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Different from Others? Jews as Slave Owners and Traders in the Persian and Hellenistic Periods

The subject of Jews as slave owners and traders throughout history received much greater attention in the last few decades. But there is no research that focuses on the Persian and Hellenistic periods and their relevant findings. This current article hopes to do exactly that. This article shows that Jews owned slaves and even traded them throughout the Persian period and during the Hellenistic period until the rise of the Hasmonean Kingdom. The slaves themselves were not only gentiles but also Jews, who received no special treatment from their co-religionists. Regarding the ownership of slaves, it was found that each Jewish owner treated his slaves differently, showing a huge gap between the biblical laws on the matter and the reality. The different texts and finds brought here are a testimony to the disregard of the Biblical laws on slaves, and the subsequent similarity between the Jews and their gentile neighbours in both ownership and trade of slaves.

Keywords: slavery, ancient Judaism, Samaritans, Zenon Archive, Hellenism, Ptolemaic Egypt

The subject of Jews as slave owners and traders throughout history received much greater attention in the last few decades. But while the writings are mainly focused on such Jews in the Caribbean and the United States in the 18th and 19th centuries,[1] or on Jews in the Muslim world during the medieval period, antiquity receives little attention. The main research on Jews as slave owners and traders in antiquity refers to the period between the end of the Second Temple Period and the fall of the Western Roman Empire.[2] The publications regarding Jews in these two roles in antiquity mainly base themselves on the writings of the Pharisaic rabbinic sect i.e. the Mishna and the Talmud.[3]

[1] For example: FRIEDMAN (1998); FABER (1998).

[2] HEZSER (2005).

[3] One research focusing on Talmudic attitude towards slavery, is BELMAN (2016).

There is no research that focuses on the Persian and Hellenistic periods and their relevant findings. This current article hopes to do exactly that, while taking into consideration the biblical laws and their observance. Because of the lack of writing on the subject, the current article is based mainly on primary sources, including the papyri from Elephantine, the papyri from Wadi Daliyeh, the Zenon archives, the Apocrypha like the book of Ben Sira and pseudepigrapha like the book of Jubilees and sectarian texts (i.e the texts of small Jewish sects)[4] like the Damascus Document known from the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Evidence from the Late Persian Period

The first documents to be presented are papyri dated to the 5th century BC from the Jewish community in Elephantine, an island on the Nile in southern Egypt. This settlement was sitting on an important trade route and, as a result, was used as a customs checkpoint, bringing great revenue to the kingdom of Egypt and the Persian Empire. From the papyri that were discovered on the island, we have learnt that the garrison in the city, which was also responsible for collecting taxes, was Jewish. Furthermore, it was discovered that the Jewish settlement existed at least from the mid-6th century until the end of the 5th century BC.[5]

[4] The Sectarian writings depict a community's organization, ideology and political and theological controversies. In the Dead Sea Scrolls, organizational matters are detailed in the Rule of the Community (1QS) and the Damascus Document (CD): DIMANT (2009: 8).

[5] We can learn about Jewish immigration to the area of Elephantine from the letter of Aristeas, which was composed by an Alexandrian Jew during the Ptolemaic era in Egypt: *Letter of Aris.* 3, 13; the academic literature has extensively debated and presented the Jewish community of Elephantine and their papyri. An important example is the book written by PORTEN (1968: 19–27), in which he asserts that the Jewish military community on the island protected the southern border of Egypt since the Persian conquest of 525 BC until approximately 399 BC; GRELOT (1972); MÉLÈZE-MODRZEJEWSKI (1991: 21–41); KASHER (1979: 1) says that the exact circumstances for the foundation of this Jewish community are unclear; another hypothesis is that the Jewish community on the island served the Kings of Egypt even before the Persian invasion of 525 BC and that the origin of the Jewish immigration to the area was the Babylonian conquest of the land of Israel: OLSHANETSKY (2018: 8).

Through these documents, we know that the Jews there even built their own temple,[6] and owned, and even inherited, slaves.

In one of the documents from the island, dated to the 24th of Shevat in the 14th year of King Darius,[7] an agreement between the two sons of a woman called Mivtahyia is recorded.[8] The sons, Mehessia Bar Natan and Yedonia Bar Natan, agreed on splitting their mother's slaves. The two slaves, Batusiri and Baloi, were brothers of Egyptian origin. The document states that each of the slaves had a tattoo on his hand, which said "to Mivtahiya" (למבטחיה) and to its right there was the letter "yud" (י). It also mentioned that the sons of Mivtahiya received the slaves for eternity as their inheritance, and that they could sell or pass them on to whoever, whenever they wanted.

The papyri clearly indicate that in the Jewish community there was a habit of marking the slaves with a tattoo, most probably to prove ownership (the slave belonged to Mivtahiya). Cowley,[9] who identified with certainty the letter 'yud' in the papyri, suggested that this was the beginning of the word 'yeret' (ירת), meaning heir,[10] and concluded that we should read the mark as 'to the heir of Mivtahiya.' Guillaume, who also assumed that the letter 'yud' represented the change in ownership of the slave, explained that it was easier to add a letter on the body than to erase the old tattoo and make another one.[11] The branding of slaves in

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[6] Regarding the temple in Elephantine, see: PORTEN (1968: 100–150); regarding the co-operation between the Jews and the Persian rulers who were hated by the local Egyptians, and the celebration of Passover as the main reason for the tension between the Jews and the local Egyptians which led to the eventual destruction of the temple in Elephantine, see: PORTEN (1968: 28–35; 278–282).

