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"We Beg You, Our King!": Some Reflections on the Jews in Persian and Ptolemaic Egypt

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“WE BEG YOU, OUR KING!”¹

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE JEWS IN PERSIAN AND PTOLEMAIC EGYPT

Peter C. Nadig

Due to its proximity to Canaan, the fertile Nile delta had always been a breadbasket for the house of Israel. Even the biblical patriarchs went there in time of need. Later tradition merged the long sojourn of the children of Israel into a captivity of over four hundred years that finally resulted in the exodus. Later, the law given on Mount Sinai expressed the ideal of separating the covenant people from Egypt and its culture and even prohibited emigration from Canaan to Egypt. Notwithstanding this restriction² and also a warning of the prophet Jeremiah,³ Egypt maintained a remarkable attraction for the people who lived in the area settled by the tribe of Judah. They mostly came as mercenaries or military settlers in order to serve the current ruler of the land—the Pharaoh, Persian Great King, or Ptolemaic *basileus*. One of the earliest references to such activities can be dated back to the seventh or early sixth century, according to the *Letter of Aristeas*.⁴ Immigration was intensified after the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem (597 B.C.), when many Jewish military leaders went to Egypt with a large retinue, as can be gleaned from a statement of Jeremiah.⁵

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1. CPJ I 37 (= P. Magd. 3; P. Enteux. 59) ll. 29–31.
 2. Deuteronomy 17:16: “But he [the king] shall not multiply horses to himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt, to the end that he should multiply horses: forasmuch as the Lord has said unto you, Ye shall henceforth return no more that way.” Cf. Exodus 13:17; Jeremiah 42:19.
 3. Jeremiah 42:14–22, 43:2.
 4. Letter of Aristeas 13: “And even before this time large numbers of Jews had come into Egypt with the Persian, and in an earlier period still others had been sent to Egypt to help Psammetichus in his campaign against the kings of the Ethiopians.” Cf. Joseph M. Modrzejewski, *The Jews of Egypt: From Rameses II to Emperor Hadrian*, trans. Robert Cornman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995), 21–26; originally published as *Les Juifs d’Egypte, de Ramsès à Hadrien* (Paris: Editions Armand Colin, 1992).
 5. Jeremiah 43:4–7.

The present paper shall examine the relationship between the Jews and the rulers of Egypt from the sixth to the first century B.C.—namely the Persians and the Ptolemies. Here some examples will be singled out to examine the question of how the Jews dealt with royal authority and to what measure they could exercise their religion.

After the conquest by the Persian Great King Cambyses in 525 B.C., Egypt became a satrapy of the Persian Empire. Unlike the earlier rulers of Egypt, the Great King did not reside in the country but left a satrap to administer it. Despite their absence, the Persian kings subsequently tried to implement themselves as Pharaohs, as can be seen in their Egyptian royal titles and the building programs they promoted. To a large extent the conquerors even adopted the Egyptian civil administration. In this context it is noteworthy that the Persian administrative language, Aramaic, was also the everyday language of the Jews. However, this language never succeeded in establishing itself as a lingua franca in Egypt—as was the case with Greek at the time of the Ptolemies. Despite the concessions made by the Persians, they were distrusted by the Egyptians, who couldn't imagine Persian kings in the traditional ritual role of the Pharaoh.⁶

However, contrary to the native Egyptian population, the Jews welcomed the Great King and openly acknowledged his rule. Their positive attitude towards the Persian administration and the king can be easily understood in light of the conquest of Babylon of 539 B.C., which ended Jewish exile. The special tolerance that the Persians in return extended to the Jews can be demonstrated by the existence of a Jewish temple dedicated to YHW (Yaho) on Elephantine Island at the southern Egyptian border.⁷ We know about it through some papyri from the late fifth century B.C.; however, no physical remains of the building are extant. Moreover, some of these Aramaic papyri are named and dated after the years of King Darius II (424–404 B.C.).⁸ Two of these, the extant draft preserved in two versions of a letter to Bagavahya, the governor of Judah in 407 B.C., hint at the age of this shrine: “Our ancestors built that temple in Fort Elephantine back during the time of the kings of Egypt, and when Cambyses came into Egypt, he found it already built. They pulled down the temples of the Egyptian gods, but no one damaged anything in that temple.”⁹

6. Cf. G. Hölbl, “Zur Legitimation der Ptolemäer als Pharaonen,” in *Selbstverständnis und Realität: Akten des Symposiums zur Ägyptischen Königsideologie in Mainz*, 15–17 June 1995, Ägypten und Altes Testament (ÄAT) 36,1, ed. R. Gundlach and C. Raedler (Mainz: Wiesbaden, 1995), 21–22.

