body in the middle of the street. The morning after, the corpse was found and Awatia was recognized as the dead man. His family brought their complaint before the Grand Vizier and the Shah, and an investigation was carried out. In the meanwhile, P'inhas fled to a faraway land. Eventually, Awatia's maternal uncle Sasun managed to get a confession from P'inhas' three accomplices and reported them to the Persians. The three were sentenced to death and killed beside the corpse of Awatia, on the *maydān* (Xanlaryan 1990, 367–69).<sup>36</sup>

It has been suggested that Ārak'el knew and used the *Ketāb-e anūsī* or “had access to a Jewish informant who knew [Bābā'i's] work” (Spicehandler 1975, 341). However, even if the chronology allowed it (supposing that Bābā'i did write his work in 1662, immediately after the removal of Moḥammad Beg from office and the end of the persecutions),<sup>37</sup> the way Ārak'el fashions a different narrative drawing from the same facts and events is quite telling of his intent.

Ārak'el's sympathetic and positive portrayal of the Jews—in comparison with Bābā'i's account, where he acknowledges that the persecution was brought on by the sins of his generation—has already been noted.<sup>38</sup> In narrating the wandering and suffering of the Jews right after the expulsion decree and before their conversion, Ārak'el describes the tortures and torments they were forced to undergo in further detail than Bābā'i does, stressing more than once how they did not abandon their faith and eventually managed to persuade the Persians into treating them as Muslims, even though they had not really abjured Judaism (see below). Ārak'el also mentions a certain Yovsēp' (i.e., Joseph), who was martyred by the Grand Vizier for refusing the honours and treasures the latter said he would grant to the new converts:

A certain Jew, whose name was Yovsēp', replied to these words and said: “When one of the farmers of our land comes to us to buy human manure for their gardens, we first take the money for the manure and then give them the manure. Yet you put treasures and gifts on top of your faith and throw them on us.” [...] The *Ēht'imal-Dōlvat'n* grew angry because of that and killed him. All the other Jews said the same: “Kill us all, for it is better for all of us to die than to submit to your faith.” (Xanlaryan 1990, 359–60)

This episode is missing in Bābā'i's account, where a certain Yūsef is mentioned only in chapter 71 as a “noble young man” from Farahābād, who resolved to put an end to the persecution against the Jews and give them back their faith. However, according to Bābā'i, Yūsef was not killed by the Persians but died of a very high fever before he could do anything.<sup>39</sup> In fact, in his account of the eviction of the Jews of Isfahan, Bābā'i does not mention any martyr, whereas he tells of how the Jews of Farahābād were ready to die for their faith.<sup>40</sup>

For Ārak'el, even the fact that the Jews accepted money in exchange for their conversion is far from signaling evidence of their greed, as it is, instead, for Bābā'i. According to the latter, when Sā'id converted to Islam, he asked for a worthy reward and got himself a caravanserai.

Then all the others [Jews] said the profession of faith. [...] But they sought a

36 This section, too, is missing from Oskan's edition, where the only information given is that P'inhas and his friends threw Awatia's corpse in the middle of the street.

37 Ārak'el finished his *Girk' patmut'eanc'* in 1662, and the earliest extant manuscript of his work, dating to 1663, includes the account in its full version.

38 See, for example, Moreen (1981b, 287, 290, 1987, 12, 62).

39 *Ketāb-e anūsī*, chap. 71; Fallāḥiān (2021, 359–62); see Bacher (1906b, 259).

