ΙΔΡΥΜΑ ΜΕΙΖΟΝΟΣ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΣΜΟΥ

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Jews in Asia Minor (Antiquity)

Summary :

It was Antiochus III the Great, the Seleucid king, in the early 3rd cent. BC who sent 2000 Babylonian Jews as cleruchs to establish the first communities in Lydia and Phrygia, in Asia Minor. One of their largest settlements was Sardis. In the Roman imperial times Jewish communities were well established at several cities in Lydia and Phrygia , such as Thyateira and Hierapolis.

Date

Hellenistic - Roman periods

Geographical Location

Asia Minor

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1. Early Jewish settlements

The earliest certain evidence for Jewish communities in Asia Minor dates back to the late third century BC, when the Seleucid king Antiochus III sent 2000 Babylonian Jews as cleruchs to fortresses and strategic strong points in Lydia and Phrygia. They were to keep a check on his rebellious subjects.[1] Josephus, the source of this information, does not identify the exact locations to which the Jews were sent, but one of their settlements was clearly Sardis, the largest Lydian city, which had served as the headquarters of the rebel Achaios, until it fell to a siege in 214 BC. In 213 BC Zeuxis, who controlled the regions north of the Taurus for Antiochus III, organized a synoecism and refounded Sardis, and Jewish cleruchs were certainly among the new inhabitants.[2] During the Roman imperial period inscriptions show that Jewish communities were well established at several other cities of Lydia, including Thyateira and Philadelphia, and of Phrygia, including Apamea, Eumeneia, Hierapolis, Laodicea Sebaste and Acmonia. It is likely that many, if not all of these settlements originated with the Jewish settlers sent by Antiochus.

2. Jewish tribute to Rome

During the first century BC the Jews of Asia sent annual contributions to the temple at Jerusalem. Cicero in his speech *Pro Flacco* reveals that around 62 BC this tribute was collected at four cities in Asia, Adramyttium, Pergamon, Laodicea and Apamea. It is significant that all four cities were centers of Roman assize districts and formed part of the framework of Roman administration in the province of Asia, and the Jewish tribute was evidently gathered under Roman supervision. 100 pounds of gold were collected annually at Apamea, 20 pounds at Laodicea, but much smaller quantities at Adramyttium and Pergamon.[3] This indicates that the Jewish communities of Phrygia were more important than those of the northern coastal regions. Unfortunately we have no figures relating to the large Jewish communities at Sardis and Ephesus, although Josephus indicates that the temple tax for Jerusalem was collected there too.[4] After the destruction of the Jewish temple at Jerusalem by the emperor Vespasian's son Titus in AD 70, this levy was transformed into a tax payable by all Jews to the so-called *fiscus Iudaicus*, part of the Roman treasury. The change would have been easily made in the province of Asia, since the Roman authorities had always kept an eye on the gathering of the Jewish tax.

3. Jewish communities along the coast

In addition to Jewish settlements in the interior, there were clearly substantial communities in the coastal cities of Asia Minor.[5] Josephus suggests that the Jews of Ephesus acquired local citizenship in the period of Alexander's successor kings, perhaps under Antiochus II (261-46 BC). Jews were also numerous and influential at Smyrna, and there were Jews in other Ionian cities, including Phocaea, Teos and Miletus, on the Carian coast at Myndus, Iassus, Halicarnassos and Cnidus, in inland Caria at Aphrodisias, in Lycia at Limyra and Tlos, in Pamphylia at Side, and in Cilicia. Apart from Tarsus, the birthplace of the apostle Paul, Jews are attested by inscriptions of the 4th to 6th centuries AD at Seleukeia on the Kalycadnos and at Korykos. Jews are recorded also in Bithynia, Pontus, and Galatia. The Acts of the Apostles also draws attention to Jewish communities in the cities of South Galatia: Pisidian Antioch, Ikponion, and Derbe. Most of the inscriptions relating to Jews date to the second and third centuries AD, or to later