[7] Document number 28, in: COWLEY (1923: 103–104).

[8] Here, we can identify a theophoric name which refers to the god of Israel, Mivtahiya, meaning 'trusting God': MÉLÈZE-MODRZEJEWSKI (1991: 106); according to Porten, only 13 of the 160 names appearing in the different documents from Elephantine, are not theophoric: PORTEN (1968: 13).

[9] COWLEY (1923: 105–106); a similar tattoo is mentioned in the release document of a slave named Temphet, who belonged to one of the female members of the community in Elephantine. The tattoo, which said, 'To Meshullam' (Lameshullam) was on her arm as a mark of ownership: BMAP, V: 3.

[10] SOKOLOFF (2002: 246).

[11] GUILLAUME (1921: 378).

Egypt was not unique to Jews. According to classic literature, on the bodies of slaves in Egypt there was usually a branded mark of dedication to one of the gods.[12] This tradition is also represented in the documents from Elephantine, as one of the slaves, whose name was Hur, was dedicated to the Egyptian god Khnum.[13]

Therefore, Guillaume identified the letter 'yud' as representing the beginning of the name of the God of Israel (Yahweh).[14] The possibility that the 'yud' was used to mark slaves with the name of God can be found in a verse in Isaiah:

> …and another shall subscribe with his hand unto the Lord, and surname himself by the name of Israel.[15]

Similarly, in the period of the First Temple, there was a tradition of branding the forehead or the hand as a sign of accepting the supremacy of the God of Israel.[16]

On the other hand, was the branded letter 'yud' on the arm of the slave representing the beginning of the word *yudea* (יהודיא)? During the Hellenistic and Roman periods, the Jews of Egypt were familiar with the tradition of branding the slave as a symbol of submission and ownership.[17] If the brand was referring to the word *yudea*, then this is a unique

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[12] Hdt. 2, 113; the classical literature has referred several times to the tradition of marking the slave's body: Ar. *Av*. 760; Ar. *Lys.* 311; Xen. *Hell.* 3, 24; Pla. *Lg.* 9, 854b.

[13] BMAP, VI: 8; BMAP, IX: 10; BMAP, X: 6; the slave Hur is mentioned as the gardener of the god Khnum and it is thought that he was a slave in this god's temple.

[14] GUILLAUME (1921: 378).

[15] Isaiah 42, 5 (King James Bible).

[16] See the interpretation of Ginsburg of this verse in connection to the papyri from Elephantine, which offered to read 'yud' instead of 'yado' i.e. his hand: PORTEN (1968: 204, n. 15).

[17] When Ptolemy IV, Philopater (244–204 BC) asked for a census of the Jews of Egypt and wanted to revoke their rights, he ordered 'χαράσσεσθαι καὶ διὰ πυρὸς εἰς τὸ σῶμα παρασήμῳ Διονύσου κισσοφύλλῳ ' (to brand their flesh with an ivy leaf, the symbol of Dionysus), as a mark of the Jewish enslavement to the Ptolemaic rule: *Third Book of Macc.* 2, 29; the symbol of the ivy leaf on a Jew would have symbolised his lower status and his obedience to the king Ptolemy Philopater, who saw himself as a reincarnation of Dionysus. With regards to the image of Philopater, which is identified as Dionysus: Clem.Al. *Protr.* 54, 2; TONDRIAU (1948: 127–146); TCHERIKOVER (1961: 342)

testimony which raises the possibility that Jews branded their slaves to declare ownership.[18] When tackled with the question on what the branded letter meant, there is still the possibility that the slaves were dedicated to the God of Israel and to the Jewish temple in Elephantine; or that the tattoo indicates the national identity of the owner; or that it is actually showing the military affiliation of the owner due to the term Hila Judaea (חילא יהודאי) which was a common way to refer to the Jewish military unit stationed at Elephantine.

Another find, originating from the Late Persian period in the land of Israel, are the 17 Samaritan documents that were written in Aramaic and were discovered in 1962 by Bedouin from the Taʿamireh tribe in Wadi Daliyeh (12 kilometres northwest of Jericho).[19] Nine of these documents are bills of sale for slaves.[20] The documents contained the names of the sellers, the buyers, the slaves, the witnesses and the administrative official who oversaw the signing of the deal. All the contracts were written up and signed in the city of Samaria, which was the capital of a Persian province at the time.[21] The names that appear in the deeds indicate an

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thinks that the tradition to brand the flesh with a mark of a god was very common during antiquity, and for that reason, we should not see the king's command as a punishment as the king himself would have been marked with the same symbol; KASHER (1979: 198–199) responds to TCHERIKOVER and states that there were many incidents in which a royal mark was branded on the bodies of slaves and prisoners of war as a symbol of their submission and to prevent them from escaping; see also HACHAM (2002: 18–26); we know that although the events of Maccabees III are allegedly attested to the beginning of the Ptolemaic rule in Egypt, the text itself was written many years later.

[18] Regarding modern research on the marking of slaves, see: MENDELSOHN (1949: 42–50); WESTERMANN (1955: 19); on the double role of marking the slave, firstly as a symbol of ownership, and secondly for an easier way to find run-away slaves, see: MENDELSOHN (1949: 49–50); HUROWITZ (1992: 1); CHRISTOPHER (1987: 139–155).