7. The temple may have had a certain protection through the Great King and some toleration by the priestly authorities in Jerusalem. The precise reasons for the construction of this temple, which seems to have been built as early as the seventh century B.C. by military colonists, can only be partially determined and depend on the possible time of its construction. The reforms of King Josiah of Judah had fixed the unity of worship in 622 B.C. With that, only one temple could be the right one—the one in Jerusalem. It remains a fact, however, that the shrine in Elephantine temporarily replaced the one in Jerusalem during the Babylonian exile until the Second Temple took up its service in 515 B.C. Yet the cult of Elephantine continued. Deviations to the official cult seem to be evident in the so-called Passover Papyrus. Cf. Modrzejewski, *Jews of Egypt*, 141–153.

8. “Darius the King,” cf. Bezalel Porten and Ada Yadeni, *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt I, Letters* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1986) (= TAD), A4.1 (B13) l. 2; A4.5 (B17) l. 2; A4.7 (B19) ll. 3–419, 21, 30; A4.8 (B20) ll. 2–4, 19, 29; 4.9 (B21) l. 7.

9. James M. Lindenberger, *Ancient Aramaic and Hebrew Letters*, in Kent H. Richards, ed., *Writings from the Ancient World*, vol. 4 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), No. 34, 67. Cf. TAD, A4.7 (B19) ll. 13–14; A4.8 ll. 12–13.

It becomes very clear through this passage that the temple was there under the Pharaohs—that is, before the Persian conquest. The statement about the destruction of the Egyptian temples by the Persians may be exaggerated, but the leniency towards the Jewish sanctuary on the island is an indication of how the Jews approached the Persian king and proves at the same time that the Persians respected a place of worship built under their predecessors.

Adjacent to the Jewish temple at Elephantine was the Egyptian temple of Khnum, the ram-headed god of the Nile flood, a fact which would eventually prove disastrous for the Jews.¹⁰ This can be explained by the Jews’ sacrifice of rams and sheep. The ram was sacred to Khnum and its use as a sacrificial animal was not only out of the question, but the Jewish proceedings must have been perceived as a massive affront to the religious sensibilities of the Egyptians. Confrontation was inevitable.¹¹

In the year 410 B.C. the priests of Khnum used the absence of the satrap from Egypt to pillage and destroy the Jewish temple. In order to do this they had obviously bribed the local Persian military commander into collusion. The above-mentioned letter to the satrap of Judah, dating from three years after this, narrates not only the course of events but also contains a petition for the rebuilding of the sanctuary. At the same time it becomes clear that the destruction was an isolated incident and not a reflection of a wider anti-Jewish sentiment. Subsequently, a remarkable compromise was reached, with reconstruction linked to the condition that only meal offerings and incense could be offered up. The conciliatory intentions of Persian politics become obvious here—Jews and Egyptians were equally considered.¹² Soon after the destruction of their temple, the Jews of Elephantine had written to the high priest Yehohanan in Jerusalem and also to other Jewish nobles—most likely to get some support for a rebuilding. But no answer came.¹³ This indicates that the religious authorities in the Jewish homeland wished to enforce the demand for a central place of worship as laid out in the Pentateuch and thus had little interest in a temple in the diaspora. For this reason the Jews of Elephantine had addressed their petition to the Persian governor of Judah and also to the sons of the satrap of Samaria. They again expressed their loyalty to the Persian administration and stated their lack of understanding as to why a sanctuary built

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10. For the building cf. Walter Niederberger, Elephantine XX. *Der Chnumtempel Nektanebos II: Architektur und baugeschichtliche Einordnung* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1999). How far any tensions between Egyptians and Jews on Elephantine reached back in the long run is not documented. The first signs stem from the time prior to the destruction of the temple.
 11. Egyptians were normally permitted to eat the meat of sheep, drink their milk, and use their skins, but to priests this was forbidden, and it was also taboo to bring wool into a temple. This may perhaps explain the aloof attitude of the Egyptians regarding sheep-breeding. Cf. L. Störk, *Schaf*, LÄ 5:522–24 P. Behrends, *Widder*, LÄ 6:1243–45; C. Strauß-Seeber, *Wolle*, LÄ 6:1285–86.
 12. Lindenberger (cf. note 9), *Ancient Aramaic and Hebrew Letters*, No. 35, 68; Cf. TAD (see note 8) A4.7 (B19) ll. 13–14; A4.8 (B20) ll. 12–13. This is confirmed in another petition by the Jews that explicitly states that “no sheep, ox or goat is to be offered as a burnt offering, but only incense and meal offering” when the temple should be rebuilt. Cf. Lindenberger, *Ancient Aramaic and Hebrew Letters*, No. 36, 69; Cf. TAD A4.7 (B22) ll. 10–11.
 13. Lindenberger, *Ancient Aramaic and Hebrew Letters*, No. 34, 67: “Some time ago, when this evil was done to us, we sent letters to our lord, to Yehohanan the high priest and his colleagues the priests in Jerusalem . . . and to the Judean nobles. None of them ever replied to us.” Cf. TAD A4.7 (B19) ll. 18–19; A4.8 (B20) ll. 16–18.

under the last native kings of Egypt, who had tolerated their religion, was destroyed. Whether the temple was ever rebuilt is not known.