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Antiquity. However, it is likely that the origins of these settlements were much earlier.[6]

The Jews enjoyed special privileges within the cities of the eastern Roman Empire. At Ephesus, a series of edicts and other decisions by Roman governors between about 50 BC and the age of Augustus exempted local Jews from Roman military service, gave them permission to practise their religion without interference, and protected their right to send the temple tax to Jerusalem. During a visit to Ephesus in 13 BC, Herod the Great and his friend M.Agrippa upheld the rights of the local Jews.[7] The Roman quaestor, L. Antonius, wrote a letter to the magistrates at Sardis, allowing them to establish their own court to deal with disputes within the Jewish community, and later documents confirm the similar protection and privileges as had been given to the Ephesian Jews.[8]

4. Sources for the Jewish communities

Detailed evidence for Jewish communities in the Roman and late Roman period comes from several of the cities of the interior. At Akmonia in Phrygia a synagogue was built in the reign of the emperor Nero with funds provided by Iulia Severa, a prominent member of the civic aristocracy who was connected with the royal families of the Galatians and who married a Roman senator. She herself was a gentile, interested in Jewish cult and religion, and should be classed as one of the God-Fearers. Several epitaphs of the third century AD show that Jews formed an essential part of the governing class of the city and held civic magistracies, although they invoked Jewish curses from the Torah to protect their graves. It is evident that they were assimilated into the non-Jewish community. They used the Greek language and were familiar with their scriptures in the Septuagint translation, not in Hebrew.[9] Hebrew inscriptions from Asia Minor have been found only at Akmonia, Smyrna and Sardis, and all date to late antiquity, when the language enjoyed a strong revival as the Jews asserted their identity against the Christians.[10]

The Acts of the Apostles is the most important source for Jewish communities in Asia Minor in the mid-first century. At Pisidian Antioch the leaders of the local Jewish community were alarmed at the radical evangelistic message preached by St Paul, and turned to the leading men and the pious and wealthy women of the community to support them against the newcomer. Pisidian Antioch was a Roman colony and we can deduce from this that some of the leading Roman settlers there were sympathetic to the Jews, and may have taken part in some of their religious practices, as Iulia Severa did at Akmonia.

At Apamea the importance of the Jewish community is illustrated by coins of the city, struck between AD 200 and 250, which depicted the story of Noah's ark and the flood.[11] A local Jewish gravestone indicates that the man buried there had adhered to the Law of Moses.[12] Inscriptions from the neighbouring city of Eumeneia refer to the worship of angels, a characteristic of Asia Minor Judaism,[13] and also show close links between the local Christian and Jewish communities during the third century AD. In the mid 4th century a church council held at Laodicea anathematized heretical Christians who followed Jewish ways.[14] On the other hand in Smyrna in AD 250 the Jews of the city at the festival of *Purim* joined with pagans worshipping Dionysus in attacking and reviling the Christian bishop Pionius, as he was arrested and put to death by the Roman proconsul.[15] Thus the relationships between Jewish, Christian and pagan groups in the period before the 4th century were fluid, and depended on local circumstances.

Some of the most important evidence for Jews in Asia Minor dates to the 4th and 5th centuries AD. Excavations at Sardis have shown that one wing of the city gymnasium was converted into a basilica for Jewish worship, thus creating one of the largest synagogues known from antiquity, capable of holding up to a thousand persons. The interior building was elaborately decorated with marble paneling and mosaic floors, which had been paid for by individual worshippers. These include both Jews and God-Fearers (*theosebeis)*. The latter were sympathetic non-Jews who attended worship in the synagogues. There is evidence for several building phases at the Sardis synagogue, which were originally dated by the excavators between the late second and the fourth centuries AD.[16] More recent studies indicate that the wing of the gymnasium was not converted for use as a synagogue before the fourth century.[17]