[19] Regarding the study on the papyri of Wadi Daliyeh, see ESHEL (1994: 48–52); DUSEK (2007).

[20] DJD, XXVIII: 33–116.

[21] In the Bible, the letters of Rehum the Commander and Shimshai the Scribeare are a testimony of the existence of a local administration in Samaria during the first half of the 5th century BC, who were loyal to the Persian rule and tried to prevent the rebuilding of the Temple: Ezra. 4, 8–16; see also on the subject: ESHEL (1994: 28–36).

ethnically mixed population with Edomean, Phoenician and Akkadian names, but most of the names had the theophoric component of Yahweh.[22] The use of a theophoric beginning or ending of 'יהו' in a name was considered as the only way to identify a believer in the God of Israel.[23]

We can learn from these documents that also some of the slave traders, who were buying and selling slaves, had names with the theophoric element referring to the God of Israel. For example: Yehonur son of Laneri, Yehopadaini son of Delaiah, Hananiah son of Beyad'el, etc. The slave traders were not the only ones with names referring to the God of Israel. There were several slaves who also had such names, such as: Yehohanan son of Seʾilah, Yehoʿanani son of ʿEzra, etc.

Some scholars in the past have claimed that the papyri belonged to the Samaritans. However, there is a problem with this claim. In the province where Samaria was its capital, many Jews lived there besides Samaritans.[24] We cannot be certain to whom of those two groups the papyri belonged to. Since Jewish and Samaritan names are so similar, it is nigh impossible to differentiate between them. Perhaps we should not even differentiate between the two, as at that time, in terms of beliefs, the Samaritans were not that different from Jews to justify defining them as a different religion.[25] During this period, it seems that the Sa-

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[22] ESHEL (1994: 48–52); DUSEK (2007: 27–33); ZSENGELLÉR (1996) claims that 34 names appeared in nine of the bills of sale (some of which appear more than once) and nine of them started with theophoric component *yhw*; it is worth noting that according to ZADOK (1998), 57.7% of all the names appearing in the documents and epigraphical and papyrological material from the Persian Samaria, are theophoric names with the element-*yhw*-.

[23] ALBRIGHT (1924: 370–378); BLAU (1907: 118–120); ANDERSON (1962: 409).

[24] Using epigraphical documents, and the personal names in them, ZSENGELLÉR divided the residents of the city of Samaria into groups, according to hierarchic structure or historical origins. Especially relevant to us is the lower class, i.e. slaves, who in many cases had theophoric names that according to him, originated from the Kingdom of Israel (the Northern Kingdom before it was conquered by Assyria) which ZSENGELLÉR defined as proto-Samarians: ZSENGELLÉR (1996: 188–189).

[25] It seems the Samarians were not different from the Jews, in almost any aspect. It is impossible to separate between the two groups in individual cases. It seems that the Samarians wished to be separated from the Jews only from the 3rd century A.D. In a paradoxical manner, one of the new symbols of their new, separated identity which

maritans were merely a sect or a stream of Judaism. Furthermore, the Samaritans themselves claimed to be Israelites who keep the Biblical laws. They knew the Israelite history, carried theophoric names which were associated with the one God and they tried to take an active part in the temple worship in Jerusalem, at least until the middle of the 5th century BC.[26] Nevertheless, the location in which these documents were written and found raises the significant possibility that at least some of the slaves and slave traders were not Samaritans but rather Jews.

The Wadi Daliyeh papyri are a window to how the common Jews of the period treated their slaves, allowing us to compare them to the Talmudic laws on the matter, which were written many centuries later.[27] The fact that each slave's origin and family (X son of Y) appear on the bills of sale, a custom not common when mentioning slaves, leads us to the conclusion that the slaves were actually Jewish freemen who sold themselves into slavery because of economic hardships.[28] In addition,

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they adopted at the time, was the Hebrew writing, which the Jews stopped using at the time: ABADI (2017).

[26] 'Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the children of the captivity built the temple unto the LORD God of Israel':Ezra. 4, 1. (King James Bible); this verse shows that the head of the communities of Samaria wished to join the construction of the Second Temple and Sanballat intervened with the building works from religious reasons; according to TADMOR (1984), there was a large dispute among the residents of Samaria during the Persian period. Leaders such as Sanballat, who saw themselves as part of those that worshipped the God of Israel, while others, like Rehum the Commander and Shimshai the Scribe, continued to preserve a Mesopotamian tradition and wished to take no part in the ritual worship in the temple.

[27] Regarding halachic laws in the Talmud and Mishna, see: BELMAN (2016).

