

Jews in the Persian Period

After the destruction of the Kingdom of Judah in 586 BCE, our knowledge of the Jews changes dramatically. Both the amount of sources we have and what those sources tell us, differs from what came before. For this assignment, you will look at four different sources and describe what we can learn from them. The first two sources come from the Tanakh and are from earlier in the Persian period. The second two sources were found through archaeology and come from later in the Persian period.

In 2-3 pages, you will summarize each of these sources and describe what each one teaches us about the Jews during the Persian period. After doing this, you will write a paragraph or two describing how the political situation of the Jews may have changed from earlier in the Persian period to later in the Persian period based upon these sources.

1. Book of Nehemiah 1:1-3 and 2:1-9

2. Book of Ezra chapters 3,9, and 10

3. Bagohi letter from Elephantine, Egypt.

To our lord, Bagohi, governor of Yehud, (from) your servants: Yedaniah and his associates, the priests who are in the fortress of Yeb.

May the God of the Heavens perpetually pursue the welfare of our lord greatly and grant you favors before Darius the king and the "sons of the palace" a thousand times more than now. May you be joyful and healthy at all times.

Now your servant Yedaniah and his associates testify as follows:

In the month of Tammuz, in the fourteenth year of King Darius, when Arsames departed and went to the king, the priests of the god Khnub, who is in the fortress of Yeb, conspired with Vidranga, who was administrator here, to destroy the temple of Yahu (HASHEM) in the fortress of Yeb. So that villian Vidranga sent this order to his son Nefayan, who was in command of the garrison of the fortress at Sawn: "The temple of the god Yahu in the fortress of Yeb shall be destroyed." Nefayan consequently led the Egyptians with other troops. Arriving with their weapons at the fortress of Yeb, they entered the temple and burned it to the ground. They smashed the stone pillars that were there. They demolished five great gateways constructed of hewn blocks of stone which were in the temple; but their doors (are still standing), and the hinges of those doors are made of bronze. And the roof of cedar in its entirety, with the . . . and whatever else was there, were all burned with fire. As for the basins of gold and silver and other articles that were in the temple, they carried all of them off and took them as personal possessions.

Now, our ancestors built this temple in the fortress of Yeb in the days of the kingdom of Egypt; and when Cambyses came to Egypt he found it (already) constructed. They (the Persians) knocked down all the temples of the Egyptian gods; but no one damaged this temple. But when this happened, we and our wives and our children wore sackcloth, and fasted, and prayed to Yahu, the Lord of Heaven, who has let us "see to" Vidranga. The axes removed the anklet from his feet (?) and any property he had acquired was lost. And all those who have sought to do evil to this temple—all of them—have all been killed, and we have "seen to" them.

We have (previously) sent letters to our lord when this catastrophe happened to us; and to the high priest Yehochannan and his associates, the priests in Jerusalem; and to Ostan, the kinsman of Anani; and the Judahite elites. They have never sent us a letter. Furthermore, from the month of Tammuz, the fourteenth year of Darius the king, until today, we have been wearing sackcloth and fasting, making our wives as widows, not anointing ourselves with oil or drinking wine. Furthermore, from then until now, in the seventeenth year of Darius the king, no grain-offering, incense, or burnt-offering has been sacrificed in this temple.

Now your servants Yedaniah, and his associates, and the Judahites, all inhabitants of Yeb, state: If it seems good to our lord, remember this temple to reconstruct it, since they do not let us reconstruct it. Look to your clients and friends here in Egypt. Let a letter be sent from you to them concerning the temple of the god Yahu to construct it in the fortress of Yeb as it was before. And the grain-offering, incense, and burnt-offering will be offered in your name, and we will pray for you continuously—we, our wives, and our children, and the Judahites who are here, all of them—if you do this so that this temple is reconstructed. And you shall have honor before Yahu, the God of the Heavens, more than a man who offers him burnt-offerings and sacrifices worth a thousand talents of silver and gold. Because of this, we have written to inform you. We have also set forth the whole matter in a letter in our name to Delaiah and Shelemiah, the sons of Sanballat, the governor of Samaria. Furthermore, Arsames (the Persian satrap) knew nothing of all that was perpetrated on us.

On the twentieth of Marcheshvan, the seventeenth year of King Darius.

4. Yehud coin



- This minute silver coin, minted in Jerusalem in about 350 BC, is one of the earliest known Jewish coins, one of the artistic highlights of Jewish numismatics, and is the first extra-biblical instance of the common usage of 'Judea' to denote the Israelite province.
- On the obverse is shown a lily flower, or fleur-de-lys, which later became the French sign of royalty. Given the Latin name *lilium candidum* by biologists, it is a symbol of purity and was regarded in Ancient Israel as the most beautiful flower. In the words of the prophet Hosea, the lily was the national flower of Israel- "I will be like the dew for Israel; he shall blossom like the lily" (Hosea 14-6). It was referred to allegorically in the Song of Songs (2-1) and was often used in similes by later Hebrew poets. The white lily was a major ingredient in perfumes, no doubt was used in sacred incenses, and constituted a main type of spice for the ancients. Though not found in profusion in Israel today, we may assume that the lily was once common in all parts of the country, especially when we consider that there has been much botanical change in Israel resulting from climate change as well as much trade and population movement throughout the Levant. The use of the lily on this coin is apparently derived from the design that graced the capitals of the two main pillars that stood in front of the Temple, known as Jachin and Boaz. Following from its earlier use, the lily became a popular motif in Jewish art of the Second Temple Period, appearing on coins struck in Jerusalem during the second and first centuries BCE under Antiochus VII, John Hyrcanus I and Alexander Jannaeus.
- The reverse side bears an image of a bird. Zoologists cannot determine the exact species from the depiction, but have suggested that it is a falcon or hawk. The heraldic form of the bird is borrowed from contemporary coins of Asia Minor that depict other birds in a similar fashion. Near the bird's head is the word 'Yehud,' "YHD," in ancient Aramaic script. This expression had a twofold meaning, signifying both the name of the city Jerusalem as the capital (Aramaic 'Birta') of Judah and the province (Aramaic 'Medinta') itself. This assumption is based on the fact that at the time of the minting of this coin and during the previous few centuries "YHD" was

the name of Jerusalem. In the Book of Chronicles (2 26-28), Amaziah king of Judah was buried with his fathers in the city of Judah, which must refer to Jerusalem since, as the capital, all the Judean kings were buried there. Although this refers to his burial in 769 BCE, Chronicles is a later edition of Israelite history, implying that the author knew of Jerusalem as “Yehudah,” or Judah. In addition to the local meaning, Yehud was the current name of the province of Judah during the fifth and fourth centuries BCE since Aramaic had already replaced Akkadian as the lingua franca of the Near East and which the current Persian Empire employed as well instead of its native tongue.

- A number of other small coins have been discovered from this time period with ‘YHD’ pressed into them. It seems that they were minted by a self-governing authority of the province of Judea because they are only found in small denominations. Since, in those times, the face value of coins was equivalent with the inherent value of the metal, small coins meant small denominations. And the Persian Empire could certainly have afforded to commission larger coins. Combining that information with the lack of Persian symbols on the coins gives a strong indication of great autonomy on the part of Judean authorities granted by the Persians – they could make their own money! These coins give us a good idea about the political status of Judea within the Persian Empire; it was one of the more respected provinces.

http://cojs.org/yehud_coin_1-4th_century_bce/