When Alexander the Great liberated Egypt from the Persians in 332 B.C. and was crowned as Pharaoh in Memphis—after his visit to the Oracle of Siwa¹⁴—he was accepted by the Egyptian population. With him the country came under Greek-Macedonian administration and was from then on basically administered in two languages: Greek for the Greek-speaking foreigners and Egyptian for the native Egyptian majority. The Egyptians, partially conditioned by the Persian precedent, tolerated the absence of the king.¹⁵ Following his death in 323 B.C., Alexander's general Ptolemy became satrap of Egypt. When he became king two decades later, Egypt once again had a resident monarch. Since Ptolemy, who as Ptolemy I Soter (306/4–283/2 B.C.) founded the dynasty of the Ptolemies, saw himself in the immediate succession of Alexander, whose body he had interred in Egypt, he emulated Alexander's example by his own coronation in Memphis. As the land was governed by two languages, so was the king's ideology expressed twofold. The Macedonians and Greeks as well as the other foreign nationals saw the Ptolemaic king as a Hellenistic *basileus*. But for the Egyptians, who were attached to their traditions, he was the Pharaoh.¹⁶ At his side was his queen, who in official documents of this time is referred to as Pharaohness (pr-ꜣ.t). The latter, however, constitutes a novelty, which can be explained by the fact that the royal couple was always listed jointly in the royal Ptolemaic titlature.¹⁷

Since the Ptolemies favored immigration and settlement of Jews on a greater scale than their predecessors, the Jewish population in Egypt experienced a steady increase.¹⁸ Significantly,

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14. K. P. Kuhlmann, *Das Ammoneion: Archäologie, Geschichte und Kultpraxis des Orakels von Siwa* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1988), 144, 154.
 15. This applies to Alexander's immediate successors, Philipp III Arrhidaios (323–317) and Alexander IV (317–310/9). For Alexander as Pharaoh see also Hölbl, "Pharaonen," 22–25.
 16. It is important to note that he did not usually appear as a Pharaoh. He may at best have worn pharaonic garb when he was crowned in Memphis or visited Egyptian temples in order to attend religious festivals or functions. He may have even just worn a type of Greek dress blended with pharaonic insignia like a double-crown, which was adorned with the Hellenistic diadem. For some examples of such a depiction in the temple of Edfu cf. É. Chassinat, *Le Temple d'Edfou*, IX, Cairo plate XXXVIII 1929, and X,1, Cairo plate XCIII 1928. Cf. P. Munro, *Die spätägyptischen Totenstelen* (Glückstadt: Verlag J.J. Augustin, 1973), 63. Compare Bernard V. Bothmer, *Egyptian Sculpture of the Late Period: 700 B.C. to A.D. 100*, ed. Elizabeth Riefstahl (Brooklyn: The Brooklyn Museum 1960), No. 138, 178–179. On Ptolemy I Soter see also G. Hölbl, *Geschichte des Ptolemäerreiches: Politik, Ideologie und religiöse Kultur von Alexander dem Großen bis zur römischen Eroberung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994), 69–91, 105–107; 111–112; Hölbl, "Pharaonen," 25–27; Hölbl, *A History of the Ptolemaic Empire* (London: Routledge, 2001), 77–98.
 17. Cf. Hölbl, "Pharaonen," 31–33.
 18. The start was made by Ptolemy I. According to tradition he deported one hundred thousand Jewish prisoners of war after his conquest of Jerusalem, of which he took aside thirty thousand men to serve in the rural garrisons, while enslaving all the others. Ptolemy II Philadelphus later released the slaves. Independent of this singular enforced measure, voluntary immigration to Egypt continued. Cf. Bezalel Bar-Kochva, *Pseudo-Hecateus On the Jews: Legitimizing the Jewish Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 71–91. J. M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan* (323 B.C.E.–117 C.E.) (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 20–22.

the territory of Judah belonged to the Ptolemaic kingdom from 301 to 200 B.C. and was thus directly linked to the Egyptian Diaspora. Since the Ptolemies desired to fill the most important posts in their civil and military administration with Greek-speaking foreigners, the Jews quickly adapted themselves to the use of the Greek language, which helped them raise their status accordingly. This process was strengthened by the translation of the Torah (i.e., Pentateuch)¹⁹ into Greek, as well as the use of this language for prayer and worship. Under the Ptolemies, Jews were counted among the *Hellenes*, the foreigners of Greek tongue. Especially in the countryside they were employed to a greater extent as civil administrators and mercenaries and even served in police functions. The latter certainly was not very conducive to a good relationship between Jews and Egyptians.

