

# The Jews of Egypt in Antiquity

Malka Z. Simkovich  
Torah in Motion  
January-February 2022  
Class 2: Elephantine and Leontopolis

## The Populousness of Diasporan Jewry in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE

### Josephus, *Antiquities*, 14.7.2.

And this same Strabo in another passage testifies that at the time when Sulla crossed over to Greece to make war on Mithridates, and sent Lucullus to put down the revolt of our nation in Cyrene,<sup>b</sup> the habitable world was filled with Jews, for he writes as follows. “There were four classes in the state of Cyrene; the first consisted of citizens, the second of farmers, the third of resident aliens (metics), and the fourth of Jews. This people has already made its way into every city, and it is not easy to find any place in the habitable world which has not received this nation and in which it has not made its power felt. And it has come about that Cyrene, which had the same rulers as Egypt, has imitated it in many respects, particularly in notably encouraging and aiding the expansion of the organized groups of Jews, which observe the national Jewish laws. In Egypt, for example, territory has been set apart for a Jewish settlement, and in Alexandria a great part of the city has been allocated to this nation. And an ethnarch of their own has been installed, who governs the people and adjudicates suits and supervises contracts and ordinances, just as if he were the head of a sovereign state. And so this nation has flourished in Egypt because the Jews were originally Egyptians and because those who left that country made their homes nearby, and they migrated to Cyrene because this country bordered on the kingdom of Egypt, as did Judaea—or rather, it formerly belonged to that kingdom.” These are Strabo’s own words.

### Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 14.7.2: (late 1<sup>st</sup> century CE)

And let no one wonder that there was so much wealth in our temple, since all the Jews throughout the habitable earth, and those that worshipped God, nay, even those of Asia and Europe, sent their contributions to it, and this from very ancient times. Nor is the largeness of these sums without its attestation; nor is that greatness owing to our vanity, as raising it without ground to so great a height; but there are many witnesses to it, and particularly Strabo of Cappadocia, who says thus: "Mithridates sent to Cos, and took the money which queen Cleopatra had deposited there, as also eight hundred talents belonging to the Jews." Now we have no public money but only what appertains to God; and it is evident that the Asian Jews removed this money out of fear of Mithridates; for it is not probable that those of Judea, who had a strong city and temple, should send their money to Cos; nor is it likely that the Jews who are inhabitants of Alexandria should do so neither, since they were ill no fear of Mithridates. And Strabo himself bears witness to the same thing in another place, that at the same time that Sylla passed over into Greece, in order to fight against Mithridates, he sent Lucullus to put an end to a sedition that our nation, of whom the habitable earth is full, had raised in Cyrene; where he speaks thus: "There were four classes of men among those of Cyrene; that of citizens, that of husbandmen, the third of strangers, and the fourth of Jews. Now these Jews are already gotten into all cities; and it is hard to find a place in the habitable earth that hath not admitted this tribe of men, and is not possessed by them; and it hath come to pass that Egypt and Cyrene, as having the same governors, and a great number of other nations, imitate their way of living, and maintain great bodies of these Jews in a peculiar manner, and grow up to greater prosperity with them, and make use of the same laws with that nation also.

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Accordingly, the Jews have places assigned them in Egypt, wherein they inhabit, besides what is peculiarly allotted to this nation at Alexandria, which is a large part of that city. There is also an ethnarch allowed them, who governs the nation, and distributes justice to them, and takes care of their contracts, and of the laws to them belonging, as if he were the ruler of a free republic. In Egypt, therefore, this nation is powerful, because the Jews were originally Egyptians, and because the land wherein they inhabit, since they went thence, is near to Egypt. They also removed into Cyrene, because that this land adjoined to the government of Egypt, as well as does Judea, or rather was formerly under the same government." And this is what Strabo says.