40 *Ketāb-e anūsī*, chap. 52; Fallāḥiān (2021, 161–69); English translation in Moreen (1981b, 304–6, esp. 306); see also Bacher (1906b, 242–43, esp. 243).

reward at the same time. One took money, another took clothes. One said: “I want a slave girl so that my house should be clean.” Another said: “I have many outstanding debts; pay my debts and I shall confess Islam.”<sup>41</sup>

On the contrary, in the *Girk‘ patmut‘eanc‘* the Jews do not try to exploit their conversion to get rich. As already noted above, they did not ask for any compensation. In fact, Arak‘el explains that they kept the two *tumāns* they got from the Persians and added the annual interest to that sum, so that “when they [the Persians] ask, we shall be saved from them by giving [it back]”, and they put aside in a box the annual amount of the poll tax (*jezya*), which they no longer had to pay because they had converted, so that “when they ask, we shall be saved by giving [it back] at once” (Xanlaryan 1990, 370). [34]

But it is in the details of the story of Awatia/‘Ūbadyā’s murder that the Judeo-Persian and the Armenian accounts diverge the most and best express the two authors’ different approaches and intents. Interestingly enough, they both link the murder to the idea of ritual sacrifice. Yet they depict it in two opposite ways: an illicit deed performed by impious men in Bābāi’s account, which eventually had dire consequences for the Jews, and a legitimate and religiously zealous act in the *Girk‘ patmut‘eanc‘*. [35]

Bābāi acknowledges that ‘Ūbadyā was guilty “of many injustices.”<sup>42</sup> Being the Grand Vizier’s informer, he incurred the hatred of the Jews, who unsuccessfully tried to bribe him in order to stop him from revealing the names of those who were still secretly professing Judaism. Even so, Bābāi does not praise ‘Ūbadyā’s murderers. First, he introduces Pinḥās and his accomplices as debauchees: They are impious even as (pseudo-)Muslims, as their choice to party and get drunk during the holiest night of Ramadan clearly shows. Then, Bābāi describes how they killed ‘Ūbadyā in a most cruel way. They stoned, strangled, and beheaded ‘Ūbadyā, eventually trying to burn his body. Those are all the four modes of executions listed and discussed by the Talmud (bSanhedrin 49a–53a). This is obviously an exaggeration, the purpose of which is to underline Bābāi’s firm condemnation of Pinḥās and his associates. This is apparent also in the author’s claim that they would deserve fourteen such deaths as that of ‘Ūbadyā (Moreen 1987, 72). The fate of ‘Ūbadyā’s corpse is also quite telling. Indeed, the “sacrifice” performed by the murderers is illicit: the “sheep” they killed is *terefah* and, as such, not pleasing to God. Unsurprisingly, it is not fit for being burnt, either. Moreover, because of the murder, the Jews risked undergoing another, fiercer persecution, which, in the light of the above-mentioned paradigm of sin and punishment, defines the murder as negative in itself. According to Bābāi, the Shah, livid with rage because of the defilement of Ramadan, issued a decree throughout all the provinces ordering to kill the Jews. [36]

It was a crueller persecution than that of the time of Ahasuerus and Haman. Then the Jews were worthy of the assistance of Esther and Mordechai, while now the few wise men who lived in each city were dead. If only one perfect man had lived in this generation, he could have been its shield. But there was none.<sup>43</sup> [37]

On the other hand, Arak‘el’s sympathy is all for P’inhas and his companions. Whether or not his description of P’inhas as an “eager avenger of the Jewish faith” may be taken as an allusion [38]

41 *Ketāb-e anūsī*, chap. 25; Fallāḥiān (2021, 161–69); English translation by Moreen (1981b, 302); see also Seligsohn (1902, 258); Bacher (1906b, 81).

42 *Ketāb-e anūsī*, chap. 38; Fallāḥiān (2021, 213–19); see Bacher (1906b, 93). However, as noted above, Bābāi is careful to also say that ‘Ūbadyā had done “many good things” as community leader (*ibid.*).

43 *Ketāb-e anūsī*, chap. 39; Fallāḥiān (2021, 221–27); see Bacher (1906b, 95).