[28] We need to remember that the Biblical law allows a man to sell himself to his brother in one of two circumstances that are well defined: A) when his economic situation is dire and does not allow him to sustain himself (Leviticus. 25, 39), B) when he was caught stealing and he has no other way to pay for what he stole (Exodus. 22, 3). While relying on this, GUTMAN (1949) claimed that the Biblical law allows self-enslavement only in order to survive harsh conditions; according to URBACH (1960: 184), the Israelite society during the period between the days of Nehemia and the Hasmonean Revolt, was in such a harsh economic situation that pressed many of them to sell themselves into slavery; the Biblical law allows selling oneself into slavery on the conditions stated previously, yet limits the person to sell himself only to another son of Israel, 'And if thy brother that dwelleth by thee be waxen poor, and be sold unto thee; thou shalt not

the inclusion of the word תמים to some of the slaves emphasised that the seller would have made enquiries on the physical condition of the slaves, and that many of the sellers made sure that the slave they were selling was in the condition they had described. This phrasing, in which the slave owner takes responsibility for the condition of the slave, can also be found in the laws of the Talmud:

ומנוקה מכל מום ומן שחין דנפק עד טצהר חדת ועתיק.[29]

The term forever 'לעלמא', which appears in most of the bills of sale, is evidence that the slaves were not released after six years, even if the slaves, the sellers and the buyers were all followers of the God of Israel. It is obvious that this fact is in contradiction with the laws of the bible, which stated that a Hebrew slave should be freed after six years, or during the year of the Yovel, whichever of the two came first.[30] Another important point regarding the bills of sale from Wadi Daliyeh is the phenomenon of the selling of their own countrymen, of people who also believe in the one God. Contrary to the biblical law: 'For they are my servants, which I brought forth out of the land of Egypt: they shall not be sold as bondmen (slaves).'[31]

Evidence from the Hellenistic Period

One of the main pieces of evidence for Jews owning and trading slaves in this period comes from the Zenon archive. This archive, from Faiyum in Egypt, was discovered in 1915 and is composed of papyri written in Greek. All the papyri belonged to the archive of one man, Zenon, a private secretary of Apollonius, the minister of finance for King Ptolemy II Philadelphus. Apollonius was a rich man and the owner of a large household in Faiyum, in which Zenon had a main administrative role

compel him to serve as a bondservant…And if a sojourner or stranger wax rich by thee, and thy brother that dwelleth by him wax poor, and sell himself unto the stranger or sojourner by thee, or to the stock of the stranger's family': Leviticus. 25, 39, 47. (King James Bible).

[29] Babylonian Talmud. *Gittin*. 86a.

[30] Exodus. 21, 2–6; Leviticus. 25, 39–40; Deuteronomy. 15, 12–14.

[31] Leviticus. 25, 42, (King James Bible with amendments).

and where he kept all the correspondence he maintained due to his position.[32]

These papyri are important to our subject because in between the years 260 to 258 BC, Zenon visited the land of Israel and he even spent an entire year there in 259 BC. From these travels, Zenon brought with him many documents and letters back to Egypt and even after returning to Egypt, Zenon kept corresponding with members of the higher classes who lived in the land of Israel.[33] From these letters, we learn about an important Jewish family, the house of Tobiah.[34] The father of the family,

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[32] Regarding the discovery of the Zenon papyri, see: PRÉAUX (1939: 11–12); following the publication of the papyri, PRÉAUX tried to portray the life of the Greeks settlers in their mansions in Egypt in another book, where the Zenon papyri added valuable information on the life of the peasants, agriculture and methods of irrigation: PRÉAUX (1947); ROSTOVZEFF's (1922) research on Egypt in the early Hellenistic period was published in a book and heavily relied on the Zenon papyri.

[33] Regarding the Zenon papyri, which are connected and relevant to the land of Israel, see TCHERIKOVER's (1961: 33–82) reference to the land of Israel in light of the Zenon papyri; In the 1980s, the French researcher ORRIEUX (1985: 43–44) gathered 52 papyri from the Zenon archives, which is known as 'Le Dossier Syrien'; in the late 1980s, DURAND (1997: 15–16) collected 62 papyri from the Zenon archives, which are also known as 'Le Corpus des Papyrus Palestiniens'.

[34] The house of Tobiah was one of the most important Jewish families in the land of Israel during the Persian period. During the time of Nehemiah, Tobiah the Ammonite stood at the head of the household, which was one of the great opponents of Nehemiah, together with Sanballat the Samarian and Geshem the Arabian: Nehemiah. 2, 10, 19; Nehemiah. 3, 35; Nehemiah tried to alienate Tobiah from Jerusalem because of his family's foreign background, yet from the biblical texts it is clear that Tobiah was in a continuous relationship with the priests in Jerusalem: Nehemiah. 13, 4–5; a member of the house of Tobiah mentioned in the Zenon papyri, is defined by TCHERIKOVER (1961: 54) as a rich sheikh from the land of Ammon, who assisted the first Ptolemaic kings to solidify control in the area; Josephus describes the son of Tobiah in length, Joseph Ben Tobiah, whose mother was the sister of the high priest Onias II: Josep. *Ant.* 12, 160; this fact is clear evidence that even the distance from their residence in the land of Tobiah in modern-day Jordan, did not sever the connection between the house of Tobiah and the aristocracy in Jerusalem. The influence of Joseph Ben Tobiah in Jerusalem was so extensive that he was considered one of the leaders of the Jewish people and intervened in the dispute between Ptolemy III (246–222 BC) and Onias II, when Onias refused to pay taxes to the king. Josephus emphasises that the power and status of Joseph were mostly attributed to the wealth he had acquired during his lifetime: Josep. *Ant.* 12, 184; regarding the house of Tobiah, see also: Josep. *Ant.* 12, 160–222; 228–236.