## I. Elephantine<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Papyrus B 19 TAD A4.7 Cowley 30 Sachau Plates 1–2 November 25, 407 BCE

To our Lord Bagavahya governor of Judah, your servants Jedaniah and his colleagues the priests who are in Elephantine the fortress. The welfare of our lord may the God of Heaven seek after abundantly at all times, and favor may He grant you before Darius the king and the princes more than now a thousand times, and long life may He give you, and happy and strong may you be at all times. Now, your servant Jedaniah and his colleagues thus say:

In the month of Tammuz, year 15 of Darius the king, when Arsames had departed and gone to the king, the priests of the god Khnub who are in Elephantine the fortress, in agreement with Vidranga who was Chief here, (said), saying: “The Temple of YHW the God which is in Elephantine the fortress let them remove from there.” Afterwards, that Vidranga, the wicked, a letter sent to Naphaina his son, who was Troop Commander in Syene the fortress, saying: “The Temple which is in Elephantine the fortress let them demolish.”

Afterwards, Naphaina led the Egyptians with the other troops. They came to the fortress of Elephantine with their implements, broke into that Temple, demolished it to the ground, and the pillars of stone which were there – they smashed them. Moreover, it happened (that the) 5 gateways of stone, built of hewn stone, which were in that Temple, they demolished. And their standing doors, and the hinges of those doors, (of) bronze, and the roof of wood of cedar – all (of these) which, with the rest of the fittings and other (things), which were three – all (of these) with fire they burned. But the basins of gold and silver and the (other) things which were in that Temple - all (of these) they took and made their own.

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<sup>1</sup> There are two versions of the first letter; both are translated by Betzalel Porten in Porten, *The Elephantine Papyri in English: Three Millennia of Cross-Cultural Continuity and Change*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Revised edition (Studies in Near Eastern Archaeology and Civilisation 22; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2011) 141–146; 150–151. All Elephantine translation in this document are taken from Porten.

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And from the days of the king(s) of Egypt our fathers had built that Temple in Elephantine the fortress and when Cambyses entered Egypt – that Temple, built he found it. And the temples of the gods of Egypt, all (of them), they overthrew, but anything in that Temple one did not damage.

And when this had been done (to us), we with our wives and our children sackcloth were wearing and fasting and praying to YHW the Lord of Heaven who let us gloat over that Vidranga, that cur. They removed the fetter from his feet and all goods which he had acquired were lost. And all persons who sought exile for that Temple, all (of them), were killed and we gazed upon them.

Moreover, before this, at the time that this evil was done to us, a letter we sent (to) our lord, and to Jehohanan the High Priest and his colleagues the priests who are in Jerusalem, and to Ostares the brother of Anani and the nobles of the Jews. A letter they did not send us.

Moreover, from the month of Tammuz, year 14 of Darius the king and until this day, we sackcloth are wearing and are fasting; the wives of ours as widow(s) are made; (with) oil (we) do not anoint (ourselves), and wine do not drink. Moreover, from that (time) and until (this) day, year 17 Darius the king, meal-offering and ince[n]se and burnt-offering they did not make in that Temple.

Now, your servants Jedaniah and his colleagues and the Jews, all (of them) citizens of Elephantine, thus say:

If to our lord it is good, take thought of that Temple to (re)build (it) since they do not let us (re)build it. Regard your obliges and your friends who are here in Egypt. May a letter from you be sent to them about the Temple of YHW the God to (re)build it in Elephantine the fortress just as it had been built formerly.

And the meal-offering and the incense and the burnt-offering they will offer on the altar of YHW the God in your name and we shall pray for you at all times – we and our wives and our children and the Jews, all (of them) who are here. If thus they do until that Temple be (re)built, a merit you will have before YHW the God of Heaven more than a person who will offer him burnt-offering and sacrifices (whose) worth is as the worth of silver, 1 thousand talents and about gold. About this we have sent (and) informed (you). Moreover, all the(se) things in a letter we sent in our name to Deliaha and Shelemiah sons of Sanballat governor of Samaria. Moreover, about this which was done to us all of us Arsames did not know.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> of Marcheshvan, year 17 of Darius the king.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Porten, *The Elephantine Papyri in English*, 139, 139–144, 150–151.