Regarding religious worship under the Ptolemaic kings, the following can be noted: the Jews surely must have had some knowledge of the religious traditions of their Egyptian neighbors, but there is no evidence of how they viewed the pharaonic aspect of their Hellenistic king. They can hardly have seen him in line with the Pharaoh of the bondage.²⁰ His function as the head of the Egyptian religion may, therefore, have been of little interest to them because they were not compelled to violate their religion.²¹

A limited insight is given in the documents that can be linked to Jews and that have references to royal titles and administration. They refer as usual to the king and queen as the *basileus* and *basilissa*. Like all other Greek documents they use the same formalities and do not shun common referral to the official cults of deceased and deified rulers.²² Other writings contain petitions (*enteuxeis*) addressed to the king with the plea to receive justice. Those cases were normally dealt with by subofficials but sometimes found their way to the ruler.²³ Some writings express the petitioner's hope that “the king may read it”²⁴ or that he will receive justice through the king's judgment.²⁵

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19. Cf. H. J. Cadbury and M. D. Goodman, “Septuagint,” *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (1996), 1391–92, Modrzejewski, *Jews of Egypt*, 99–104.
 20. The question is, How could they? Pharaoh is one of the most popular anachronisms. The very dating of the Exodus cannot be exactly determined. But it can be said for certain that whenever it took place, the actual word *Pharaoh* had not become the title for the king as it was at the time our version of Exodus came on record (after 1000 B.C.). As early as the Eighteenth dynasty the word *pr-ꜥꜣ* referred to the king's palace and thus synonymously to the king himself. As a title it came into use by Sheshonq I in the twenty-second dynasty (946/45–925, after Jürgen von Beckerath, *Chronologie des pharaonischen Ägypten: Münchener Ägyptologische Studien* Bd. 46 [Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1997], 191). Cf. Jürgen Osing, “Pharao,” *LÄ* 4:1021.
 21. This also applies to the pharaonic aspect as exercised by the Persian Great King.
 22. The following Ptolemaic papyri have dating formula which include the names of the reigning couples as well as their deified parents and eponymous priests: CPJ I 1 (= PCZ 59003); CPJ I 18 (= P. Hib. 96); CPJ I 19 (= P. Petr. 3, 21 (g)); CPJ I 22 (= P. Tebt. III 820); CPJ I 23 (= P. Tebt. III 817); CPJ I 24 (= P. Tebt. III 818); CPJ I 25 (= BGU 1272); CPJ I 127d (= P. Tebt. III 815 col. II recto ll. 1–3); CPJ I 127e (= P. Hib. 90 ll. 1–4).
 23. CPJ I 16 (= PCZ 59618); CPJ I 19 (= P. Petr. 3, 21 [g]); CPJ I 37 (= P. Magd. 3; P. Enteux. 59); CPJ I 38 (= P. Magd. N.S. 18; P. Enteux. 2); CPJ I 127b (= P. Enteux. 29); CPJ I 128 (P. Enteux. 23); CPJ I 129 (= P. Magd. 35).
 24. CPJ I 38 (11. 11–12); (= P. Madg. N.S. 18; P. Enteux. 2).
 25. CPJ I 129 (= P. Magd. 35): “I shall have received justice through you, my king.” Nearly the same formula is in CPJ I 38 (= P. Madg. N.S. 18; P. Enteux. 2); cf. note 1.

The king is also addressed as “impartial saviour of all [men].”²⁶ Other papyri slightly touch on the king’s or queen’s affairs.²⁷

An extraordinary example of the religious tolerance of the Ptolemies towards the Jews can be seen in the activities of Onias, most likely a former high priest from Jerusalem, of whom Flavius Josephus, a Jewish writer of the first century A.D., reports. The erection of another Jewish sanctuary in Egypt in the middle of the second century B.C., under Ptolemy VI, has been attributed to Onias. Parts of its archaeological remains seem to have long been identified in the modern Tell-el-Yahudieh, the ancient Leontopolis, about forty miles north of Cairo.²⁸ Further sources of information²⁹ include some scant references in the rabbinical,³⁰ Jewish-Hellenistic,³¹ and early Christian literature.³² Without going into the exact ramifications, a historical arrangement shall be attempted here. The real identity of Onias does not emerge clearly, since Josephus presents conflicting accounts and seems to confuse father and son.³³

26. CPJ I 38 (11. 11–12); (= P. Madg. N.S. 18; P. Enteux. 2).

27. CPJ I 130 (= P. Tebt. III 793 col. II [Fr. I., recto II] l. 29–31 [about some produce being withheld]): “that the king shall not suffer any loss.” CPJ I 132 (= P. Paris 63; UPZ I 110), see above; CPJ I 134 (= P. Tebt. I 86 ll. 14–31) refers to one Sarapion who holds one aroura of sacred land belonging to the queen (Cleopatra II or III?).