Tobiah was not only extremely wealthy but also a relative of the high priest in Jerusalem, Onias II. Tobiah dwelt in Birta of the Ammanitis, in the land of the Ammonites, and was a cleruche, a type of vassal to the king of Egypt, and thus was responsible for managing an area that included a military settlement.[35]

The first papyrus which deals with slavery relevant to us,[36] is dated to April/May 259 BC, when Zenon arrived to Birta and bought a 7-year-old slave girl from Tyre called Sphragis for 50 drachmas.[37] This is the earliest bill of sale for slaves written in Greek and which contains Jewish elements. The deal itself was made in the house of Tobiah where one of the witnesses from the side of Tobiah was said to be the son of Hananiya the Persian,[38] and it is safe to assume that he was a Jew who served Tobiah.

There is another two-part letter,[39] dated to the 12th May 257 BC, which is extremely relevant to our subject. The first part is a regular formal opening in which Tobiah enquires Apollonius on his health. The second part contains an elaborate description of four boys, two of whom were circumcised (περιτετμημένοι),[40] that Tobiah sent to Apollonius together with a eunuch. It is worth noting that the presence of a eunuch as an integral part of the shipment raises the worth of the gift given to Apollonius. This is since a eunuch in the Hellenistic world was perceived as trustworthy, and it was common to employ them in different roles, even in the most sensitive of places.[41] The description of the young

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[35] Regarding prisoners of war who were enlisted into the Ptolemaic army and received plots of land (cleruchy) at the beginning of the Hellenistic period, see: LAUNEY (1949: 44–49; 543–548); DUCREY (1968: 101–105); BAGNALL (1984).

[36] Zenon Papyri, 59003; CPJ, I, 118–121.

[37] Regarding the prices of slaves in the Hellenistic period, see: WESTERMANN (1929: 60–61); BIEZUNSKA-MALOWIST (1974: 20); HOPKINS (1978: 158–163).

[38] For papyrological and literary sources from the Hellenistic period where the name Hananiya appears in them, see: ILAN (2002: 103–109).

[39] Zenon Papyri, 59076; CPJ, I, 125–127.

[40] Περιτέμνω, means to cut or clip round about, or circumcision: LIDDELL & SCOTT (1968: 1390).

[41] We can find a testimony for eunuchs being employed by the Ptolemaic kings in Polybius. He describes Aristonicus, who was both a eunuch (εὐνοῦχος) and a friend

boys not only includes whether they were circumcised but also their age and names. However, the letter did not add any further detail that could help us trace their origins or the language that they spoke. Moreover, it is impossible to identify with certainty whether the two boys were circumcised because they were Jewish. This is because during that period, Jews were not the only ones to circumcise their children. A good testimony to this can be found in the writings of Herodotus:

> …but my better proof was that the Colchians and Egyptians and Ethiopians are the only nations that have from the first practised circumcision. The Phoenicians and the Syrians of Palestine acknowledge of themselves that they learnt the custom from the Egyptians,[42] and the Syrians of the valleys of the Thermodon and the Parthenius, as well as their neighbours the Macrones, say that they learnt it lately from the Colchians.[43]

(σύντροφος) of Ptolemy V: Poly. *Hist.* 22, 22, 1–5; regarding the tradition of having eunuchs in antiquity, see: NOCK (1972: 7–15); KRAUTBAUER et al. (2014: 315–320).

[42] This part from the writings of Herodotus is mentioned twice by Josephus. In *Against Apion*, he states that only the Syrians who lived in Palestine and circumcised themselves could be Jews, as Jews were the only residents of this land who did so: Josep. *Apion.* 1, 171; Josep. *Ant*, 8, 262.

[43] Her. *His.* 2, 104, 2–3 (trans. A. D. Godley, *LCL*); except for Herodotus, we know from Philo of Alexandria that Egyptian priests were circumcised in order to purify their bodies as they believed that there was filth that needed to be removed under the foreskin.: Philo. *Law*. 1, 5; we also have other testimonies which claim that Egyptian priests were circumcised. For example, in the iconography of the murder of the Egyptian King Buseris by Heracles, we can see circumcised priests ('Heracles Killing the Egyptian King Buseris,' the Archaeological Museum of Athens, dated to circa. 470 BC). We also have a papyrus that was found in the city of Tebtunis in the Egyptian Faiyum, dated to 187 AD, and saying the next: 'δεῖν αὐτὸν περιτμηθῆναι διὰ τὸ μὴ δύνασθαι τὰς ἱερουργίας ἐκτελεῖν εἰ μὴ τούτο γενήσεται.' (meaning that a person needed to be circumcised before working in the temple): The Tebtunis Papyri, II, 293, l.19–21, p.62; in the book of Jeremiah, there is a passage in which the nations that circumcise or used to circumcise are counted; from it one can learn that the neighbours of the people of Israel, such as the Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites and the Ancient Egyptians, practiced circumcision: Jeremiah. 9, 24–25; Philo of Alexandria stated that circumcision of males was a common tradition in the warmer parts of the world: Philo. *Genesis*. 3, 48; on the popularity of circumcision in the ancient world, see: SASSON (1966: 473–476).

Except for the question whether circumcised slaves in the Hellenistic period are necessarily Jewish or not, it is worth noting another issue connected to circumcising slaves: the fact that the custom of circumcision was not accepted in the Greek world, not only because of aesthetic reasons but also because the phallus without a foreskin was considered deformed.[44] So why did Tobiah send circumcised slaves as a gift when he was obviously trying to please Apollonius? Another question is whether those young boys were born and raised in Tobiah's household as slaves of the family. Is it possible that they were circumcised by their owner due to the biblical law?

