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

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Jews in Egypt
Those who escaped the Babylonian advance on Jerusalem, 605-586 B.C.E.

Jeremiah 44:1
כָּל־אֶ֚ל אֶֽל־יִרְמְיָ֔הוּ הָיָ֣ה אֲשֶׁ֣ר הַדָּבָר֙ בְּאֶ֣רֶץ הַיְּהוּדִ֔ים מִצְרָ֑יִם וּבְנֹ֔ף וּבְתַחְפַּנְחֵ֣ס בְּמִגְדֹּל לֵאמֹֽר׃הַיֹּשְׁבִ֤ים פַּתְרוֹס בְאֶ֥רֶץ

The word which was to Jeremiah, concerning all the Jews who dwell in the land of Egypt, who dwell in Migdol, Tahpanhes, Noph, and the land of Pathros, saying.

Judahites to Egypt
600 – 585 B.C.E.
Pathros

Map of the Persian (Achaemenid) Empire
538 – 333 B.C.E.

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

Empire of Alexander the Great
(356-323 B.C.E.) / (r. 336-323 B.C.E.)
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 Jews from Judea and Jerusalem to Egypt.
- 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.”
Map of Ptolemaic Empire indicating cities with Jewish population

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

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

Tomb Inscriptions from Leontopolis (Tell el-Yehudiyeh)

Great Library of Alexandria
O. Von Corven (19th century)

P. Rylands 458 (Egypt) – John Rylands Library (Manchester)
Fragments of the book of Deuteronomy (discovered 1917)
Papyrus Fouad 266
Société Royale de Papyrologie (Cairo)
2nd century B.C.E.
117 fragments including portions of Genesis and Deuteronomy (discovered 1939)

Papyrus Fouad 266
Divine Name: יהוה – in paleo-Hebrew script
Oxyrhynchus Papyri

c. 500,000 papyrus fragments discovered in a rubbish heap in Oxyrhynchus, Egypt, in 1896 by B. P. Grenfell and E. S. Hunt (1st century B.C.E. – 6th century C.E.)

http://www.papyrology.ox.ac.uk/POxy/

P. Oxy. 5101 – Psalms – c. 100 C.E.

Published by Daniela Colomo and W. B. Henry in The Oxyrhynchus Papyri, vol 77 (2011)

Inspecting Oxyrhynchus Papyri, July 2018
Sackler Library (Oxford)

Septuagint fragments from the Land of Israel c. 150 B.C.E. – c. 150 C.E.

Inspecting Oxyrhynchus Papyri, July 2018
Sackler Library (Oxford)

Grenfell and Hunt (1896)

Inspecting Oxyrhynchus Papyri, January 2018
Sackler Library (Oxford)

with Emmanuel Aprilakis, Ph.D. student at Rutgers in Classics

Qumran

Nahal Hever
Septuagint fragments of the book of Deuteronomy found at Qumran
C. 100 B.C.E. (Israel Museum)

Septuagint fragment of the book of Leviticus found at Qumran
C. 50 B.C.E. (Israel Museum)

Sephtuagint fragments of the Minor Prophets
Nahal Hever (near Ein Gedi, Israel)
C. 50 C.E. (Israel Museum)

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

St. Catherine’s Monastery (Greek Orthodox), southern Sinai
Proseuche
forerunner of the Synagogue

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

Schedia, c. 240 B.C.E.

Krokodilopolis, Fayum c. 240 B.C.E.
On behalf of king Ptolemy the son of Ptolemy and queen Berenike, his wife and sister, and their children, the Jews in Krokodilopolis (dedicate) this 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 (dedicate) 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 (dedicate) the proseuche and its appurtenances.

Alexandria, c. 40 B.C.E.
On behalf of the queen and king, for the great God who listens to prayer, Alypus made the proseuche in the 15th year, Mecheir...

Alexandria (?), c. 40 B.C.E.
Papous built the proseuche on behalf of himself and his wife and children. In the 4th year, Pharmouthi 7.

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. [in Latin]
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 ...
Flinders Petrie, *Hyksos and Israelite Cities*, 1906, Plate XXVII

Ostracon written in Demotic Egyptian
Builder’s account mentioning a person named Abram
Temple of Onias destroyed by Titus or Vespasian – 73 C.E.

Display Cases at the Petrie Museum (London)
Stelae
Figurines and statuettes

My teacher Cyrus Gordon excavated with Petrie at Tell el-'Ajul (near Gaza) 1930 – 1934


Voyages of Matthew Flinders (1774 – 1814)
This stele bears witness.

"Who are you that lie in the dark tomb? Tell me your country and your father."

"Arsinoe, daughter of Aline and Theodosios. The famous land of Onias reared me."

"How old were you when you slipped down into the shadowy region of Lethe?"

"At twenty I went to the mournful place of the dead."

"Were you married?"

"I was."

"Did you leave him a child?"

"Childless I went to the house of Hades."

"May the earth, the guardian of the dead, be light on you."

"And for you, stranger, may she bear fruitful crops."

In the sixteenth year, Payni 21.

**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

Known from later citations in Church Fathers:

- Clement of Alexandria (d. 215 C.E.)
- Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 340 C.E.)
- Eustathius of Antioch (d. 340 C.E.)

For a total of 269 extant lines
Then the princess with her maidservants came down to bathe. When she saw me, she took me up and recognised that I was a Hebrew. My sister Mariam then ran up to her and spoke, “Shall I get a nursemaid for this child from the Hebrews?” The princess urged her on. Mariam went to fetch our mother who presently appeared and took me in her arms. The princess said to her, “Woman, nurse this child and I shall pay your wages.” She then named me Moses, because she had taken me from the watery river-bank.

**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

**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. – Sabbataiios son of Horos and his son Dosas, potters
- 2nd cent B.C.E. – Iapheasson of Dositheos the weaver
- 2nd cent B.C.E. – Iakoubisson of Iakoubis the flute-player
- 78 C.E. – Tryphasson of Nikon, the farmer (Edfu)
- 89 C.E. – Philopposson of Thedetos, the donkey-driver

**P. Cairo Zenon 4.59762**

3rd century B.C.E.

An account of the quantities of bricks received day by day from the 5th to the 11th of Epeiph.

The 7th day is marked Sabbath, and on that day no bricks were delivered.
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)

174 B.C.E. (Fayum)
P. Tebtinus 818
Berkeley

• Theodoros son of Theodoros, who is also called Samaelos
• Nikanor son of Jason, both Jews of the First Hipparchy

174 B.C.E. (Fayum)
P. Tebtinus 818
Berkeley

1st century B.C.E. inscription dedicating a sundial and a well in the Fayum (west of the Nile)

"Eleazaros son of Nikolaos, the officer, (has dedicated) the sundial and the well on behalf of himself and his wife, Eirene."

Map of Alexandria

P. Tebtunis 817
(Berkeley)

Apollonios son of Protogeneos lends to Sostratos son of Neoptolemos, 2 talents, 3000 drachmas on the security of his house.

Both men are identified as Jews of the Epigone.

4 November 182 B.C.E.
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.

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


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

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