Septuagint, Synagogue, and Symbiosis: The Jews of Hellenistic Egypt

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Empire of Alexander the Great
(356-323 B.C.E.) / (r. 336-323 B.C.E.)

Bust of the young Alexander the Great
(c. 100 B.C.E.)
(British Museum)

Cartouche of Alexander the Great
c. 330 B.C.E.
(Louvre, Paris)

The Four Successor Kingdoms to Alexander the Great
Ptolemies – Alexandria, Egypt (blue)
Seleucid – Seleukia / Antioch (golden)
Ptolemy Dynasty
305 B.C.E. – 30 B.C.E.

Founded by Ptolemy I, general under Alexander

Royal names:
16 kings named Ptolemy
7 queens named Cleopatra
4 queens named Berenike

Jews under Alexander and Ptolemy I

Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 12, Chapter 1

- Ptolemy brought captives from Judea and Jerusalem
- He had heard that the Jews had been loyal to Alexander
- He placed many of them into garrisons

At Alexandria he gave them equal privileges of citizens with the Macedonians themselves; and required of them to take their oaths, that they would keep their fidelity to the posterity of those who committed these places to their care. Nay, there were not a few other Jews, who, of their own accord, went into Egypt, as invited by the goodness of the soil, and by the liberality of Ptolemy.

Jewish tomb
Alexandria
c. 275 B.C.E.

עקביה
בנ אלייע
ינ

Aqavyah ben Elio‘enai

Tomb Inscriptions from Leontopolis (Tell el-Yehudiyyeh)

Iesous
Abramos

Map of Ptolemaic Empire
indicating cities with Jewish population
**Septuagint**
The Bible in Greek

Torah translated by Jewish scholars in Alexandria during the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (r. 283-246 B.C.E.)

Prophets and Writings sections followed within the next century

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4Q120

Septuagint fragment of the book of Leviticus found at Qumran

c. 50 B.C.E. (Israel Museum)

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P. Rylands 548 (Egypt) – John Rylands Library (Manchester)

Fragments of the book of Deuteronomy

2nd century C.E.

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Great Library of Alexandria

O. Von Corven (19th century)

Septuagint fragment of the book of Habakkuk

Nahal Hever (near Ein Gedi, Israel)
c. 50 C.E. (Israel Museum)

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Codex Sinaiticus – 4th century C.E., parchment
Oldest Complete Manuscript of the Septuagint
St Catherine’s Monastery > British Library

www.codexsinaiticus.org
**Proseuche – forerunner of the Synagogue**

*Schedia, c. 240 B.C.E.*

On behalf of king Ptolemy and queen Berenice his sister and wife and their children, the Jews (dedicate) the proseuche

*Xenephyris, c. 120 B.C.E.*

On behalf of king Ptolemy and Queen Cleopatra the sister and queen Cleopatra the wife, the Jews of Xenephyris (dedicated) the gateway of the proseuche when Theodore and Achillion were presiding.

**More Proseuche Inscriptions**

*Alexandria, c. 120 B.C.E.*

... to God, the Highest ... the sacred precinct and the proseuche and its appurtenances.

*Nitriai, c. 120 B.C.E.*

On behalf of King Ptolemy and Queen Cleopatra the sister and queen Cleopatra the wife, Benefactors, the Jews in Nitriai (dedicated) the proseuche and its appurtenances.

*Alexandria (?), c. 40 B.C.E.*

On the orders of the queen and the king, in place of the previous plaque about the dedication of the proseuche, let what is written below be written up. King Ptolemy Euergetes (proclaimed) the proseuche inviolate. The queen and the king gave the order.

*Alexandria, 3 C.E.*

... Hathyr 18, in the ... of those from the ... archisynagogos (or -oi) ... archiprostates ... Since Brasidas son of Herakleides ... 33rd year of Caesar ... in all ... and soundly, ... the expense ... days ... repair ... by word in ... crown ... with two ...

*Alexandria, 3 C.E.*

... Hathyr 18, in the ... of those from the ... archisynagogos (or -oi) ... archiprostates ... Since Brasidas son of Herakleides ... 33rd year of Caesar ... in all ... and soundly, ... the expense ... days ... repair ... by word in ... crown ... with two ...
Theodotus Synagogue Inscription
Jerusalem, 1st century C.E.