to the biblical Phinehas, Ārak'el nevertheless claims that he had a ritual knife which would assure that he performed his "sacrifice" properly. That this is a crucial detail in the narrative is clear from the thorough description that Ārak'el gives of the blade. Ārak'el wants his readers to know that that knife was precisely like those used for ritual slaughtering.<sup>44</sup> That Ārak'el had access to information from the Jewish community is confirmed by the detail of P'inhas and his friends agreeing not to hide the corpse of Awatia but to throw it in the middle of the street. Ārak'el tells that, when he first heard the story, he wondered why they did not secretly disposed of the corpse (as the murderers attempted to do in Bābā'i's version of the story), and he asked many Jews about this. The answer he received is nothing less than another piece of evidence on the piety and religious eagerness shown by those "zealous followers of their ancestors' faith": according to Jewish religious law, a woman cannot remarry if her missing husband cannot be proven to be dead. This was the reason why P'inhas and his companions,

feeling compassion for Awatia's wife, [...] threw his dead body on the main street, so that his wife would see it and get permission to marry another man. (Xanlaryan 1990, 367) [39]

That Ārak'el considered the killing of Awatia as a rightful action is proven by another fact: just as the biblical Phinehas "made atonement for the children of Israel" in his zeal, the act of P'inhas and his companions eventually improved the circumstances of the Jews, instead of increasing their suffering as in Bābā'i's account. Indeed, the murder resulted in an opposite outcome compared to that of the *Ketāb-e anūsī*. According to Ārak'el, [40]

After that, the people of the Persians did not say anything nor do anything to the people of the Jews [...] but they regarded them to be as the people of the Persians [...] they let them live as they wished. Although the Persians knew that the Jews had not accepted the faith of Muhammad, for the time being they left the things as they were. Moreover, in their gatherings and among their people, the Jews followed their faith and the Jewish traditions, and not those of Islam. (Xanlaryan 1990, 369–70) [41]

Ārak'el's *Girk' patmut'eanc'* and Bābā'i's *Ketāb-e anūsī* are two works of a different nature and genre. To be sure, Bābā'i was a poet more than a historian. Yet his *mansavī* includes historical data (which are confirmed by other sources) and conveys a distinct view on history. As already noted, his work must be understood in the light of the above-mentioned paradigm of sin and punishment, followed by eventual restoration. Bābā'i's hermeneutical lens solidly rests on the [42]

44 In describing the knife, Ārak'el shows some vague knowledge of the halachic rules governing ritual slaughtering (*šehiṭah*), as he takes care to note that the blade was "large, long, and very sharp." Nevertheless, his comment on the number of allowed cuts is at best inaccurate: the *Halacha* forbids any pausing during the incision, yet it permits to move the blade forwards and backwards across the neck of the animal (*Šulḥan 'aruk*, *Yoreh De'ah* 23). To be sure, the beheading of the animal is also not admitted. As a consequence, even in the case of the murder as it is told in Ārak'el's account the victim would have been *terefah*. However, the detail that the knife could *behead* (*hatc'ē zgluxn*) the victim with just one or two movements is functional to the narrative, as it presages the use that P'inhas would make of it. On a side note, since both Ārak'el and Bābā'i tell that Awatia/ʿŪbadyā was beheaded, thus confirming each other's account, it is tempting to surmise that the murderers had chosen such a mode of killing or that the original story of Awatia/ʿŪbadyā's murder was fashioned having in mind the Talmudic passage where decapitation is said to be the mode of execution to be meted out to the inhabitants of an apostate town (bSanhedrin 50a). The Talmud refers here to Deuteronomy 13:13–14: "Scoundrels from among you have gone out and led the inhabitants of the town astray, saying, 'Let us go and worship other gods'"; which basically was what Awatia/ʿŪbadyā was doing among the Jews of Isfahan.

Hebrew Bible, which provides him with the explanation for the events unfolding in his own times, and an understanding of the Jewish condition as fundamentally exilic: “Each Jewish generation in every country has endured its own *galut* [i.e., exile].”<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the *Ketāb-e anūsī* displays the tendency famously noted by Yerushalmi “to subsume even major new events to familiar archetypes” (1982, 36). Abraham is praised because of the religious zeal he showed in smashing the idols, thus giving an example for the Jews to follow.<sup>46</sup> Moḥammad Beg is a second Haman and goes to his fate just like him.<sup>47</sup> Kāshān was a “little Temple” (*miqdaš qāṭan*), and when its Nāsī Mollā Yehudā, whom Bābā’ī compares to the prophet Zechariah, was murdered by ‘magic’ by other Jews, his death was followed by God’s punishment: Shah ‘Abbās II and his Grand Vizier destroyed the synagogues of the town, burnt the Torah scrolls and put to death many priests and young men, just as the death of Zechariah was avenged by Nebuchadnezzar and his captain Nebuzaradan, who burned the Jerusalem Temple (see 2Kings 25:8–9).<sup>48</sup> History is in God’s hands: just as Israel’s deliverance from Egypt came in due time, “our *galut* also ended when its time came to an end.”<sup>49</sup> Many other examples could be added.