> And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any stranger, which is not of thy seed. He that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money, must needs be circumcised: and my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant.[45]

From the first papyrus we learn that Tobiah had a slave girl which he sold to Zenon, and in the second one we see that Tobiah sent four young slave boys as a present to Apollonius in order to maintain and strengthen diplomatic ties in Egypt. The second papyrus describes the four young boys as from good pedigree (τῶν εὐγενῶν),[46] which most probably means that they learnt Greek, a fact which represented their high quality. This current papyrus is not the sole evidence for the dispatch of slaves by a member of the house of Tobiah in order to strengthen ties with the ruling class in Egypt. The grandson of Tobiah, Hyrcanus, continued to maintain this tradition, which can be seen in the fact that he

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[44] On the Greek view that circumcision is a barbaric act tarnishing the aesthetic of the human body, see: Her. *His.* 2, 37; Cels. *Medicina*. 7, 25, 1; Kasher notes that forcing circumcision upon conquered nations was seen as a manifestation of barbarian hostility and as deliberate harassment of the Hellenistic civilisation: KASHER (1988: 51); GILULA (1986: 19); MIMOUNI (2007: 21, 125); FELDMAN (1992: 155) claims that according to the Graeco-Roman culture, there was no possible way for an athlete who had been circumcised to be able to participate in the Olympic Games.

[45] Genesis. 17, 12–13. (King James Bible).

[46] See line no. 4 in: Zenon Papyri, 59076; CPJ, I, 125–127.

sent 200 slave boys and girls as a present to King Ptolemy IV as a present for the birth of his child. Josephus, who recorded the incident, mentioned that Hyrcanus did not choose the slaves due to their young age, but also with regards to their education:

> Then he secretly went to the slave-dealers and bought from them a hundred boys who were well educated and in the prime of youth, at a talent apiece, and a hundred virgins at the same price…but Hyrcanus brought the hundred boys and hundred virgins whom he had purchased, and giving each of them a talent to carry, presented them, the boys to the king, and the girls to Cleopatra.[47]

It is known that the people of Ptolemaic Egypt preferred young slaves, a fact the members of the house of Tobiah were aware of, as can be seen from the papyrological evidence. The extensive use of the terms παῖς/παιδάριον/παιδίσκη which represent the young age of the slaves and which appear in the papyri of the 'Dossier Syrien', show that this group of slaves were not intended to be used for physical labour but for different roles required in the inner service of the household.[48] According to Orrieux,[49] Zenon bought the slaves in the land of Israel in order for them to serve in Apollonius' household and in the wool industry. They were not meant to be traded. This is according to the belief that it is easier to educate and train young slaves rather than older ones for the different roles required in the household. We can gather that when Apollonius sent delegates to the land of Israel in order to buy slaves, they encountered there many Jewish slave traders, such as the family of Tobiah, and not only pagan ones.

We can also find evidence of Jewish slave owners in one of the books of the Jewish Apocrypha, the book of Ben Sira, also commonly known as the Book of Ecclesiasticus. This book is one of the only texts in

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[47] Josep. *Ant*. 12, 209; 217 (Trans. Ralph Marcus, *LCL*).

[48] See the word Παιδίσκη in the bill of sale for seven years old Sphragis: Zenon Papyri, 59003; this expression is also part of the description of young girls in Greek papyri, for example papyrus 406 in: PGEL, IV, 134–135; this word was used to describe a slave girl whom Zenon's men received from an oil merchant. In this case, it is also worth noting the word παῖδες (slaves/children): Zenon Papyri, 59077.

[49] ORRIEUX (1985: 154).

the Hebrew language that were composed prior to the Hasmonean revolt and were preserved until our time.[50] The book was authored by Shimon ben Yeshua ben Eliezer ben Sira, a native of Jerusalem who lived during the time of Simeon the Just, in the early 2nd century BC. The text was originally written in Hebrew, which was later translated into Greek by the grandson of the author when he moved to Egypt. The book includes moral guidance and a cry to preserve and keep the Torah and its laws, alongside poems praising the fathers of the nation and the high priest with proverbs and teachings for wisdom and good manners. The book also includes a harsh criticism on the moral decline of the Jewish community in Jerusalem, due to it becoming closer and more accepting of the Greek culture.

In chapter 33, Ben Sira discusses the way a man should rule over his slaves:

> Fodder and whip and loads for an ass;
> food, correction, and work for a slave.
> Make a slave work and he will look for his rest;
> let his hands be idle and he will seek to be free.
> Yoke and harness are a cure for stubbornness;
> and for a refractory slave, punishment in the stocks.
> Force him to work that he be not idle,
> for idleness is the teacher of much mischief.
> Give him work to do such as befits him;
> but if he fails to obey you, load him with chains.
> Yet never lord it over any human being,
> and do nothing that is not just.
> If you have but one slave, treat him like yourself;
> you would miss him as though it were you who was lost.

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[50] We do not possess the timeframe the author of the book of Ben Sira lived through. The lower chronological limit is before the Hasmonean kingdom, because in the text itself there is no hint of religious persecution by the Greeks. Evidence for the upper chronological limit can be hinted by the Greek translation of the book that was made by the grandson of Ben Sira, when he travelled to Egypt in the 38th year of the reign of Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II: Segal (1953: 1 (א)); regarding the date of composition of the book, see: Box–Oesterley (1913: 293–294); the date of 180 BC as the time of composition was suggested in: Skehan (1987: 10).