28. Cf. Edouard Naville, *Mound of the Jew and the City of Onias, Bilbeis, Samarod, Abusir, Turkh El Karmus*, EEF 7 (London, 1890), 17–21; W. M. Flinders Petrie, *Hyksos and Israelite Cities* (London 1906), 3, 19–27. For a summary of the earliest relevant studies on the Temple of Leontopolis, cf. L.H. Feldmann, *Josephus and Modern Scholarship (1937–1980)* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1984), 459–463. See also A. P. Zivie, Tell el-Jahudija LÄ 6:321–35; E. S. Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 240–245. For a study on rival Jewish temples, see J. Frey, “Temple and rival Temple—The Cases of Elephantine, Mt. Gerizim, and Leontopolis,” in Beate Ego, Armin Lange, and Peter Pilhofer, eds., *Gemeinde ohne Tempel (Community without Temple): Zur Substituierung und Transformation des Jerusalemer Tempels und seines Kults im Alten Testament, antiken Judentum und frühen Christentum*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 118 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 171–203.

29. It is interesting to note that Philo of Alexandria does not mention the temple in his numerous works.

30. M Menahot 13:10 (for the text see note 48); cf. also M Menahot 109b; Jerusalem Talmud, *Yoma* VI, 3.

31. Sibylline Oracles 5.492–511.

32. Eusebius, *Chronicle (Hieronymi Chronicon and versio Armenia)*, mentions it, though he is basically following Josephus, *Antiquitates judaicae*, in seeing Onias IV as the builder of the temple. Cf. Eusebius, *Hieronymi Chronicon*, ed. R. Helm (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1956), 223F: “Ob quod Onias, filius pontificis Oniae, Aegyptum transmigrans in Heliopolitano pago civitatem nominis sui condidit templo ad similitudinem templi patrii constructo (in *versio Armenia*: ‘. . . in qua templum similitudinem Hierosolymitani aedificabat’).” There is one papyrus from a later time that can be linked to it: CPJ III 520. For a new reading, cf. G. Bohak, “CPJ III, 520: The Egyptian Reaction to Onias’ Temple,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period* 26 (1995): 32–41, who sees some native response to the presence of the Leontopolis temple.

33. For recent studies on the background, see F. Parente, “Onias III’s Death and the Founding of the Temple of Leontopolis,” in *Josephus and the History of the Greco-Roman Period: Essays in Memory of Morton Smith*, ed. F. Parente and J. Sievers (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 69–98; G. Bohak, *Joseph and Asenath and the Jewish Temple in Heliopolis* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996); E. S. Gruen, “The Origins and Objectives of Onias’ Temple,” *Scripta Classica Israelica* 16 (1997): 47–70; J. E. Taylor, “A Second Temple in Egypt: The Evidence for the Zadokite Temple of Onias,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period* 29 (1998): 297–321.

In *A History of the Jewish Wars*, the high priest Onias III flees to Egypt and builds this temple, whereas in *Antiquities of the Jews*, Josephus attributes this deed to his son, Onias IV.³⁴

Fausto Parente has recently offered a convincing analysis of the sources and clarified some of those contradictions. It now appears likely that it was the third Onias who fled to the Nile and constructed the sanctuary.³⁵ The reason for his exile was his deposition as high priest by Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–164 B.C.) in favor of his brother Jason, who received the office through bribery.³⁶ The desecration of the temple in Jerusalem through the machinations of the Seleucid king falls in that period.

Josephus reports that Onias was living in Alexandria for a while before he asked King Ptolemy VI Philometor by letter, and, it is important to note, Queen Cleopatra II as well,³⁷ for permission to build a Jewish temple.³⁸ According to the text, he felt prompted to fulfill the prophecy³⁹ by the prophet Isaiah that states: “In that day shall five cities in the land of Egypt speak the language of