The most important Jewish inscription yet found in Asia Minor comes from Aphrodisias in Caria.[18] Two related texts have been carved on a tall marble slab, which served as the door-jamb at the entrance to a building. The inscription is hard to interpret but the earlier inscription appears to be the dedication of a memorial building by 'the members of the dekany of the students of the law, also

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known as those who continually praise God', a select group of members of the community who sang the praises of the dead. The longer second text simply consists of a list of names, possibly those who contributed to the cost of the building. The most striking thing about both lists is that they contained both Jews (*Ioudaioi*), and God-Fearers (*theosebeis*), the same categories as are found at the Sardis synagogue, and clearly distinguished between the two groups. God-Fearers are also associated with Jews in Syria, Asia Minor, the Black Sea and the Aegean regions as early as the first century AD. We thus see that the Jews attracted many non-Jewish worshippers to their synagogues and there was a significant common ground between Jewish and gentile religious beliefs. The Aphrodisias inscription provides a total of ninety Jews and sixty-five God-Fearers, listing their names and often their professions. It is thus by far the most explicit documentary source for the social composition of a Jewish community in Asia Minor. The date of the texts are controversial, but strong arguments favour a date in the 4th or 5th rather than the 2nd or 3rd centuries.[19]

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1. Josephus, *AntJud* 12, 147-53.

2. P. Gauthier, *Nouvelles inscriptions de Sardes* II (Paris 1989), 13-45.

3. Cicero, *Pro Flacco* 68-69.

4. Josephus, *AntJud* 17, 162-172.

5. E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish people in the Age of Jesus Christ (175BC – AD 135),* English edition revised and edited by G. Vermes, F. Millar and M. Goodman vol. III.1 (Edinburgh 1986), 17-36.

6. W. Ameling, 'Die jüdischen Gemeinden im antiken Kleinasien', in R. Jütte and A. P. Kustermann (eds.), *Jüdischen Gemeinden und Organisationsformen von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart* (1996), 29-55.

7. Josephus, *AntJud* 14, 223-30, 234, 239-40, 262-4 and 16, 167-8, 172-3.

8. Josephus, *AntJud* 14, 235, 259-61 and 16, 171.

9. S. Mitchell, *Anatolia. Land, Men, and Gods in Asia Minor* II (Oxford 1993), 35.

10. Akmonia *MAMA* VI, 334; Sardis, P.R. Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor* (Cambridsge 1991), 44.

11. E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish people in the Age of Jesus Christ (175BC – AD 135),* English edition revised and edited by G. Vermes, F. Millar and M. Goodman vol. III.1 (Edinburgh 1986), 28-30.

12. *MAMA* VI, 231.

13. L. Robert, *Hellenica* 11/12 (Paris 1960), 429-35; A.R.R. Sheppard, 'Pagan cults of angels in Roman Asia Minor', *Talanta* 12/13 (1980-81), 77-100; S. Mitchell, 'The cult of theos hypsistos between pagans, Jews, and Christians', in P. Athanassiadi and M. Frede (eds.), *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford 1999), 102-4.

14. S. Mitchell, *Anatolia. Land, Men, and Gods in Asia Minor* II (Oxford 1993), 35 n. 201.

15. *Life of Pionius* 3.6 (ed. H. Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*). See R. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (London 1985).

16. G.M.A. Hanfmann, *Sardis from Prehistoric to Roman Times* (Harvard 1983); P. Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor* (Cambridge 1991), 40-54.

17. H. Botermann, *Zeitschrift für neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 81 (1990), 103-21.

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18. J. Reynolds and R. Tannenbaum, *Jews and Godfearers at Aphrodisias* (Cambridge Philological Society, Suppl. Vol. 12,1987).

19. See M. Williams, ' The Jes and God-Fearers inscription from Aphrodisias – a case of patriarchal interference in early 3rd century Caria?', *Historia* 41 (1992), 297-310.

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