> If you have but one slave, deal with him as a brother;
> your life's blood went into his purchase.
> If you mistreat him and he runs away,
> in what direction will you look for him?[51]

In this text, Ben Sira explains his notion on the right relationship between slaves and their masters. He saw the slaves as a kind of livestock and recommended the owner to force harsh labour upon them in order they would not rebel. The author warns the reader not to trust the slaves and to even use harsh physical punishments towards disobedient servants. The view of Ben Sira on the issues of punishments and violence towards slaves is in clear and utter contradiction to the biblical tradition, which saw the physical molestation of a slave as a reason to set him free.[52] There were claims that Ben Sira only referred to the treatment of foreign slaves, and not Jewish ones, in the text above. Even if so, his writings are clear-cut evidence to Jews owning slaves during that period.

We should give special attention to Ben Sira 33:32–33, which hints at the issue of escaped slaves, when he recommends to not even give the slightest opportunity for a slave to escape, as it would be very hard to return him. Some of this difficulty may by attested to the next Biblical law:

> Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the servant which is escaped from his master unto thee.[53]

In the ancient world, the society treated slaves as the property of their owners. This was why harsh punishments were inflicted on runaway slaves and this was true for many of the codexes of the ancient world, such as Hammurabi and those of Greece and Rome, but the biblical text forbade such behaviour. From all the testimonies that were brought here until now, it seems that many of the Jews from that period chose to treat their slaves in accordance with the laws of their neighbours and those

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[51] Ben Sira. 33, 28–33. Trans. SKEHAN (1987: 402–403)

[52] Exodus. 21, 26–27.

[53] Deuteronomy. 23, 15, (King James' Bible).

that were presented in Ben Sira, and not according to what was written in the bible.

Some scholars have found it hard to settle the contradicting guidance of Ben Sira between a) to rule slaves firmly and harshly,[54] and b) to treat the individual slave as a brother.[55] Gordis thinks that the ambivalent attitude was meant to represent the temperamental differences which existed between the many masters and their slaves.[56] On the other hand, Segal assumes that the ambivalent perception towards slaves was due to changes in society that the author was well aware of. Those changes brought contrast between two different worlds.[57] On the one hand, there were the rich owners of the large households, which adopted a Hellenistic lifestyle and employed and traded in many slaves. On the other hand, there was a much larger group in society of those who lived modest lives and if they had slaves, it was only one and so treated him as a family member.

Menachem Kister claims that we should not see in the Book of Ben Sira's stance on the relationship between master and slave anything else except a self-centred, egoistical attitude. According to him, the ambivalent recommendation of Ben Sira in these verses, is out of concern for the master because if he unintentionally killed all of his slaves through cruelty and harsh treatment, he would be left with only one slave that he would have to treat as a brother, or lose him too. In a different part in the book of Ben Sira, we have the sentence 'Let a wise servant be dear to you as your own self; refuse him not his freedom'.[58] which Segal saw as a testimony of how a master should treat Jewish slaves.[59] If we accepted this interpretation, this would mean that during the Hellenistic period, Jews held other Jews as slaves, and even refrained from releasing them after six years. And so, Ben Sira in all the different parts that were pre-

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[54] Ben Sira. 33, 25–30.

[55] Ben Sira. 33, 31–32.

[56] GORDIS (1943: 115).

[57] SEGAL (1953: 215–216 [ריה-ריו]); regarding the writings of Ben Sira and the different social classes among the Jews due to Hellenization, see: WRIGHT (2001: 161).

[58] Ben Sira. 7, 21. Trans. SKEHAN (1987: 203)

[59] SEGAL's commentary on Ben Sira. 7, 21; SEGAL (1953: 48).

sented, is clear evidence that many of the Jews of the period did not keep the biblical laws on the treatment of slaves.

After presenting the papyrological and apocryphal evidence that show the different attitudes in the Jewish world during the Hellenistic period towards slaves they owned,[60] we will look at sectarian Jewish Literature texts from the period, which responded to the slave trade as a symbol of paganism. The first testimony we can find is in the book of Jubilees,[61] at the beginning of Chapter 11, corresponds to Genesis 11:20. In the testimony, we can find a story, with no equivalence in the bible, which is the description of the deeds of the sons of Noah after the death of their father:

> And the sons of Noah began fighting in order to take captive and to kill each other, to pour the blood of man upon the earth, to eat blood, to build fortified cities and walls and towers, so that (one) man will be raised up over the people, to set up the first kingdoms to go to war, people against people and nation against nation and city against city, and everyone (will act) to do evil and to acquire weapons of battle and to teach their sons war. And they began to take captive a city and to sell male and female slaves. And 'Ur, the son of Kesed, built the city of 'Ur of the Chaldeesc and he named it after his name and his father's name.[62]

The author of Jubilees kept the biblical tradition, which attests the origins of slaves in the world to the time of the sons of Noah.[63] The description in Jubilees 11 referred to a time of city conquests, which lead humanity from bad to worse. This decline of humanity is embodied in the need to forbid manslaughter, murder, drinking and eating blood. Yet, for the author of Jubilees, the slave trade represented the moment where

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[60] Regarding the different social classes among the Jews in the Hellenistic period, see: WILL–ORRIEUX (1986: 56); STERN (1993).