34. In Josephus’s report in *Antiquities of the Jews*, the father of Onias IV died a natural death when Onias IV was still a child and thus too young to succeed his father in the priesthood (12.237). But once he had come of age it was another man, Alcimus, who was invested as high priest in his place for his murdered and unbeloved uncle Menelaus (12.283–88). This prompted the younger Onias to flee to Egypt with an unknown number of followers. Whether this Onias really is the mercenary leader of 145 B.C. is far from certain. Cf. Gruen, “Origins and Objectives,” 59. According to Josephus (*Contra Apionem* 2.52–55) this Onias took up arms and came to the aid of the Queen Cleopatra II against her brother Ptolemy VIII “Physcon.” Ptolemy, however, didn’t dare face the army of Onias but instead forced all the Jews of Alexandria to be assembled at a certain place and ordered them to be trampled to death by his war elephants. But the animals, despite being made drunk for the event, turned against the king’s friends and killed quite a few of them. Due to the intercession of one of his concubines, Ptolemy repented of his plans. It is difficult to assess what really happened. There is proof of an annual festival celebrated by the Alexandrian Jews which commemorated relief from a great danger (Josephus, *Contra Apionem* 2.56). As for the elephant episode, there is a similar story in 3 Maccabees from the time of Ptolemy IV Philopator (222/21–204 B.C.). Here the king had intended the same fate for the Alexandrian Jews. The victims were already driven into the hippodrome, but the elephants miraculously refused to kill them and turned against the royal troops instead. This event also affected the king’s change of heart (3 Maccabees 6:21–22). There has been some discussion as to which of the two accounts is historical or if both events occurred independently from each other. It remains difficult, if not impossible, to narrow both narratives down to the historical truth. For a discussion on both accounts, cf. Modrzejewski, *Jews of Egypt*, 141–53. See also Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 37–39 n. 18 and Peter Schäfer, *Judeophobia: Attitudes towards the Jews in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 218 n. 43. Nothing is known about the fate of Onias after the events of 145 B.C. His interference surely created a precedent. Josephus, who refers to a lost passage by the geographer Strabo, writes that his sons Khelkias and Ananias commanded the troops of Cleopatra III when she went to war against her son Ptolemy IX Soter II from 107 to 102 B.C. She was the daughter of the second Cleopatra. Josephus, however, refers to both generals as sons of the Onias who built the temple. Gruen, “Origins and Objectives,” 59n61, rejects that and rather sees the two generals as sons of the Onias who helped in 145 B.C. Cf. Parente, “Onias III’s Death,” 95, for a summary of the various Josephus accounts.
35. Cf. Parente, “Onias III’s Death,” *passim*.
36. According to 2 Maccabees 4:31–35, which is in fact the only source for this, he was later murdered on behest of Menelaus, who had supplanted Jason. Parente, “Onias III’s Death,” doubts this passage. Contra Gruen, “Origins and Objectives,” 48–51, who believes Onias III was murdered.
37. The letter, which the author quotes, is obviously a fiction, but may reflect the way Onias might have proceeded.
38. Likewise he asked for the authority to install Levites and priests as well; cf. Josephus, *Antiquitates judaicae* 13.63, 13.73. Gruen, “Origins and Objectives,” 69 and n. 105 questions his installment as high priest.
39. Josephus, *Antiquitates judaicae* 13.64.

Canaan, and swear to the Lord of hosts; one shall be called city of [the sun]. In that day there shall be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar at the border thereof to the Lord.”⁴⁰ A further motivation can be seen in the report of Onias. In the course of his flight from Judea he had visited many Jewish settlements in Egypt. He stated that “most of them have temples, contrary to what is proper, and for this reason they are ill-disposed toward one another, as is also the case with the Egyptians and the multitude of their temples (*hiera*) and their varying opinions about the forms of worship.”⁴¹ So it seems that other Jewish communities in Egypt had built sanctuaries of their own that did not meet Onias’s approval.⁴² He therefore offers himself as the right man for the construction of a Jewish temple, since he had already found an ideal site in a ruined temple of the cat-headed goddess Bastet in the city of Leontopolis in the nome of Heliopolis, not far from the city which gave it its name, the Egyptian center of the sun god Ra, *Iwnw*. Here Onias was able to use the analogy to the city of the sun in the passage from Isaiah mentioned above.⁴³ According to his plan, the Jews of Egypt should gather at this temple in mutual harmony, serving the interests of the king and the queen at the same time. This became apparent when the deposed high priest—in contrast with the Jews in his (now Selucid-controlled) homeland—submitted himself in religious affairs to the Ptolemaic rulers. The royal answer, likewise in written form, was consequently in the affirmative.⁴⁴ The king allotted Onias “extended territories” to assure revenues for the temple and provisions for the priests.⁴⁵ As a result, the Jewish population around Leontopolis boomed, and the area was known as “the Land of Onias” from then until Roman times.

A further motive for the erection of an alternate sanctuary in Leontopolis seems to lie in the character of the high priest. Josephus writes that Onias had seen the desecrations in Jerusalem but was also prompted by the desire “to acquire for himself eternal fame and glory.”⁴⁶ In *A History of the Jewish Wars*, this impression becomes clearer: “In all this Onias was not actuated by honest motives; his aim was rather to rival the Jews at Jerusalem, against whom he harboured resentment for his exile, and he hoped by erecting this temple to attract the multitude away from them to it.”⁴⁷ This negative commentary becomes understandable if one considers that Josephus was a determined adherent of the Jerusalem temple who deeply deplored its destruction by the later emperor Titus in A.D. 70—the blame for which he attributed to the various Jewish partisan

40. Isaiah 19:18–19. See also Gruen, “Origins and Objectives,” 67–69.

41. Josephus, *Antiquitates judaicae* 13.66.

42. The exact nature of these sanctuaries is not clear. Cf. Gruen, “Origins and Objectives,” 60.

43. The interesting clue lies in the phrase “city of the sun.” This reading is preserved in the oldest known copy of Isaiah—in the Qumran scroll (1QIsa^a). All later versions have “city of destruction,” which is a slightly different spelling in Hebrew.