In Moreen’s opinion, Bābā’ī’s narrative might be “almost characterize[d...] as bitter, bearing the stamp of a disappointed man, as he shows little sympathy for his coreligionists” (1981b, 287). However, even if Bābā’ī was “disappointed” with his fellow Jews and their greed (Moreen 1981b, 290) and acknowledged that the persecution was brought upon them by their own sins, such lack of empathy might also be explained in the light of his above-mentioned hermeneutical lens: Israel *does* live in exile, and when “expulsion, no less than massacre or forced conversion” happened, it brought “the perception of *galut* to full consciousness, in its original, archetypal meaning” (Yerushalmi 1997, 18). In this sense, Bābā’ī’s lack of sympathy comes from a simple statement of fact: when a “local” exile becomes the archetypal *galut*, there is not much that men can do, other than wait for it to end, while ideally repenting of their sins, which brought it on. “Persecution and suffering are, after all, the result of the conditions of exile, and the exile itself is the bitter fruit of ancient sins” (Yerushalmi 1982, 36). This is the reason why Pīnḥās and his accomplices are to be blamed, as their plan interfered with God’s righteous plan for the punishment (and salvation) of the Persian Jews. This is also the reason why Bābā’ī feels no need to overemphasize the Jews’ acts of heroism (as compared to Arak’el): even if martyrs are to be praised, their sacrifice speaks only for their heroism, but it has no use in making the *galut* shorter, as the exile shall only end when God so decides. In this sense, Bābā’ī’s *masnavī* is not just poetry: even if it is not a historical work *per se*, it includes a hermeneutics of history.

On the other hand, though the *Girk’ patmut’eanc’* could be defined as a “history” to all intents and purposes and the chapter on the Jews of Isfahan is itself called a *patmut’iwn* (“history, account”) in its title, what Arak’el does is turn a historical event (the expulsion and forced conversion of the Jews) into a moral tale by literary fashioning the account of the suffering endured by the Jews and of Awatia’s murder in a way that would resonate with his fellow Armenians. Interestingly enough, his account of the eviction of the Christians from Isfahan is far more succinct in describing the torments the Armenians had to undergo. In

45 *Ketāb-e anūsī*, chap. 4; Fallāḥiān (2021, 61–63); see Bacher (1906a). On the exilic nature of the Jewish condition and on Jewish “traditional” conceptions of history, see, among others, Raz-Krakovitzkin (2007); Valensi (1986); Yerushalmi (1982, 36, 1997).

46 *Ketāb-e anūsī*, chap. 3; Fallāḥiān (2021, 51–58); see Bacher (1906a, 125, 266).

47 *Ketāb-e anūsī*, chap. 77; Fallāḥiān (2021, 383–86); see Bacher (1906b, 264).

48 *Ketāb-e anūsī*, chap. 69–70; Fallāḥiān (2021, 353–57); see Bacher (1906b, 257–59).

49 *Ketāb-e anūsī*, chap. 81; Fallāḥiān (2021, 405–8); see Bacher (1906b, 267–68).