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## 2. Papyrus B 21, TAD A4.0 Cowley 32, Sachau Plate 4 Shortly After 407 BCE

Memorandum. What Bagavahya and Delaiah said to me. Memorandum. Saying, “Let it be for you in Egypt to say (ERASURE: bef) (ERASURE: to me about) before Arsames about the Altar-house of the God of (ERASURE: Heav) Jeaven which in Elephantine the fortress built was formerly before Cambyses (and) which Vidranga, that wicked (man) demolished in year 14 of Darius the king: to (re)build it on its site as it was formerly and the meal-offering and the incense they shall offer upon that altar just as formerly was done.”

## 3. Elephantine, Passover Letter, 419 BCE; (Sachau Plate 6)

[To] my [brethren Yedo]niah and his colleagues the [J]ewish gar[rison], your brother Hanan[iah]. The welfare of my brothers may God [seek at all times]. Now, this year, the fifth year of King Darius, word was sent from the king to Arsa[m]es saying, “Authorize a festival of unleavened bread for the [Jen]ish [garrison]”. So do you count fou[r]teen days of the month of Nisan and] obs[er]ve *the passover*, and from the 15th to the 21st day of [Nisan observe the festival of unleavened bread]. Be (ritually) clean and take heed. [Do n]o work [on the 15th or the 21st day, no]r drink [beer, nor eat] anything

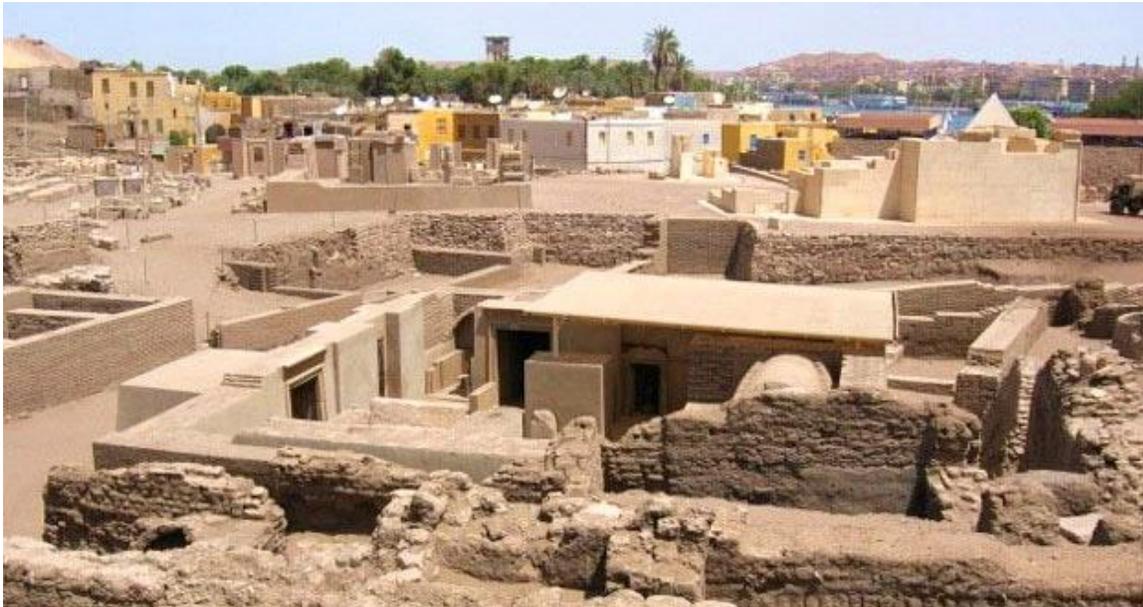
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[in] which the[re is] leaven [from the 14th at] sundown until the 21st of Nis[an]. For seven days it shall not be seen among you. Do not br[ing] it into your dwellings but seal (it) up between these date[s]. By order of King Darius. To] my brethren Yedoniah and the Jewish garrison, your brother Hanani[ah].