44. Josephus, *Antiquitates judaicae* 13.70–71. In their reply the royal couple questioned if Onias’s choice of the site would please God, since it was wild and full of sacred animals. For the alleged piety of the king, cf. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 36 n. 52. See also Gruen, “Origins and Objectives,” 51–52.

45. Josephus, *Bellum judaicum* 7.430.

46. Josephus, *Antiquitates judaicae* 13.63.

47. Josephus, *Bellum judaicum* 7.431–432; cf. 7.425.

groups. For this reason he may have held very little sympathy for what seemed to him a schismatic shrine in the Diaspora.⁴⁸

There is no proof that the Jewish temple in Leontopolis had more than regional or local importance. While it was tolerated as a shrine of minor significance, its offerings and vows were regarded as inferior at best to those in Jerusalem.⁴⁹ It is also noteworthy that the temple in Jerusalem had been rededicated in 164 B.C.—by the time the temple in Egypt was under construction or barely built.

Not only is the foundation of a temple by Onias of interest, but his likely career permits several interesting conclusions on how Jews could rise to the court. Onias writes to the royal couple: “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.”⁵⁰ This statement is substantiated by a line in *Contra Apionem*, where Josephus states that Ptolemy and Cleopatra “entrusted the whole of their realm to Jews and placed their entire army under command of Jews, Onias and Dositheos.”⁵¹ Both passages prove a military leader by the name of Onias in the service of the Ptolemaic king.⁵² How far one can take the word of Josephus, who in his own time hoped for an influential position at the Roman imperial court, remains undecided. Perhaps a papyrus apparently addressed to an Onias, dated to 21 September 164 B.C., may elucidate the context: the familiar tone by which the royal family is being referred to constitutes an interesting aspect: “King Ptolemy is well and King Ptolemy his brother and queen Cleopatra his sister and their children, and their affairs also are as usual.”⁵³ It is important to note that such an intimate reference to the king’s family is unique among all Ptolemaic documents and signifies that the writer as well as the recipient were high state officials who were well acquainted with the court.

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48. Gruen, “Origins and Objectives,” 69, sees the temple of Leontopolis not as schismatic. It rather served “as a beacon announcing that the faith remained alive and strong,” especially in a time when the high priesthood in Jerusalem stood vacant. This may therefore serve as an indicator for the date of its construction.
49. M Menahot 13:10: “[If he said,] ‘I pledge myself to offer a Whole-offering,’ he must offer it in the Temple. And if he offered it in the House of Onias he has not fulfilled his obligation. [If he said,] ‘I will offer it in the House of Onias,’ he should offer it in the Temple, but if he offered it in the House of Onias he has fulfilled his obligation. R. Simeon says: Such is not accounted a Whole-offering. [If a man said,] ‘I will be a Nazirite,’ he must offer the Hair-offering in the Temple; and if he offered it in the House of Onias he has not fulfilled his obligation. [If he said,] ‘I will offer the Hair-offering in the House of Onias,’ he should offer it in the Temple; but if he offered it in the House of Onias he has fulfilled his obligation. R. Simeon says: Such a one is not accounted a Nazirite. If priests have ministered in the House of Onias they may not minister in the Temple in Jerusalem; still more does this apply to [priests who have ministered in] that other matter; for it is written, ‘Nevertheless the priests of the high places came not up to the altar of the Lord in Jerusalem, but they did eat unleavened bread among their brethren (2 Kings 23:9); thus they were like them that have a blemish: they may share and they may eat [of the Holy Things] but they may not offer sacrifice.’” The Mishnah, trans. Herbert Danby (Oxford University Press, 1933), 512–13.
50. Josephus, *Antiquitates judaicae* 13.65. The context of this passage is attributed to Onias IV. As stated above (see note 34) it remains doubtful, however, whether the mercenary leader named Onias can be identified with the religious leader. Cf. Gruen, “Origins and Objectives,” 52–54.
51. Josephus, *Contra Apionem* 2.49. Cf. Hölbl, *Geschichte des Ptolemäerreiches*, 167–68; Hölbl, *Ptolemaic Empire*, 190–91.
52. Perhaps Onias had been promoted to the *strategos* of the Heliopolite nome.
53. P. Paris 63, I–VII = UPZ I 110 ll. 1–19 = CPJ I 132. The name of the recipient has been amended to Onias by Ulrich Wilcken. His conjecture has found wide acceptance but is still far from certain. Cf. also Aryeh Kasher,

