How Did Jews in the Ancient World Understand Diaspora?

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Yedida K. Stillman Lecture
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I. The Judean Perspective

1. 2 Maccabees 1:1–9

The Jews in Jerusalem and those in the land of Judea, to their Jewish kindred in Egypt, greetings and true peace. May God do good to you, and may he remember his covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, his faithful servants. May he give you all a heart to worship him and to do his will with a strong heart and a willing spirit. May he open your heart to his law and his commandments, and may he bring peace. May he hear your prayers and be reconciled to you, and may he not forsake you in time of evil. We are now praying for you here. In the reign of Demetrius, in the one hundred and sixty-ninth year, we Jews wrote to you, in the critical distress that came upon us in those years after Jason and his company revolted from the holy land and the kingdom and burned the gate and shed innocent blood. We prayed to the Lord and were heard, and we offered sacrifice and grain-offering, and we lit the lamps and set out the loaves. And now see that you keep the festival of booths in the month of Chislev, in the one hundred and eighty-eighth year.

2. 2 Maccabees 1:10b–2:18, c. 103 or 102 BCE

The people in Jerusalem and in Judaea and the Council of Elders and Judas to Aristobulus, tutor of King Ptolemy and member of the stock of the anointed priests, and to the Jews in Egypt, greeting and wishes for health. Having been saved by God from great perils, we thank Him greatly as befits men who war against a king, for God Himself cast way those who made war on the Holy City...Inasmuch as we are about to celebrate, on the twenty-fifth of Kislev, the Purification of the Temple, we thought we ought to let you know, so that you, too, might celebrate it as when Nehemiah, the builder of the temple and the altar, brought sacrifices....

When our forefathers were being carried off to Persia, the pious priests of that time secretly took some fire from the altar and hid it in a pit which was like a dry well and shut it up securely so that the place remained unknown to all. Many years went by, and then, in God's own time, Nehemiah received his commission from the king of Persia and sent the descendants of the priests who had hidden the fire to recover it. When they reported that ... they had found no fire but a viscous liquid, Nehemiah ordered them to draw it up and bring it to him. After the sacrificial offerings had been placed upon the altar, Nehemiah ordered the priests to sprinkle the liquid over the firewood and over the offerings laid upon it. When that had been done, after a while in the sun, which had been covered by clouds, began to shine, and a great fire blazed up, to the astonishment of all.

As the sacrifice was being consumed, the priests and the whole assemblage uttered a prayer, in which Jonathan led and the rest, following Nehemiah, responded. The prayer was as follows: "LORD, LORD, God, creator of all, awesome and powerful and just and merciful, our sole good king, our sole provider, the sole just One Who is almighty and eternal, the preserver of Israel from every exile, the One Who chose and sanctified the patriarchs! Accept our sacrifice for the sake of all Your people Israel, and guard Your portion and make it holy. Gather together our dispersion. Free those who are enslaved among the nations. Look upon those who have been despised and abominated, and let the nations know that You are our God. Put to torment the oppressors and the arrogant perpetrators of outrage. Plant Your people in Your holy Place, as Moses said." The priests went on singing hymns to the accompaniment of lyres. When the sacrificial offerings had been consumed, Nehemiah ordered that they pour the remaining liquid

too, . . . large boulders. As soon as the command was carried out, a flame blazed up, and when the fire on the altar lit up in turn, . . . was consumed. The news of the phenomenon spread. The king of the Persians received the report that the liquid had been found in the place where the priests being led into exile had hidden the fire and that by means of it Nehemiah and his followers had burned the sacrificial offerings. After verifying the phenomenon, the king had the place fenced in and declared it holy. The king took large sums of money and distributed them to Nehemiah and his followers. Nehemiah and his followers called the liquid "nephthar," which means "purification," but it is commonly called "nephthai."
In our documents we find that it was Jeremiah the prophet who commanded those who were being led into exile to take some of the fire, as we have just told you. They also show that the prophet gave the Torah to those who were being led into exile and admonished them not to forget the LORD's commandments and not to let their minds be led astray when they saw gold and silver images and the ornaments upon them. With other words to the same effect, he exhorted them not to let the Torah depart from their hearts. The text also said that the prophet, on receiving a divine revelation, ordered that the tabernacle and the ark should go with him. It went on to say that Jeremiah went out ot the mountain which Moses ascended to see the heritage promised by God. There, Jeremiah found a cave chamber and brought into it the tabernacle and the ark and the incense altar and blocked up the entrance. Some of those who had come along when back to mark the path, but they could not find it. When Jeremiah found out, he rebuked them, saying, "the place will remain unknown until God gathers His people together in the Age of Mercy. At that time the LORD will bring these things to light again, and the glory of the LORD and the cloud will be seen, as they were over Moses and as Solomon, too, requested, in order that the Place should be greatly sanctified." We are also told that Solomon in his wisdom offered a sacrifice in honor of the dedication and completion of the temple. Just as Moses prayed to the LORD and fire came down from heaven and devoured the sacrifices, so Solomon prayed, and fire came down and consumed the burnt offering. . . (And Moses said, "On account of . . . the sin offering. . . was consumed."). . . So, too, Solomon celebrated the eight days.