(<http://www.ancientneareast.net/elephantine-papyri/>)

The excavation:



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## II. The Land of Onias / Leontopolis / Tel El Yehudiyeh



### 1. Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 7.10.2–3:

Now Lupus did then govern Alexandria, who presently sent Caesar word of this commotion; who having in suspicion the restless temper of the Jews for innovation, and being afraid lest they should get together again, and persuade some others to join with them, gave orders to Lupus to demolish that Jewish temple which was in the region called Onion, and was in Egypt, which was built and had its denomination from the occasion following: Onias, the son of Simon, one of the Jewish high priests fled from Antiochus the king of Syria, when he made war with the Jews, and came to Alexandria; and as Ptolemy received him very kindly, on account of hatred to Antiochus, he assured him, that if he would comply with his proposal, he would bring all the Jews to his assistance; and when the king agreed to do it so far as he was able, he desired him to give him leave to build a temple somewhere in Egypt, and to worship God according to the customs of his own country; for that the Jews would then be so much readier to fight against Antiochus who had laid waste the temple at Jerusalem, and that they would then come to him with greater good-will; and that, by granting them liberty of conscience, very many of them would come over to him.

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So Ptolemy complied with his proposals, and gave him a place one hundred and eighty furlongs distant from Memphis. That Nomos was called the Nomos of Heliopolis, where Onias built a fortress and a temple, not like to that at Jerusalem, but such as resembled a tower. He built it of large stones to the height of sixty cubits; he made the structure of the altar in imitation of that in our own country, and in like manner adorned with gifts, excepting the make of the candlestick, for he did not make a candlestick, but had a [single] lamp hammered out of a piece of gold, which illuminated the place with its rays, and which he hung by a chain of gold; but the entire temple was encompassed with a wall of burnt brick, though it had gates of stone. The king also gave him a large country for a revenue in money, that both the priests might have a plentiful provision made for them, and that God might have great abundance of what things were necessary for his worship. Yet did not Onias do this out of a sober disposition, but he had a mind to contend with the Jews at Jerusalem, and could not forget the indignation he had for being banished thence. Accordingly, he thought that by building this temple he should draw away a great number from them to himself. There had been also a certain ancient prediction made by [a prophet] whose name was Isaiah, about six hundred years before, that this temple should be built by a man that was a Jew in Egypt. And this is the history of the building of that temple.

## 2. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 13.62–73

Now the son of the high priest Onias, who had the same name as his father, having fled to King Ptolemy surnamed Philometor, was living in Alexandria, as we have said before; and seeing that Judaea was being ravaged by the Macedonians and their kings, and desiring to acquire for himself eternal fame and glory, he determined to send to King Ptolemy and Queen Cleopatra and request of them authority to build a temple in Egypt similar to that at Jerusalem, and to appoint Levites and priests of his own race. In this desire he was encouraged chiefly by the words of the prophet Isaiah, who had lived more than six hundred years before and had foretold that a temple to the Most High God was surely to be built in Egypt by a Jew.

Being, therefore, excited by these words, Onias wrote the following letter to Ptolemy and Cleopatra. “Many and great are the services which I have rendered you in the course of the war, with the help of God, when I was in Coele-Syria, and Phoenicia, and when I came with the Jews to Leontopolis in the nome of Heliopolis and to other places where our nation is settled; and I found that most of them have temples, contrary to what is proper, and that for this reason they are ill-disposed towards one another, as is also the case with the Egyptians because of the multitude of their temples and their varying opinions about the forms of worship; and I have found a most suitable place in the fortress called after Bubastis-of-the-Fields, which abounds in various kinds of trees and is full of sacred animals, wherefore I beg you to permit me to cleanse this temple, which belongs to no one and is in ruins, and to build a temple to the Most High God in the likeness of that at Jerusalem and with the same dimensions, on behalf of you and your wife and children, in order that the Jewish inhabitants of Egypt may be able to come together there in mutual harmony and serve your

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interests. For this indeed is what the prophet Isaiah foretold, “There shall be an altar in Egypt to the Lord God,” and many other such things did he prophesy concerning this place.”