Those three sources document that the sixth Ptolemy was well disposed toward the Jews. This must be seen against its historical background. The kings of Egypt stood in obvious antagonism against the Seleucid king Antiochus IV from the year 170 B.C. This was the more remarkable since the latter was the uncle of the royal couple and of their brother, Ptolemy VIII. During the sixth Syrian War, from 170 to 168 B.C., Antiochus assumed the guardianship for his nephew, occupied parts of Egypt, and had himself crowned as king of Egypt. Only the intervention of the aspiring power of Rome through a delegation of Popillius Laenas in 168 B.C. brought his activities there to a halt.⁵⁴ Additionally, ever since the Ptolemies lost Coele-Syria in 200 B.C., they had an interest in the reconquest of those territories. The chances of that then looked very bad, however. So it must have suited the royal couple that the oppressions of the Seleucid king and his interference concerning the appointment of the high priest in Judea resulted in the revolt of the Maccabees in 166 B.C. Considering the strained relations between Antiochus and the Ptolemies, Onias must therefore have been a very welcome guest in Egypt, and his favorable reception must logically be seen in this context. The more Antiochus hassled the Jews with his politics of Hellenization and other measures, the more his Ptolemaic enemies were willing not only to grant asylum to the presumably anti-Seleucid Jews but also to permit some of their most able men into the higher echelons of power. Josephus mentions that Onias in return used this political situation, promising the Ptolemies that the Jews would be his allies—provided the king approved the building of a Jewish temple in Egypt. Thus, after Antiochus's defilement of the temple in Jerusalem, Ptolemy had the chance to pull many Jews to his side with this building permit.⁵⁵ But these hopes were not fulfilled. Antiochus IV died in 164 B.C. and his successor, Antiochus V Eupator (164 to 162 B.C.), supported the resumption of the temple worship as pursued by the Maccabees.

Summary

This contribution endeavors to chart how the position of the Jews in Egypt and their relationship to royal authority changed from late pharaonic times to the Ptolemaic period. The main turning point can be fixed after the year 200 B.C., when Coele-Syria, including Judea, was lost to the Seleucids. The resulting conflict enabled the Jews to achieve greater social status within the Ptolemaic realm, a status that at times surpassed even that of the native population. This was an obvious contrast to the epoch of the last Pharaohs, when the Jews had a rather subordinate standing. Already under the Persian rule, they were made nearly equal with the native Egyptians, but their toleration depended on a foreign power that was rejected by the Egyptians. Later, in Ptolemaic times, an escalating conflict concerning the homeland of the Jews meant that the Ptolemies could see a benefit in favoring the Jews within their borders, thereby reserving the option of enlisting

The Jews in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt: The Struggle for Equal Rights (Tübingen: Mohr, 1985), 60–61, 135, who doubts that the Onias of the Papyrus is the builder of the temple (in this case Onias IV); Modrzejewski, *Jews of Egypt*, 124, accepts Wilcken's conjecture; Parente, "Onias III's Death," 84, 96, is equally positive about it and sees Onias III as the recipient of the letter.

54. For more details cf. Hölbl, *Geschichte des Ptolemäerreiches*, 128–40, 157–69; Hölbl, *Ptolemaic Empire*, 143–48, 181–92.

55. Josephus, *Bellum judaicum* 7.422–425.

Jewish aid in any future attempts to recapture their lost territories or in defending their own borders from the Seleucids. Only within this context can the concessions to Onias, the exiled high priest, be understood. The Jewish priest may have found it hard to exercise subservience toward the royal couple, but he nevertheless had the unique opportunity to gain concessions for his followers. At the same time, he used the Ptolemies to gratify his own ambitions, for he desired a position he esteemed equal to that of the high priest in Jerusalem. That neither the wishes of the royal couple nor Onias were fulfilled in the long run was regrettable for both sides but inevitable in the face of a momentary stalemate between the successor of Antiochus IV and the rulers in Alexandria.

For the Jews, Egypt must have been a place of many opportunities. Their Pharaoh "who remembered not Joseph"⁵⁶ was himself but a distant memory and no longer equated with the nominal Pharaohs of the later centuries. Additionally, the prohibitions against (re)emigration in the Law and the Prophets were no longer seen as relevant or binding. The handling of Jewish religion by the Egyptian rulers was an additional factor. The level of tolerance was remarkable. The last native kings permitted the Jews to build their temple on Elephantine. The Persians largely continued this toleration, and under the Ptolemaic kings, the Jews extended their religious freedoms, and the building of a Jewish sanctuary at Leontopolis was even sponsored by royal grants.

In general, however, we should note that our sources present us with a very one-sided and distorted, sometimes even glorifying, picture so that we remain incapable of gaining a complete and rounded picture of Egyptian Jewry in these centuries.

56. Exodus 1:8.