[43]

[44]

fact, he mentions only some “[blows with] the cudgel on [their] heads” and the “violence” of the Persian authorities charged with the expulsion, whereas insisting on the “rudeness and coarseness” (*sopr ew bird azgs Hayoc’*) and “natural insolence” (*zbnakan gořozut’iwnn*) of the Armenians (Xanlaryan 1990, 352–53). Whether or not this seemingly unsympathetic attitude towards his coreligionists can be evidence of the tensions that existed at the time between the Armenian community of Isfahan-New Julfa and the Holy See at Ējmiacin (where Aṛak’el was reared and educated and was entrusted with the task of writing his *History* first by Catholicos P’ilippos I Aḡbakec’i and then by Catholicos Yakob IV Ĵulayec’i),<sup>50</sup> Aṛak’el’s remarks about the providential outcomes that the Armenians enjoyed *for being evicted* might provide some context for understanding his compassionate and appreciative attitude towards the Jews and the rationale that guided him in fashioning the chapter he devoted to their plight. Of the four main reasons he gives why the Christians should be grateful for their expulsion from the centre of the town, three concern their relations with the Muslims. According to Aṛak’el, the eviction turned out to be a positive event to the extent that, by separating the Christians from the “cunning” (*ōjabaroy*, lit. “snake-like”) Muslims, it significantly reduced the occasions for those who were “imperfect believers” (*t’erahawat*) to have their faith weakened in seeing the more lenient religion of the Muslims and convert to Islam, and for the young Christians to fall in love with young Muslims and marry them, turning away from Christianity. Indeed, “it was of God’s mercy that this thing happened to the Christians” (Xanlaryan 1990, 354–55). That many of his fellow Armenians converted to Islam is something that deeply troubled Aṛak’el, especially when they did it to get rich at their coreligionists’ expense. In chapter 5 of the *Girk’ patmut’eanc’*, he discusses at length how some Christians embraced Islam and began persecuting other Christians, capitalizing on their new condition to extort money from them. They bribed other Muslims to witness against the Christians. They pretended to be the relatives of those Christians to have the Muslim judges hand them over all their inheritance and possessions, taking advantage of a law that allowed the Christians who converted to Islam to claim their Christian family inheritance up to the seventh degree.<sup>51</sup>

This might be the reason why Aṛak’el insists so much upon the Jews’ steadfastness in their faith in the face of persecution and luring by money. Whether this steadfastness is actual, perceived, or a literary fabrication, Aṛak’el makes the Jews into an example for his fellow Armenians to follow. The unconcern with the wealth and money he credits to them is a paragon of virtue that he uses to teach his readers how true believers should not be bargaining their faith away. Rather than springing from his sympathy for his own people or from the wish to emphasize the suffering of non-Muslims minorities (Moreen 1981b, 287, 1987, 62, 68), Aṛak’el’s empathetic attitude towards the Jews could be a literary device he uses to make the Armenians realize the providence in getting to live separated from the Muslims and understand that salvation does not come from betraying their faith but from enduring and resisting the enticements of conversion. The fact that, according to Aṛak’el’s story, the Jews

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50 Starting from the late 1640s, the Julfan Armenian community began to style itself as the stronghold of Armenian Apostolic orthodoxy, not only against Catholicism and Catholic missionaries, but also in direct conflict with the Catholicoi in Ējmiacin and their more open attitude towards Catholics. In 1655, the election of Yakob Ĵulayec’i—the defeated pro-Catholic contender of the anti-Catholic Dawit’ Ĵulayec’i in the 1652 election to the archiepiscopal See of New Julfa—as the new Catholicos of all Armenians played a major role in exacerbating the rift between the clergy of New Julfa and the Holy See of Ējmiacin (see Ghougassian 1998, 101, 105–22).

51 This law was enacted in 1628 by Shah ‘Abbās I, who ratified a *fatwa* issued a few years before by Bahā’ al-Dīn al-‘Āmilī, the Shaykh al-Islām of Isfahan (Matthee 2017, 557; Persian text and English translation of the *fatwa* in Ghougassian 1998, 211–13).



did not make use of the money they were remunerated with for their (feigned) conversion and that, though they did not really embrace the Muslim faith, they managed not to be harassed by the Persians, can be viewed as one of the many miracles and god-fearing deeds that, according to Bournoutian (2005–2006, 2:561), Arak'el included in his *Girk patmut'eanc'* to demonstrate the power of the Christian (and Jewish!) God over Islam.

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