CHAPTER 15

Judaism in Asia Minor

Introduction

Map B VI/18 of the Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients (with the title Die jüdische Diaspora bis zum 7. Jahrhundert n. Chr.),1 shows a considerable concentration of Jewish settlements in Asia Minor, with a higher density of Jewish communities in the West than in the East. The history of this Jewish diaspora in Asia Minor is a long one. It probably started as early as the fifth century BCE and continues till the present day.2 This chapter will focus on the roughly one thousand years between the beginnings of Jewish settlement there and the end of the Talmudic period (or the rise of Islam). The literary sources at our disposal are scarce, unfortunately: we have only a handful of references in pagan literary sources, several more in Josephus and the New Testament, and also some in Church Fathers and in canons of Church Councils; on the other hand, we have no less than some 260 Jewish inscriptions, by far the most in Greek (more than 95 percent), only a handful in Hebrew.3 On the question whether or not we possess Jewish writings from Asia Minor (perhaps some of the Or. Sib. and 4 Macc.) there is no scholarly consensus at all and we have to leave this question out of account.4 Archaeological remains are not very

numerous (apart from the epigraphic material), but some of them are spectacular (see below on Sardis).

**Historical Aspects**

The beginnings of Jewish presence in Asia Minor may go back to the fifth century BCE, although the evidence is controversial because of a problem in the interpretation of a Hebrew word in Obadiah 20. The prophet says there that the exiles of Jerusalem who live in Sepharad will possess the towns of the Negev. Sepharad (only in later Hebrew the designation for Spain) is a name that occurs nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible and it is uncertain which place or region the prophet has in mind here.5 That uncertainty is also reflected in the ancient versions: the Septuagint renders it Ephratha (or Sephratha), the Vulgate has Bosporus, and the Peshitta and the Targum read Spain. According to some modern scholars, however, the city of Sardis is meant here.6 The reason is that in 1916 an Aramaic inscription from the Persian period (KAI no. 260 from the fifth century BCE) was found in the ancient necropolis of Sardis, in which the name Sepharad (in the same spelling as in Obadiah 20: sprd) is used for the capital of the Persian satrapy Sparda = Sardis. And fifty years later, in 1966, another Aramaic inscription from the Persian period (ca. 450 BCE) was published from which it became apparent that in Daskyleion, not far from Sardis, a Jewish family had settled.7 That is to say that it is not impossible that the prophet indeed does have in mind here Jewish exiles in the Lydian capital, Sardis. But since that cannot be strictly proved, it is understandable that some scholars remain skeptical.8

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7 For details see the publications mentioned in the previous note.