[61] According to some, the book of Jubilees was written at the beginning of the Hasmonean period: ALBERT-MARIE (2005: 399–400); see the introduction of: WERMAN (2015: 55–74).

[62] Jubilees. 11, 2. Trans. CHARLESWORTH (1985: 78)

[63] Genesis. 9, 26–27; Jubilees. 7, 11–13.

evil was born.[64] The author most probably reacted to the wars, the conquests and the mass enslavement of nations and the imperial attitude which was prevalent during the Hellenistic period. It is important to understand that the author of Jubilees was not opposing the ownership of slaves or slavery itself, but rather meant to present a different ideological perception that, according to it, Jewish people were an isolated entity that had nothing to do with the neighbouring nations. Henceforth, the author rejected the behaviour of Jews who embraced the Greek lifestyle and took part in the slave trade as a practice identified with foreign culture, which was perceived by the author of Jubilees as the root of all evil in this world.

Another sectarian text which responded to the custom of trading slaves is the Damascus Covenant, a Hebrew text which is commonly believed to have been written in the middle of the 2nd century BC.[65] In the part that deals in things and acts which are forbidden and related to gentiles, the following appears:

> Neither should he sell his servant and his maidservant to them, for they entered the covenant of Abraham with him.[66]

Schiffman notes that this sectarian law was part of an extensive legislation that was meant to regulate the extensive commercial relations between the members of the Damascus cult and the gentiles around them.[67] It talks about the main fields of trade: the sale of livestock, grains

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[64] SEGAL (1968: 147).

[65] Regarding the period of the composition of the Damascus document, Davis' elaborate introduction summarizes the research that has dealt with the subject since Schechter's work that followed the discovery of the document in the Cairo Geniza. Davis' introduction emphasises the changes in the research that were made after the discovery of further copies in the Qumran caves: DAVIS (1983); WINTERMUTE (1985: 43); SOMMER–PHILONENKO (1987: XXXVIII); in Qumran cave no. 4, they found eight manuscripts: DJD, XVIII, 4Q266–273; two further manuscripts were found in caves 5 and 6 in Qumran: DJD, III: 6Q15; 5Q12.

[66] This part of the text was found only in the Cairo Geniza and had no equivalence in the Qumran Manuscripts. We followed the text as it appears in: Damascus Covenant. 12, 10–11. (trans. The Dead Sea Scrolls: 570).

[67] SCHIFFMAN (1983).

and grapes and the sale of slaves.[68] It seems that this clear division was pointing towards an extensive trade relationship between Jews and gentiles in the Hellenistic period, very similar to what can be found in the Zenon papyri. Likewise, this division emphasises the importance of the slave trade. It is startlingly clear that in the divisions mentioned, we are talking about laws that forbade or limited the sale, while the texts do not limit or forbid the members of the cult to buy any of those goods. Therefore, we need to assume that the author of the Damascus Covenant was not opposing slavery and allowed Jews who lived according to their rules to buy and use slaves.[69]

Like the author of Jubilees, the composer of the Damascus Covenant emphasised to his followers the importance of refraining from selling slaves to gentiles. In this ruling, we can see a stricter ruling to some extent than the biblical law:

> For they are my servants, which I brought forth out of the land of Egypt: they shall not be sold as bondmen.[70]

The Damascus Covenant is a much stricter law to some respect, as it can be understood that it forbade the sale of not only Hebrew slaves from birth, like this biblical law, but also the sale of gentile slaves who were either willing or forcefully converted to Judaism.[71]

This Halachic innovation, which put the Hebrew and gentile slave on equal footing, represented a historical reality which severely limited the sale of slaves by Jews, if it was indeed common among Jews to con-

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[68] Damascus Covenant. 12, 8–11.

[69] Compare to: Damascus Covenant. 11, 12 in DJD , XVIII: 4Q270.

[70] Leviticus. 25, 42 (King James' Bible version).

[71] SCHIFFMAN (1993: 125) sees this as an instrument in the process of converting to Judaism; Zeitlin's (1962) research brings up an important question regarding the status of the foreign slave in the Jewish community during the Second Temple Period. He believes that the Tannaim saw the concept of enslaving 'Canaanite slaves' as instigating the process of converting to Judaism; maybe we should see in this part in the Damascus Covenant a basis for the halacha of the Tannaim on the same subject: SCHIFFMAN (1983: 388); URBACH (1960: 162) writes that the mere entrance of a slave into service in a Jewish household, that included circumcision and a baptism, was essentially a conversion into Judaism.

vert their slaves. In our opinion, this halachic law is a testimony to a sectarian Jewish ideology that came to prevent the contact between Jews and gentiles as much as possible, and so made trade between the two groups much more problematic.

Conclusions

We have clearly seen that Jews held and even traded in slaves, since the late Persian period, until the rise of the Hasmonean Kingdom. It was a continuous phenomenon and the slaves involved were not only gentiles but also Jewish. Until now, there is no evidence that Jewish slaves received any different treatment from Jewish owners than non-Jewish slaves. On the subject of ownership, we have seen that there were many different attitudes, ideas and traditions and there was a huge gap between the biblical laws and what was actually practiced by a large proportion of the population. Texts and other material are pointing to the assimilation of Jews to their neighbours, the most famous and visible of them being Hellenization. As a result, in the slave trade, Jews were not inherently different from other nations. Even small and unique Jewish cults, that tried to isolate themselves from others, owned and traded slaves in one form or another.

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