The same account is given also in the records and the memoirs of the time of Nehemiah, and also that Nehemiah founded a library and collected the books about the kings and those of prophets and the books of David and the letters of Persian kings on dedicatory gifts to the temple. In the same manner, Judas reassembled for us the books scattered in the course of the recent war, and we have them. If you have need of them, send messengers to fetch them. As we said, we write you in asmuch as we are about to celebrate the Purification. Please celebrate the days. God, Who saved His entire people and restored the heritage to us all...also...the kingdom and the priesthood and the sanctification, as He promised in the Torah. For we hope in God, that He will speedily have mercy upon us and gather us together from the lands under the heavens to His holy Place, for He has indeed delivered us from great evils and has purified His Place.

3. Ben Sira Prologue

Many great teachings have been given to us through the Law and the Prophets and the others that followed them, and for these we should praise Israel for instruction and wisdom. Now, those who read the scriptures must not only themselves understand them, but must also as lovers of learning be able through the spoken and written word to help the outsiders. So my grandfather Jesus, who had devoted himself especially to the reading of the Law and the Prophets and the other books of our ancestors, and had acquired considerable proficiency in them, was himself also led to write something pertaining to instruction and wisdom, so that by becoming familiar also with his book those who love learning might make even greater progress in living according to the law.

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You are invited therefore to read it with goodwill and attention, and to be indulgent in cases where, despite our diligent labour in translating, we may seem to have rendered some phrases imperfectly. For what was originally expressed in Hebrew does not have exactly the same sense when translated into another language. Not only this book, but even the Law itself, the Prophecies, and the rest of the books differ not a little when read in the original. When I came to Egypt in the thirty-eighth year of the reign of Euergetes and stayed for some time, I found opportunity for no little instruction. It seemed highly necessary that I should myself devote some diligence and labour to the translation of this book. During that time I have applied my skill day and night to complete and publish the book for those living abroad who wished to gain learning and are disposed to live according to the law.

II. The Diasporan Perspective

1. The Letter of Aristeas 121–124

I have explained to you in summary form, brother Philocrates, as much as was needful concerning these matters, and we will next expound details of the translation. Eleazar selected men of the highest merit and of excellent education due to the distinction of their parentage; they had not only mastered the Jewish literature; but had made a serious study of that of the Greeks as well. They were therefore well qualified for the embassy, and brought it to fruition as occasion demanded; they had a tremendous natural facility for the negotiations and questions arising from the Law, with the middle way as their commendable ideal; they forsook any uncouth and uncultured attitude of mind; in the same way they rose above conceit and contempt of other people, and instead engaged in discourse and listening to and answering each and every one, as is meet and right. They all observed these aims, and went further in wishing to excel each other in them; they were, one and all, worthy of their leader and his outstanding qualities. It was possible to perceive how inseparable was their attachment to Eleazar, and his to them. In addition to writing to the king concerning their reestablishment, he urged Andreas to take many active steps to this end, asking him to collaborate to the utmost extent of our ability.

2. Philo of Alexandria

Flaccus, 7.46–47

For no one country can contain the whole Jewish nation, by reason of its populousness; on which account they frequent all the most prosperous and fertile countries of Europe and Asia, whether islands or continents, looking indeed upon the holy city as their metropolis in which is erected the sacred temple of the most high God, but accounting those regions which have been occupied by their fathers, and grandfathers, and great grandfathers, and still more remote ancestors, in which they have been born and brought up, as their country; and there are even some regions to which they came the very moment that they were originally settled, sending a colony of their people to do a pleasure to the founders of the colony. And there was reason to fear lest all the populace in every country, taking what was done in Egypt as a model and as an excuse, might insult those Jews who were their fellow citizens, by introducing new regulations with respect to their synagogues and their national customs.

***On the Confusion of Tongues*, 17.77–78**

For this reason all the wise men mentioned in the books of Moses are represented as sojourners, for their souls are sent down from heaven upon earth as to a colony; and on account of their fondness for contemplation, and their love of learning, they are accustomed to migrate to the terrestrial nature. Since

therefore having taken up their abode among bodies, they behold all the mortal objects of the outward senses by their means, they then subsequently return back from thence to the place from which they set out at first, looking upon the heavenly country in which they have the rights of citizens as their native land, and as the earthly abode in which they dwell for a while as in a foreign land. For to those who are sent to be the inhabitants of a colony, the country which has received them is in place of their original mother country; but still the land which has sent them forth remains to them as the house to which they desire to return.

Embassy to Gaius, 22.155–156:

Therefore, he knew that they had synagogues, and that they were in the habit of visiting them, and most especially on the sacred sabbath days, when they publicly cultivate their national philosophy. He knew also that they were in the habit of contributing sacred sums of money from their first fruits and sending them to Jerusalem by the hands of those who were to conduct the sacrifices. (157) But he never removed them from Rome, nor did he ever deprive them of their rights as Roman citizens, because he had a regard for Judaea

3. Josephus Flavius, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 14.7.2:

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. 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.