Theodotus, son of Vetenus, priest and archisynagogue, son of an archisynagogue, grandson of an archisynagogue, built the synagogue for the reading of the Law and the teaching of the commandments, and the guest house and the rooms and the water supplies as an inn for those who came from abroad, which [synagogue] his fathers had founded and the elders and the Simonides.

Symbiosis
Ezekiel the Tragedian, Exagoge
2nd century B.C.E.

Greek-style drama in 5 acts
269 lines extant
Iambic trimeter, a la Euripides
Replete with monologue by Moses
Messenger arrives to report on the battle

Symbiosis
Philo the Poet, Jerusalem
2nd century B.C.E.

Epic poem
Only 29 lines survive
Hexameter (a la Iliad and Odyssey)
Includes episode about Abraham
Praises the springs and water system in Jerusalem

Symbiosis
Philo the Philosopher
c. 25 B.C.E. – c. 50 C.E. / voluminous writings

The Bible is the source of both religious revelation and philosophic truth
Allegorical approach to Scripture
Elements of Plato, Pythagoras, and the Stoics combined with Judaism
Questions and Answers to Genesis and Exodus
Describes reading of Torah in the Synagogue on Sabbath

The Occupations of the Jews

253 B.C.E. – Pasis the wool merchant
241 B.C.E. – Samoelis the vine-dresser
218 B.C.E. – Seos the wool merchant
2nd cent B.C.E. – Ioudas son of Dositheos the farmer
2nd cent B.C.E. – Sabbataios son of Horos and his son Dosas, potters
2nd cent B.C.E. – Iapheas son of Dositheos the weaver
2nd cent B.C.E. – Lakoubis son of Lakoubis the flute-player
78 C.E. – Tryphas son of Nikon, the farmer (Edfu)
89 C.E. – Philoppos son of Thedetos, the donkey-driver
Ostracon recording wine-tax paid by Aristomenes the Jew (Thebes, 161 B.C.E.)

Ostracon, recording distribution of wheat or some such agricultural product, includes mention of someone named Sambaton (Upper Egypt, 2nd century B.C.E.)

Jews as soldiers in the Ptolemaic Army
210 B.C.E. (Fayum)
- Theophilos son of Dositheos
- Philistion [son of . . . ]
- Timaos son of Telouphis
All three Jews of the Epigone (reserves)
(P. Gurob 8 – Trinity College, Dublin)

Jews as soldiers in the Ptolemaic Army
(174 B.C.E. – Fayum)
- Ioudas son of Iosephos, Jew of the Epigone
- Agathokles son of Ptolemy, Jew of the infantry
- Ananias son of Ionathas, Jew of the Epigone
- Deinias son of Aineas
- Thrases son of Sosibios
- Thebon son of Phanokles
- Samaelos son of Ioanes
Four Jews of the Epigone

Jews as soldiers in the Ptolemaic Army
(174 B.C.E. – Fayum)
- Theodoros son of Theodoros, who is also called Samaelos
- Nikanor son of Iason, both Jews of the First Hipparchy
Jews as soldiers in the Ptolemaic Army

107 BCE
- Civil War between Cleopatra III and her son Ptolemy IX
- The former appointed as her generals Chelkias and Ananias, sons of Onias (Josephus, Jewish Antiquities, Book 13)

1st century BCE inscription: Eleazaros son of Nikolaos, the officer, (has dedicated) the sundial and the well on behalf of himself and his wife, Eirene.

Coda

Jews continued to live in Egypt in large numbers throughout late antiquity (Roman and Byzantine periods) and into the Middle Ages (Muslim period).

Largest community shifted from Alexandria to Cairo in the 10th century, where Maimonides would serve as leading rabbinical authority in the 12th century.

Coda

At least until 1956, when Jews began to leave Egypt en masse during the anti-Israel fervor stirred up by Gamal Abdal-Nasser.

Coda


“[they] would never, ever know, nor even guess, that this was our last night in Alexandria.”