This, then, is what Onias wrote to King Ptolemy. And one may get a notion of the king’s piety and that of his sister and wife Cleopatra from the letter which they wrote in reply, for they placed the blame for the sin and transgression against the Law on the head of Onias, writing the following reply: “King Ptolemy and Queen Cleopatra to Onias, greeting. We have read your petition asking that it be permitted you to cleanse the ruined temple in Leontopolis in the nome of Heliopolis, called Bubastic-of-the-Fields. We wonder, therefore, whether it will be pleasing to God that a temple be built in a place so wild and full of sacred animals. But since you say that the prophet Isaiah foretold this long ago, we grant your request if this is to be in accordance with the Law, so that we may not seem to have sinned against God in any way.”

And so Onias took over the place and build a temple and an altar to God similar to that at Jerusalem, but smaller and poorer. But it has not seemed to me necessary to write about its dimensions and its vessels now, for they have already been described in the seventh book of my Jewish War. And Onias found some Jews of his own kind, and priests and Levites to minister there. Concerning this temple, however, we have already said enough.



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### 3. Mishnah Menahot 13:10:

יג. הרי עלי עולה, יקריבנה במקדש; ואם הקריבה בבית נחוניו, לא יצא. שאקריבה בבית נחוניו, יקריבנה במקדש; ואם הקריבה בבית נחוניו, יצא. רבי שמעון אומר, אין זו עולה. הרי אני נזיר, יגלה במקדש; אם גילה בבית נחוניו, לא יצא. הריני נזיר שאגלה בבית נחוניו, יגלה במקדש; ואם גילה בבית נחוניו, יצא. רבי שמעון אומר, אין זה נזיר. כוהנים ששימשו בבית נחוניו, לא ישמשו במקדש בירושלים, ואין צריך לומר דבר אחר, שנאמר "אך, לא יעלו כוהני הבמות, אל מזבח ה', בירושלים: כי אם אכלו מצות, בתוך אחיהם) "מלכים ב כג, ט: (הרי הן כבעלי מומין-- חולקין ואוכלין, אבל לא מקריבין.

[If a man said,] 'I take upon myself to offer a burnt-offering, he must offer it in the Temple; and if he offered it in the Temple of Onias, he has not fulfilled his obligation. [If he said,] 'I take upon myself to offer a burnt-offering but I will offer it in the Temple of Onias'. He must offer it in the Temple, yet if he offered it in the Temple of Onias he has fulfilled his obligation. R. Simeon says, such is no burnt-offering. [If a man said,] 'I will be a Nazirite'. He must bring his offerings in the Temple; and if he brought them in the Temple of Onias he has not fulfilled his obligation. [If he said,] I will be a Nazirite but I will bring my offerings in the Temple of Onias'. He must bring them in the Temple, yet if he brought them in the Temple of Onias he has fulfilled his obligation. R. Simeon says, such a one is not a Nazirite.

[trans. Instonebrewer.com/rabbinictraditions]

### 4. Bavli Talmud, Menahot 109a:

ואף רבי יוחנן סבר לה להא דרב המנונא דאמר רבה בר בר חנה אמר רבי יוחנן הרי עלי עולה שאקריבנה בבית חוניו והקריבה בארץ ישראל יצא וענוש כרת תניא נמי הכי הרי עלי עולה שאקריבנה במדבר והקריבה בעבר הירדן יצא וענוש כרת:

R. Johanan is also of the same opinion as R. Hamnuna; for Rabbah b. Bar Hanah said in the name of R. Johanan, [If a man said,] 'I take upon myself to offer a burnt-offering but I will offer it in the Temple of Onias', and he offered it in the Land of Israel, he has fulfilled his obligation but he has incurred the penalty of kareth. There has also been taught [a Baraitha] to the same effect: [If a man said,] 'I take upon myself to offer a burnt-offering but I will offer it in the wilderness', and he offered it beyond the Jordan, he has fulfilled his obligation but he has incurred the penalty of kareth.

[Translation: Soncino Talmud]